

1 Providing for Daily Life

*When the long voyages between Hawai'i and the South Pacific islands ended in the twelfth century, the Hawaiians lived for hundreds of years isolated from the rest of the world. They knew nothing of events in Europe or the Americas or Asia, or even on the other Polynesian islands in the Pacific from which they had come. They provided for their needs from the resources at hand in the islands they inhabited, developing a **subsistence economy** in which they produced only what they needed to support life.*

Then, in 1778, an English sea captain came upon the Islands. His coming exposed the Hawaiians to new ways of doing things, to new materials and ideas. It changed their way of life. From the time of Captain Cook's visit, Hawai'i's subsistence economy began to disappear.

The Hawaiian Subsistence Economy

Isolated from the rest of Polynesia and the world for hundreds of years, the Hawaiians had to live off the land and the sea. From the South Pacific they had brought plants and animals, which they raised much as farmers might anywhere. But they had to depend on their new environment to supply things they had not been able to bring or that had died along the way. And, of course, they had to get their food from their surroundings. No wonder the Hawaiians recognized the importance of the land and named it '*āina* 'that which feeds'. The land and the sea were so basic to their economy that the Hawaiians believed they belonged to the gods.

But if the land and the sea belonged to the gods, how did the people use the **resources**—things available for use when needed—on the land and in the sea? The Hawaiian chiefs, who were responsible for the welfare of the people, managed the land and the sea for the benefit of all—always mindful of the will of the gods—by assigning portions to groups of people to use for growing plants, for fishing, and for supplying their other needs.

Each *ahupua'a* was a self-contained economic unit that met the needs of the people who used it. People living on the valley slopes tended terraces of taro, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugarcane, and breadfruit. People living near the shore harvested coconuts or caught fish and shellfish, using canoes, fishhooks, and nets they made for fishing.

Those living on the slopes far from the sea would visit family and friends at the seashore. They would take crops to share, or dogs, pigs, and chickens, and receive what they needed without asking. When someone needed a house, friends and relatives would help gather materials and build it. Sharing of food and goods also went on between *ahupua'a* on the same island and on other islands. The wealth of the land and their own labor sustained the people. They did not have markets or use money; they traded things of equal value—a pig for a fishnet, or taro for cordage to build a house. They needed to produce only enough to support themselves and each other, to meet ceremonial obligations, and to meet the needs of their chiefs. Theirs was a subsistence economy.

Because they ate or shared or traded whatever they harvested, they did not accumulate large reserves of food. They could preserve some foods by drying them—cooked, sliced taro or salted fish, for example—but they did not amass surpluses of food or goods merely to create wealth. They might trade a surplus of food for cordage to build a house, or give a canoe in exchange for a supply of taro, but they traded only to sustain life, pay taxes, and meet other obligations. Creating surpluses to share or trade did allow the Hawaiians to learn skills and become experts. Some specialized in growing food crops, others in fishing or building houses or tending fishponds or planning irrigation systems.

This sharing of skills to sustain the life of the group fostered a belief in working together.

People commonly cooperated on family and community projects. The *hukilau*, when family and friends gathered to fish with a large net, is a good example. The catch was divided among all the people who helped.

The *ali'i*—kings, queens, and nobles—influenced this economy. The people were obligated to meet the daily needs of the *ali'i*, who in return were expected to care for the people. The *ali'i* made sure enough food and goods were produced for everyone, and they conducted the ceremonies that ensured the help of the gods. One such social and religious celebration, the *Makahiki*, was the occasion for collecting the products of the people. The *ali'i* would take the image of the god Lono-i-ka-makahiki in a procession around the island and accept offerings on an altar. The people would give food, *kapa* (bark cloth), fishnets, and other goods in thanks

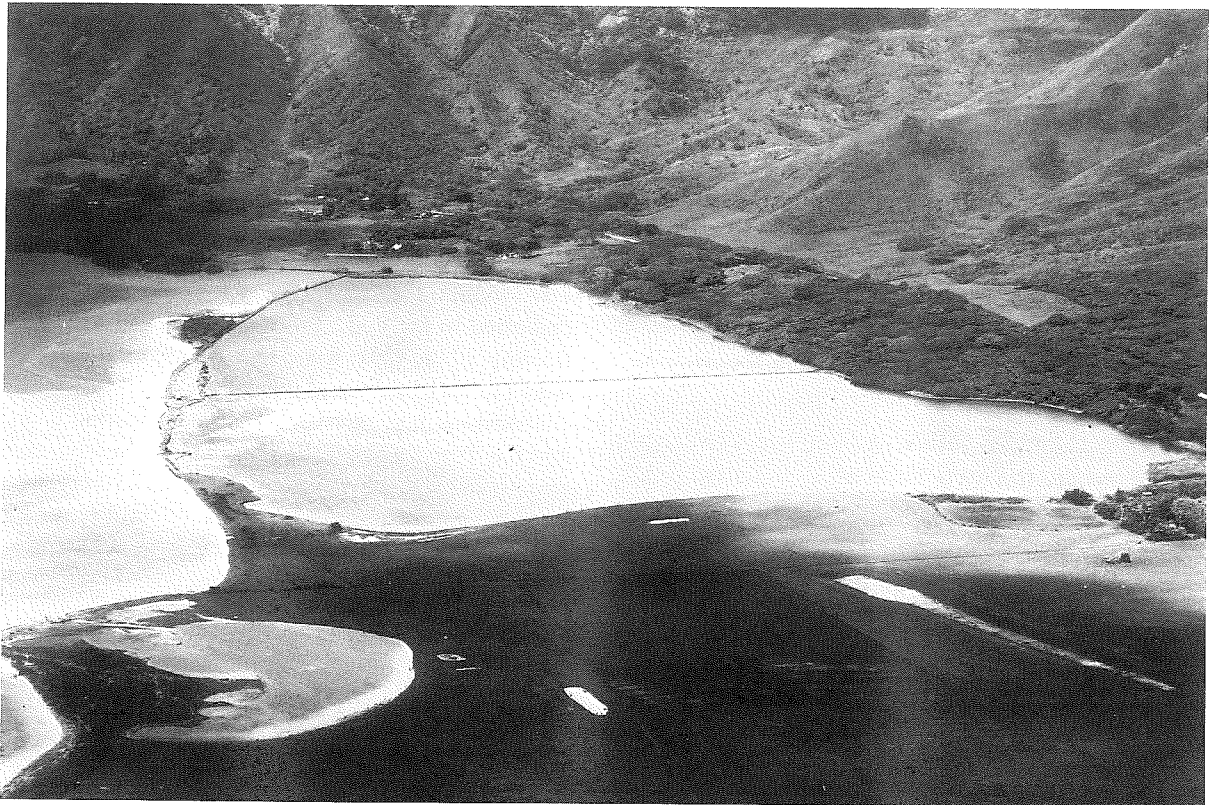
to the gods for the resources of the land and the sea. The *ali'i* would then divide the goods among the lesser chiefs, warriors, and priests.

The Hawaiians lived in this manner for hundreds of years. They used the resources the gods provided on the land and in the sea to feed, clothe, and house themselves and their chiefs and to observe the ceremonies required by the chiefs for the gods. Their subsistence economy depended on their ability to work together.

But the coming of the Westerners would bring changes.

Activity: Comparing Economies

A subsistence economy differs from a **market economy**—one in which goods are produced and services are offered for sale at prices deter-



Fishponds like this one produced a plentiful supply of an important food for the Hawaiians. Gates allowed small fish to enter the fishponds but prevented larger ones from leaving. (Courtesy of Hawai'i State Archives)