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**Refuge Sites and the Hawaiian Economy of Forgiveness**

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*Figures available from the author upon request. Because this was written for oral presentation, sources used are not referenced as extensively as would otherwise be the case.*

If the shadow of a common man fell on a chief, it was death; if he put on a [bark kilt] or [loincloth] of a chief, it was death; if he went into the chief's yard, it was death; if he wore the chief's consecrated mat, it was death; if he went upon the house of the chief, it was death. If a man stood on those occasions when he should prostrate himself, [such as] when the king's bathing water... [was] carried along, it was death. If a man walked in the shade of the house of a chief with his head besmeared with clay, or with a wreath around it, or with his head wet... it was death. There were many other offenses of the people which were made capital by the chiefs, who magnified and exalted themselves over their subjects. [Tinker 1839: 439-440]

Such was life in old Hawai`i, as recorded in the 1830's by the first literate Native Hawaiian scholars. The social rules for interaction with gods and members of the chiefly class were legion, and death by human sacrifice was the default punishment in many cases.

But all was not darkness, and today I will talk about an exception that -- rather literally -- proved the rule. As defined by early Hawaiian ethnohistoric sources, pu`uhonua were locations which, through the power of the gods and the generosity of the chiefs, afforded unconditional absolution to those who broke taboos, disobeyed rulers, or committed other crimes.

In this talk, I hope to present a view of the socio-political role of this institution which goes beyond the normative proclamations of the 19th century sources, and pays more attention to between-site variation. A study of a corpus of 64 reputed pu`uhonua shows that these sites vary widely in form, siting, and symbolic associations. Trends within this variation suggest several strategies used in site-by-site negotiation of the conflict between the paramount chief's need (as ruler) to maintain law and order, and his or her obligation (as symbolic family head) to forgive trespasses.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller treatment of the arguments presented here, with more thorough data presentation, see Schoenfelder 1992. Important earlier analyses of pu`uhonua include Stokes (n.d.) and Bryan and Emory (1986). Among the major sources consulted for information on specific sites are Kamakau (1961, 1964, 1976), Ii (1959), Kelly (1986a, 1986b), Pogue (1978), Thrum (1896-1938), Bennett (1930, 1931), and Stokes (1991).

We will start our investigation of pu`uhonua sites with a consideration of the best-known example: the site of Honaunau, on the "Big Island" of Hawai`i. A point of land roughly 400 by 700 feet in size and set off by a massive wall, this site, currently the central feature of Pu`uhonua O Honaunau National Park, was the first pu`uhonua to be described in print. In 1823 the missionary William Ellis reported that this refuge, and others like it,

afforded an inviolable sanctuary to the guilty fugitive, who, when flying from the avenging spear, was so favoured as to enter their precincts.... Hither the manslayer, the man who had broken a taboo, or failed in the observance of its rigid requirements, the thief, and even the murderer, fled from his incensed pursuers, and was secure. To whomsoever he belonged, and from whatever part he came, he was equally certain of admittance, though liable to be pursued even to the gates of the enclosure. [Ellis 1969: 167]

In wartime, the pu`uhonua was also available to noncombatants and vanquished warriors. In all cases, the safety granted was a lasting thing. After a period of no more than two or three days, Ellis says, the refugees "returned unmolested to their dwellings and families, [for] no one ventured to injure those, who, when they fled to the gods, had been by them protected" (Ellis 1969: 168)

The most important ritual structure, or heiau, in the Honaunau area is the Hale o Keawe [House of Keawe], in which the bones of an important family of chiefs were preserved (Ii 1959: 139; Ellis 1969: 164-165), most likely in sennit caskets. Mortuary houses of this sort were called hale poki, and the royal bones within them were worshipped as gods (Malo 1951: 106). Here it was that, according to Ellis, the fugitive "repaired to the presence of the idol, and made a short ejaculatory address, expressive of his obligations to him in reaching the place with security" (Ellis 1969: 167).

Note that Ellis tells us that sanctuary and absolution were offered to "whomsoever" required it, regardless of the nature of the offense or the political allegiances of the offender. Robert Edgerton, in a comparative study of societal rules and exceptions, marks the pu`uhonua as a strong case of the exception to the rule being itself a rule without exceptions (Edgerton 1985: 125).

Moving now beyond Honaunau, I have identified 64 pu`uhonua mentioned in the ethnohistorical literature, and have compiled the available physical, cultural, and locational data on each of these (Schoenfelder 1992). Seven shaky claims have been left out of much of the following, leaving a total of 57 sites for our consideration.

These sites range from enclosed areas such as that at Honaunau, to stone temple platforms (like Halulu on Lanai), to fortified mountain-tops (such as Kawela on Moloka`i), to unmodified natural features (such as Kukaniloko on O`ahu) to entire inhabited land sections, as at Lahaina on Maui. The list includes birthplaces, burial caves, chiefs' residences, groves of trees, and temples of human sacrifice. Not all pu`uhonua are walled, and those that are seldom have walls nearly as massive as those at Honaunau (fig. 1). I at one time thought pu`uhonua might be characterized by extensive, low-density food refuse deposits representing the temporary camps of refugees, but the results of 1990 excavations at the site of Popoiwi (fig. 2), on Maui, convinced me otherwise. Refugee stays at many sanctuary sites may have been too infrequent and too short to leave much of a mark, and even then would be hard to tell from the smatterings of material culture sometimes found on or around other religious sites.

In sum, there do not seem to be any distinguishing characteristics that we can use to archaeologically identify a site as a refuge; in fact, pu`uhonua hardly seem to consistently share any features at all, distinguishing or not. "Pu`uhonua-ness" appears to be a sort of floating attribute that can be attached to a wide variety of site types. These sites have little more in common than that they are geographical locations, though that in itself is significant.

Forgiveness for serious wrongs was hard to come by in Hawai`i; by their very nature as places the designated "absolution spots" would often be hard to reach after the commission of an offense. This is borne out in the traditions, which record four tales of fugitives leading pursuers on lengthy chases, in two cases ending in the death of the fugitive.<sup>2</sup> According to one possibly apocryphal story, Queen Kaahumanu swam five miles to reach Honaunau after quarreling with her husband Kamehameha (Kamakau 1961: 315).

Running to a pu`uhonua was not the only way to obtain absolution, but the other avenues were similarly limited. In wartime, chiefs of high rank could be supplicated by uncaptured foes who managed to avoid the victorious warriors and prostrate themselves at the feet of the chief (Ellis 1826: 131). If the chief spoke to the petitioner, he was not slain. Chiefs also could pardon by proclaiming certain edicts, which were perceived as the personal property of specific chiefs (Kamakau 1964: 11-17). Note that in these cases, as with the refuge sites, punishment was the default, and pardon required special action. Formalization of the procedures involved in acquiring

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<sup>2</sup>The four use episodes involving lengthy chases are those which end at Paunau (Kamakau 1961: 313) and Halulu (Gibson 1917: 156-173), and the two involving Ka`ohele, the famous runner of Moloka`i (Kanepuu 1881, Keola 1893).

absolution transformed forgiveness into a resource that was controllable and, in the case of pu`uhonua sites, localized.

However, leniency was not just a privilege and tool of the ruler, it was also a duty. The prototypical Polynesian political unit was a conical clan, in which the paramount chief, in Hawai`i often called the ali`i nui, or "king", was the most senior kinsman of his followers (Kirch 1984: 62-69). As the Hawaiian near-state developed, the clan links between specific chiefs and specific units of commoners were cast aside, but presentation of the ruler as the symbolic parent of his or her subjects (cf. Kamakau 1961: 378) remained an important ideological justification of rulership. The result was what Marshall Sahlins (1972: 148) has called "kinship morality", the most potent argument in a more general "ideology of chiefly aloha" (Linnekin 1990: 80) that linked chiefs and commoners into ideally reciprocal relationships (see also Valeri 1985:85-89).

This sets up what Sahlins, speaking of economics, calls "the Polynesian contradiction" -- the need to divert wealth to the chiefly establishment that supports the ruling chief is incompatible with maintenance of the generosity which establishes the chief's right to rule. To increase the wealth available for diversion to his key supporters, a ruler must either (1) decrease the wealth redistributed to the people and risk popular revolt, or (2) increase extraction from the people, in which case redistribution can remain at the generous level the populace expects, and the economy becomes even more centered on the chief (Sahlins 1963: 297-298).

The logic for forgiveness is similar. If liberty is viewed as a "commodity" that a ruler collects and redistributes, then we can see that an increase in the power of the ruler will tend to lead to an increase in "extraction" -- there will be more rules and taboos, and they will be better enforced. If ability to rule is dependent upon an ideology which demands generosity, it will be difficult to decrease "redistribution", here equated with acts of leniency. In such a situation, the pu`uhonua serves to maintain access to forgiveness, but simultaneously to restrict the availability of forgiveness in ways that are not visible from within the system. As in the second economic strategy just discussed, actual centralization of power can increase, but the appearance of beneficence is maintained.

The degree to which this strategy could be carried out, however, varied. I suggest that the wide variation in the form, siting, and symbolic associations of refuge locations is best understood if we see each pu`uhonua as the product of a separate instance of negotiation of the balance between order and freedom.

To the degree that chiefs depended upon consent, they were lenient and absolving. When I look at my corpus, I see a pattern in which pu`uhonua tend to occur in areas of high population and/or in areas frequented by chiefs. In effect, this means that, on the scale visible on island maps, pu`uhonua availability varied with demand for absolution (since more people means more offenses), and with the danger level (since, in Hawaii, a concentration of chiefs produces a concentration of deadly taboos to break). Such a pattern would be more beneficial for subjects than for rulers trying to control them.

1) On Kaua`i, pu`uhonua are clustered at Wailua, sometimes referred to as the "capital" of Kaua`i, and around Waimea, another area frequented by chiefs (fig 3).

2) Similarly, on Maui we find groupings of pu`uhonua at Wailuku and in the Hana/East Maui area; these two locations were the power centers for the two competing lines of Maui chiefs. A third cluster is at Lahaina, a high-population area that was of special importance in the nineteenth century because of its connection to the whaling trade (fig 4).

3) On Moloka`i, all the pu`uhonua are on the more populous eastern half of the island (fig 5).

4) O`ahu and Hawai`i have more dispersed patterns, but on O`ahu note the concentration of refuges at Kualoa, a favorite home for chiefs (fig 6).

5) The dispersed pattern on Hawai`i is perhaps misleading, since almost all the reputed pu`uhonua on this island were not noted as such until the 20th century. The three sites recorded in the 19th century are on the Kona coast (at Honaunau), in the Waipio valley, and at Hilo -- probably the three most important political centers on the island (fig 7).

To repeat, I see the density of pu`uhonua sites co-varying to some degree with local levels of population and danger. Nevertheless, access was hardly assured: in one account, the great runner Ka`ohele ran for miles before being caught and killed by his enemies within a few hundred yards of the refuge (Summers 1971: 157).

Countering the demands for leniency that I see reflected in the map patterning, we have the ruler's need to maintain order. Offering absolution is non-negotiable -- the paramount has to do it to remain legitimate. The question is how to rule under these constraints. To these ends, at least two strategies were available to the ruler: access restriction and symbolic co-optation.

First, the effectiveness of a refuge could be lessened by restricting access to it, for instance by building walls around the site (as at Honaunau), or by strategic placement of the site. Some pu`uhonua (e.g. Kawiwi, on O`ahu) are on hard-to-reach mountain tops, others (for example Kapuanoni on Hawai`i and, again, Honaunau) are

on points of land. Another striking example of the use of natural topography to restrict access is the site of Mokuola, an island in Hilo Bay.

It could further be argued that the use of the pu`uhonua was made difficult by the presence of chiefly residences, since these sorts of locations were ringed with taboos. At Popoiwi, we found residential debris suggestive of the existence of a chief's house attached to the refuge area, and archaeological and ethnohistoric information suggests a similar pattern at several other sites. In such a situation, a petitioner could easily commit additional capital offenses and pick up additional pursuers on the way to the sanctuary.

By totaling all those sites to which access was restricted by topography, architectural features, or enforceable taboos, I can conservatively say that physical and or human obstacles impede the progress of supplicants at just over half of all pu`uhonua sites.

A second tactic used to offset the chaotic effects of a pu`uhonua was to establish an association between the site and the symbolism that validated power differentials. These sorts of linkages could make explicit that forgiveness from the site was equivalent to forgiveness from the chief, and thus assured that the chief got good "P.R.", so to speak, for allowing forgiveness.

Once again, for the best example of this strategy we return to Honaunau: Honaunau's "tutelar deity", as Ellis (1969: 168) puts it, was Keawe, an ancestor of Kamehameha who's bones were worshipped at the site. Since each royal chief was at least in theory the father of his successor, every generation owed obedience to the one before it. In actuality, however, since these previous chiefs were quite conveniently dead, they were inactive and easily controlled. Such deified ancestors served as representatives of the current ruling chief and of the Hawaiian political system in the abstract. Admission of obligation to royal ancestors implies the subordination of the refugee to the ruling chief and simultaneously confirms that the infraction was an act of rebellion, not revolution.

Besides Honaunau, six other pu`uhonua were associated with interments of one sort or another. But this was only one of several ways in which a ruler could assure that both the refugee and the populace would be reminded of his power each time a refuge was used. Thirteen pu`uhonua were sites of human sacrifice, and therefore placed absolution supplicants in a position supportive of a major source of ideological power. Other pu`uhonua (such as Kukanihilo on O`ahu) were famous birthplaces, symbols of the chiefs' genealogical legitimacy. As already discussed, I found evidence that chiefs lived either within or near fifteen asylum sites -- this was perhaps

the most direct way to assure that the people would link the site with the chief. In all, 56% of the investigated pu`uhonua were found to have attributes that linked them to the ideological justification of Hawaii's political system. These sites served as forums for dramas of subordination -- scenes in which "prodigal sons" of Hawaiian society implicitly but publicly acknowledged the propriety of the existing order, and were accepted back into the fold. The trend to formalize forgiveness in this way acted to reduce the impression that one's "higher-ups" (rulers and gods) were forgiving less than was expected of them as leaders of the "family".

To conclude, neither Honaunau, nor any other one site, can serve as a template or model for all other pu`uhonua. Note that neither access restriction nor symbolic association with the chiefs is found at anywhere close to all sites -- we cannot say that paramounts invariably used these strategies at all pu`uhonua. As I see it, this is because each pu`uhonua represents a slightly different compromise between the need to rule and the need to be generous, between bonds of authority and bonds of affinity. That walls, mountains, taboo-enforcing guards, and the like were in position to serve as stumbling blocks at many but not all pu`uhonua may be indicative of ongoing, case-by-case negotiation of power balances between rulers and subjects, and the same might also be said of the variation in the degrees to which the absolving rituals of specific sites served to highlight symbols of the legitimacy of the hierarchy.

Could offering absolution in and of itself enhance the power of the chiefs? Edgerton (1985: 257, 248) holds that rules with clearly defined exceptions maintain social order in the same ways as other rules, since they can be enforced as strictly as rules without exceptions. In general, the Hawaiian pattern may be characterized as one in which runaway excessive demands, either material or social, were offset by largess from above. In the material economy, this took the form of redistribution of food and other goods by the chiefs. In the economy of social control, the largess came in the form of offers of forgiveness. The food returned was never as much as the food given, and the freedom received never made up for the freedom given up. Heightened visibility of what leniency existed in society allowed the actual amount of leniency to drop and increased perception of the chief as its source.

But that is a gloomy way to end my talk. Remember that the Hawaiian rulers were limited by an "ideology of chiefly aloha." Rules and laws do not simply serve the state; they are the formalized embodiment of the social contract, and arise out of conflict and compromise between individuals and social factions (men, women, rulers, commoners, lesser chiefs, priests, etc.). In Hawaii, the contract was founded on the morality of kinship, with the ruler taking the role of the autocratic but ultimately protecting and generous head of the family. The concept of the pu`uhonua is itself strong evidence for compromise between authority and generosity. If Hawaiian chiefs

were all-forgiving, there would be no need for physical refuge sites. But if there were no generosity and good will between Hawaiian paramounts and their followers, there would be no forgiveness -- and no pu`uhonua -- at all.

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