The Ahupua'a: An Introduction

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Ahupua'a is the name of a land division with origins in ancient Hawaii. Some have defined the *ahupua'a* as a political and ecological unit of land, designed to meet the food, material, and cultural needs of the human community living within it.

As such, the *ahupua'a* revolved around an ideal of self-sufficiency for the people living within its boundaries. The ecological side of the *ahupua'a* concept is reflected by the range of habitats captured within its boundaries, providing for a huge diversity of foods, materials, and cultural needs.

In general, most people familiar with the concept of the *ahupua'a* picture a large piece of land with a broad elevation range, usually extending upward to the summit peak or ridge-crest, and extending downward beyond the coast to include the boundaries between the reef edge and the ocean deep (the so-called *mālolo* zone, where the flying fish leap in the wake of the canoe). The boundaries between adjacent *ahupua'a* usually run along natural boundaries such as ridgelines, edges of valleys, or gulches. Thus, whether an occupant wanted to go fishing, gather medicinal herbs, grow *kalo*, or fell trees for firewood or canoe-building, one did not have to go beyond the boundaries of the *ahupua'a*. Similarly, one might expect to find *heiau* for appropriate religious observance in each *ahupua'a* on an island, such that most major ceremonies and protocol affecting the occupants could be conducted without leaving the bounds of the *ahupua'a*.

These kinds of generalizations sometimes lead to an oversimplification of the *ahupua'a* concept. The huge variation of elevation, moisture, and topography in the Hawaiian islands means that there are as many exceptions to the general picture of the *ahupua'a* as there are general rules.

For example, the pie-shaped wedge model of the *ahupua'a* that fits the pie-shaped island of Kaua'i doesn't fit so well elsewhere. Sometimes entire islands comprised only a part of a single *ahupua'a*. The ancient boundaries of the *ahupua'a* of Makena included all of the island of Kaho'olawe, as well as part of southern Maui. Sometimes an *ahupua'a* extends beyond the bounds of a single mountain range. The *ahupua'a* of Wai'anae in ancient days included both the leeward valley of the same name in the Wai'anae mountain range, but also extended eastward to include a flag of land that reached to the summit crest of the Ko'olau mountains. The ancient ahupua'a boundaries went up to Ka'ala and then down again into the plateau and then up again to the summit of the Ko'olau mountains, so that's not your typical *ahupua'a*. On Lana'i, several *ahupua'a* might behave normally, like Maunalei and Kamoku, the two northernmost ones. But then you have these strange ones like Kaunolu and Kalulu that go straight across the island from coast to coast and take advantage of the different ocean conditions on the north coast of Lana'i versus the south and west costs of Lana'i.

The myth of the complete self-sufficiency of the *ahupua'a* should be addressed here. Although the typical *ahupua'a* might provide for a variety of marine and terrestrial resources, no single *ahupua'a* could be expected to provide for every possible resource, simply because sometimes some resources (such as certain plants or animals) might be only found on a particular island or a particular region or a particular *ahupua'a*. In a more specific example, though broad-ranging, koa-bearing regions were much richer on the island of Kaua'i, as in Koke'e, rather than on the island of Moloka'i (where today as in historic times, koa was scarce or nonexistent).

Similarly, there is a conception that all *ahupua'a* are essentially ecologically equivalent, with some variations in size or shape to compensate for different land conditions. The classic example given is that *ahupua'a* in dry regions might be larger to compensate for sparseness of vegetation, relative to *ahupua'a* in wetter areas. In fact, *ahupua'a* of dry leeward districts would provide a very different set of resources than *ahupua'a* occupying wet, windward valleys. The different native grasslands and shrublands of the dry zones yielded medicinals and materials just not found in the wet sides. For example, the best sources of *pili* grass for thatching

came from leeward *ahupua'a* such as Waimea on Kaua'i or in Kīpāhoehoe in Kona on the island of Hawai'i. The best hala groves were found along the windward shores, on well-drained basalt slopes, such as at Wai'anapanapa on Māui.

That being the case, among the different *ahupua'a* there would be incorporated the full range of activities and infrastructure that was typical of Hawaiian culture, but in strikingly different ways. Wet valley bottoms were put into *lo'i kalo* (wet terraced agriculture), making use of *'auwai* (irrigation canals) to take advantage of perennial surface waters running in streams. In drier regions without reliable surface water resources, agriculture switched to dryland *kalo* or *`uala* (sweetpotato), the management of which was closely tuned to seasonal patterns of rainfall.

Such adjustments of lifestyle driven by the differences in an *ahupua'a* give a hint of the wide variety of ways that different *ahupua'a* might serve their occupants. On leeward Moloka'i, you would have the best fishpond systems and flat reef systems in the archipelago. And if a *kalo* farmer in Wailau, on the wet side, had a liking for dried *he'e* (octopus) caught on the reef flats along the coast at Kaunakakai, so might a fisherman in Kaunakakai *ahupua'a* have a particular liking for *poi* from the wetland *lehua* variety of *kalo* found in abundance in Wailau. The two might meet at Mapulehu *ahupua'a* and exchange their favorite items.

These specializations were the basis for lively intercourse between *ahupua'a*, between the larger districts, or *moku*, and between the island groups, as the saying goes, "*mai ka 'ō'ili ana ka lā i Kumukahi a ka lā iho aku i ka mole 'olu o Lehua,*" from the appearance of the sun at Kumukahi (the easternmost point on the island of Hawai'i) to its setting at the pleaseant base of Lehua Island (on the western end of the main islands).

When it came to koa, and especially koa forests yielding trees large enough for oceanic voyaging, only the largest islands with elevations extending well into the montane zone (that is, above 3000 feet elevation) included *ahupua'a* that could provide such trees; in addition, these trees were growing in the *waokele* the upland forest zone, normally the realm of gods, the *wao akua*, and *kapu* (forbidden, prohibited, or sacred to the point of special protocol) to humans. Access to the zone was not for the *maka'ainana* (any common person) but for *kahuna kalai wa'a* (the *kahuna* that specialized in canoe-building) assigned by the *ali'i* to choose trees appropriate for the *wa'a kaulua* (double-hulled canoes).

The distinction between the *kahuna* of special knowledge and those *kahuna* dedicated strictly to religious observances was by no means precisely drawn. There was none of the dichotomy of religion and technical specialization that marks modern western society. All activities in the *ahupua'a* of ancient times were conducted with keen observance to religious *kapu*. Access to land required lifting of *kapu*, either by protocol accessible to the common person (that is, in the retinue of ritual that Hawaiians of all classes could conduct) or through the actions of *kahuna* or *ali'i*.

Keen attention to the state of the land and its resources allowed for the setting of *kapu* designed to restore balance between different aspects of the natural world, including human beings. Other panel members will explore this relationship further.

It was during the larger ceremonies, such as the observance of the *Makahiki*, that the ecological and political aspects of the *ahupua'a* were most clearly integrated. The social hierarchy in ancient Hawai'i meant that the chiefs of greatest rank ruled over entire islands, groups of islands, or *moku* comprised of several *ahupua'a*. The *ahupua'a* were governed by lesser chiefs and land managers (*konohiki*) who oversaw the rights to resource use and agriculture within an *ahupua'a*, advised and given structured protocol by the hierarchy of *kahuna*. Decrees and tasks were generated top-down in the governmental and religious structure, and the resources of the land were generated to support the *maka'ainana*, as well as collected and brought forward in offering to the *akua* and *ali'i*. During the *Makahiki* (the beginning of the Hawaiian year, marked by the rising of the *Makali'i* constellation at sunset) a procession circled the island, moving from one *ahupua'a* to another, and at the boundaries of each, the populace, under decree of the *ali'i* and *kahuna*, and under the guidance of the *konohiki*, offered a portion of the bounty of the *ahupua'a*, consisting of those resources generated by the *ahupua'a* in the course of the year, whether feathers from forest birds, edible crops, fish, or even stone adzes if the *ahupua'a* included a quarry site, as did Kaluako'i *ahupua'a* on Moloka'i.

By the same token, the details of the resources and special features of each *ahupua'a* were well known to the *kama'aina* of an *ahupua'a* and the *konohiki* of that (and of neighboring) *ahupua'a*, and on upward through the hierarchy of chiefs. The *ali'i* would know which *konohiki* to contact if they needed particular items, such

as logs of koa, and the search would include that subset of *ahupua'a* famous for the best koa trees.

In summary, the *ahupua'a* was a unit of human geography that reflected a keen awareness of the huge range of natural resources passed from generation to generation of inhabitants. While the *ahupua'a* allowed for a certain level of general resource self- sufficiency for its inhabitants, it also took advantage of neighboring and regional resource specialties that were the basis for regional and interisland trade, and it was a part of a nested set of land units that reflected a hierarchical mode of government.

It is a testimony to the utility of the *ahupua'a* as a land unit that so many of the ancient *ahupua'a* boundaries have survived from pre-contact times to the present day. Now, in like manner, other panel members will explore in more detail the relationship between native Hawaiians and the land, and the system of laws and practices that have extended from ancient times to the present.