

# Hawai'ian Sugar Plantations and Colonialism

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The continental Western land privatization altered Native Hawai'ian land management practices, thus reorganizing spatial relationships on the islands. Mainland and Native Hawai'ian laborers upheaved raw earth for the construction of irrigation ditches to support the sugar plantation fields in Hawai'i. Continental US-owned sugar plantations began importing contract labor from China, Japan, and Portugal to meet labor demands. The spatial reorganization of the Hawai'ian landscape, construction of irrigation ditches, and importation of contract labor enforced Continental Western dominance over the traditional Hawai'ian landscape and people. The memorialization of Hawai'i's cultural and economic colonization through the tourist attractions Hawai'i Backcountry Adventures and Hawai'i Plantation Village influences tourist knowledge of colonialism and can encourage Western forces to try to decolonize the Hawai'ian islands.

The social and economic struggles of the Hawai'ian government in the 1850s allowed sugar plantations to rampage the Hawai'ian islands. During the 1850s, the Hawai'ian government experienced political instability from the flight of Native Hawai'ians to the mainland United States. The Pacific whaling trade, the archipelago's previous economic activity, collapsed in the 1860s, which resulted in a large population needing employment and income (MacLennan, 1997, pp. 100). Thus,

the Hawai'ian government felt enormous pressure to generate a new economic activity to support the islands and the people (Ibid., pp. 100). Current events, specifically the North's boycotting of Louisiana sugar products due to the ongoing Civil War, and increased settlers in California created an ample opportunity for a Hawai'ian sugar market to flourish (Ibid., pp. 99-100).

Hawai'ian sugar plantations provided economic advantages for the white, Continental US business owner, but the plantations sacrificed Native Hawai'ian culture, undermined Native Hawai'ian autonomy, and controlled the Hawai'ian economy and government. Continental-US businessmen invested in Hawai'ian land at the expense of the Native Hawai'ian population and culture. As business for the Hawai'ian sugar plantations flourished, so did the demand for cheap labor. This led to the importation of foreign contract laborers to support the Continental US's colonialist priorities.

The Continental US-owned sugar plantations enforced settler colonialism by reconstructing traditional land management systems through land privatization. The Native Hawai'ians traditionally utilized the ahupua'a system to manage their land. The ahupua'a system, designed to work harmoniously and non-invasively with the surrounding environment, created self-sustaining villages along the coastlines of Hawai'i. Often described as extending from mauka (mountains)

to makai (ocean), the ahupua'a system constructed small ditches, or auwais, to redirect water from rivers to irrigate taro fields (see Figure 1). This water would collect nutrients as it ran through the taro fields. The nutrient-rich water continued to flow towards the ocean and created nutrient-dense fishponds that yielded supple fish (Haiken, 2022).

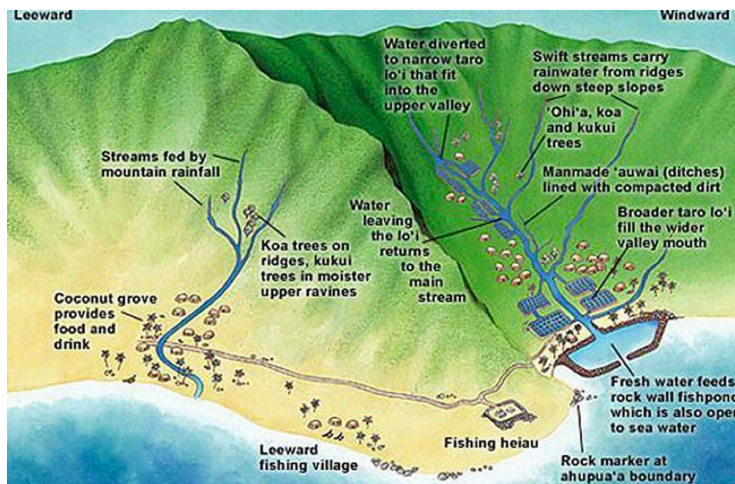


Figure 1: Native Hawai'iian ahupua'a land management system. Board of Water Supply, City and County of Honolulu. 2016. Copyright Board of Water Supply, City and County of Honolulu.

Before the invasion of Continental Western land practices, The Hawai'iian King, appointed local Hawai'iian village chiefs to be responsible for ahupua'a—the auwais, surrounding mountain forests, taro lands, and fishing rights of villagers. Chiefs also wielded the power to grant homesteads and taro patches to common villagers, but the chief could also revoke these privileges as he saw fit (Wadsworth, 1933, pp. 129). Ahupua'a lands were communal, and plots of land were oftentimes assigned based on relative need of the villagers.

The Great Māhele of 1848, a colonial method of land privatization, redesignated the communal ahupua'a as private plantation land that hoisted Western culture, economy, and values into dominance in Hawai'i. Because of Hawai'i's struggling economy and population flight, King Kamehameha III viewed Western privatization

and capitalism as a strategy to improve the islands' economy and earn the respect of a powerful United States.

The Continental Westerners believed that ahupua'a systems failed to utilize the land to its full potential, and that making the land a commodity would produce capital and properly utilize the land

(Linnekin, 1987, pp. 15). Thus, under the strong influence of powerful Western politics, King Kamehameha III proposed and carried out the Great Māhele land division (Linnekin, 1987, pp. 15).

The Māhele Land Commission wielded the power to grant land titles and rights to claim holders. The commission was comprised entirely of white (haole) men and Hawai'iian chiefs; no Native Hawai'iian commoners, or maka'āinana, were involved in the redistribution

of land. The Land Commission only allotted maka'āinana a mere 0.76% of the total redistributed land. The Continental Western processes of land privatization was a foreign and inaccessible practice to maka'āinana, which made it extraordinarily difficult for them to claim their rightful land during the Māhele (Linnekin, 1987, pp. 26). While 94% of haoles were granted land claims, only 85% of maka'āinanas that were able to successfully apply for and secure their rightful land (Linnekin, 1987, pp. 30). The Westerners exploited this cultural difference, ensured that white, Continental Westerners obtained the land for plantation usage, which helped exert Western dominance over Hawai'iian lands.

The lack of representation in the Māhele Land Commission inequality and the land redistribution dispossessed the Native Hawai'iians "line by line." It removed maka'āinanas from meeting places, traditional food sources, water holes, and sacred sites, and opened space for Western sugar plantations to invade (Banivanua-Mar & Edmonds,

2010, pp. 10).

The drawing of land boundaries over the traditional communal landscape reimagined and reshaped the landscape through the colonial eye (Ibid., pp. 5). The colonial Western forces unmade the traditional ahupua'a landscape and forced Hawai'i to fit into the Continental US capitalist image of sugar plantations (Ibid., pp. 13). The Great Māhele was a material method of settler colonialism that aided the implementation of American sugar plantations.

Despite attacking Native Hawai'ian culture, these sugar plantations brought immense wealth to the Hawai'ian monarchy, supplied a growing Continental US with sugar, and helped the US establish a military presence on the strategically located archipelago. The sugar plantations helped provide immigrants and Native Hawai'ians with jobs, and also stimulated local businesses (Cornett, 2024). Sugar supported shipping and trade enterprises on the islands, as the islands went from exporting 300,000 pounds of sugar in 1846 to 24,566,661 pounds in 1874 (Minatodani, n.d.). The Reciprocity Treaty allowed sugar grown in Hawai'i to be sold in the Continental US without a tariff, which further boosted demand for Pacific-grown sugar. (Ibid.). Furthermore, the establishment of Western culture on Hawai'i helped the US obtain Pearl Harbor, which was a strategic base for the US military and for maritime transportation.

Westerners legitimized their control over the Hawai'ian landscape by overlooking Native Hawai'ians. W. H. Rice, the manager of Henry A. Peirce & Co., later renamed Lihu'e Plantation Company, realized the fertility and potential of the islands if water resources could be applied (Wadsworth, 1933, pp. 141). He viewed the land as barren, completely overlooking the Native Hawai'ians that had managed that same land that had "potential" for thousands of years. Rice could see "potential" in the landscape because he was an

upper-class civilized White man (Nash, 2005, pp. 159). He had the privilege of interacting with the landscape how he pleased. Since Rice's statement overlooks the presence of Native Hawai'ians. It presents the Hawai'ian landscape as uninhabited and in need of capitalism. The intentional exclusion of Native Hawai'ians from the landscape legitimizes the transformation of the landscape into plantations and the construction of irrigation ditches for individual economic benefit. Although the Native Hawai'ians were not considered or seen, they suffered for the benefit of the plantations. Westerners did not believe that the ahupua'a land management system utilized the land to the fullest; thus, Native Hawai'ians were not civilized enough to appreciate the landscape and all its potential. A White man needed to decide that the landscape had potential (Nash, 2005, pp. 160).

Not only did Westerners draw property lines across traditional lands, but they also exercised control through the construction of large sugar irrigation ditches. H.P. Baldwin, the son of two missionaries, developed irrigation canals on Maui to transport water from wetter mountainous areas to coastal plains he deemed suitable for sugarcane cultivation (See Figure 2) (Wadsworth, 1933, pp. 144). Baldwin credits the transformation of this "barren" land to fertile crop grounds to the construction of irrigation ditches, saying the land "is now one of the most productive spots on the globe, supporting a prosperous population where formerly little existed besides the razorback hog, prickly pear, and wild indigo," (Wadsworth, 1933, pp. 145). Baldwin, intentionally overlooking and excluding the presence of Native Hawai'ians, further justified the construction and alteration of the landscape for capitalist benefit. His statement stratifies the Native Hawai'ians from the colonizers: one civilized and capable of success, one not (Nash, 2005, pp. 160). The Hawai'ian landscape was never not prosperous; it was just RE-presented as a useful landscape for capitalism (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 162). The physical



Figure 2: Sugar irrigation ditch in Hawai'i. Granger Historical Picture Archive. 1935. Public domain.

alteration of the landscape through the construction of irrigation ditches helped enforce dominant Western ideals by naturalizing class differences between the Westerners and the Native Hawaiians.

The irrigation ditches are presented as a great constructional feat that transformed the landscape into a productive agricultural powerhouse, but they fail to show the human labor required for its construction. Rice “built” an 11-mile, \$7,000 canal to reroute water toward his sugar plantation (pp. 141). Another aqueduct built on Kaua'i was 13.5 miles long, transported 60 million gallons of water per day, and cost \$152,000 (Wadsworth, 1933, pp. 147). Native Hawaiians and migrant workers constructed this irrigation ditch, not the White men who describe it. The workers are excluded from the descriptions of the great irrigation ditch because they're not 'picturesque' (Nash, 2005). By emphasizing the impressive statistics of water carrying capacity and irrigation potential, the irrigation ditch hides the people doing backbreaking labor for the sake of Western capitalism (Mitchell, 2000). The construction of the ditches rewrote traditional ahupua'a systems by invading the natural world and redirecting water resources toward non-native plant

cultivation. The irrigation ditches are a permanent reminder of landscape alteration and hidden labor built into the landscape.

The Reciprocity Treaty of 1875 removed tariffs on raw Hawaiian sugar imported to the mainland United States, which significantly increased sugar demand. To fulfill this growing demand, plantations imported cheap labor, especially from China, Japan, and Korea (Liu, 1984, pp. 193). Before the treaty, plantations employed Native Hawaiian laborers, but felt that they couldn't exercise enough control over their workforce. Traditional Hawaiian society and economies relied on subsistence agriculture, where “people labored only until their fulfilled their needs and their obligations to the chiefs,” and this philosophy translated over to the plantations (Liu, 1984, pp. 189). Native Hawaiian laborers would work until they met their needs, and then they would quit working at the plantation. Additionally, the Native Hawaiians lacked experience cultivating cash crops and rarely would commit to 18-22 months of constant labor until cultivation (Liu, 1984, pp. 189). The importation of labor changed the population of the islands, as migrants from Asia comprised 83% of the Hawaiian work force in

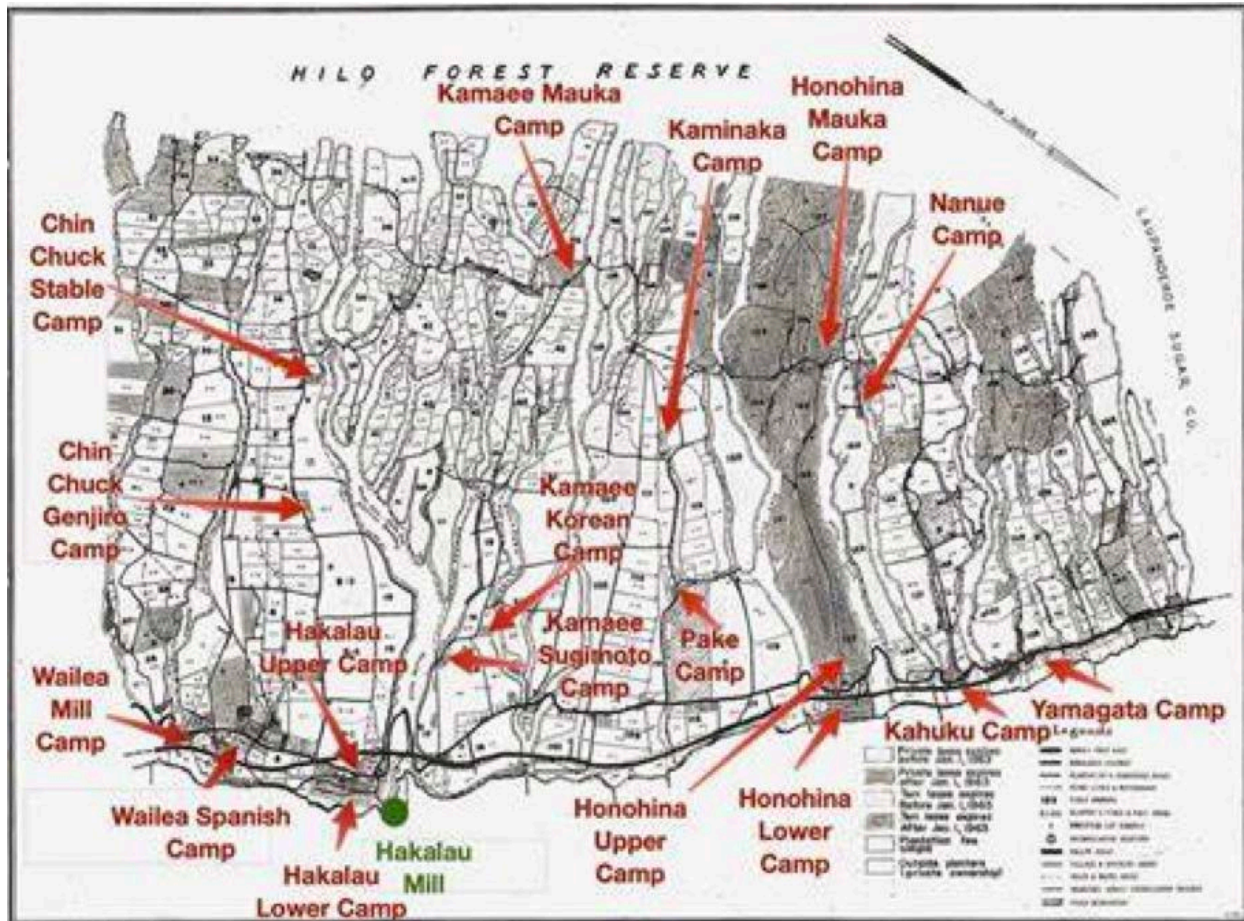


Figure 3: Hakalau Plantation field map of ethnically homogeneous camps. *Hakalau Our Home*. 1954.

1902 (Liu, 1984, pp. 198). The importation of Asian labor into Hawai'i was a method of controlling the workforce and enhancing Western cultural and economic dominance over the islands.

Plantations created ethnically homogenous camps to control the workforce and prevent collusion to maintain Western cultural and economic dominance over the islands. Plantation owners would assign migrant contract workers to camps “where people shared common geographical origins or cultural backgrounds” (Liu, 1984, pp. 197). For example, Chinese migrant workers originating from Guangdong lived together, separated from the migrant workers from Japan (See Figure 3). Separating ethnic groups made it more difficult for collusion and uprisings against the unfair and inhumane treatment on the plantations.

Furthermore, ethnically homogenous camps naturalized racism and difference of wages between ethnic groups. In 1882, 88% of lunas, or overseers, were White, contrasted to 76.8% of field workers being from Hawai'ian or Chinese ethnicities (Fleischman & Tyson, 2000, pp. 16). Furthermore, between 1886 to 1900, Caucasians never encompassed more than 15% of all sugar plantation employees (Liu, 1984, pp. 186).

Hawai'ian sugar plantations did not treat contract laborers much better than slaves. Plantations reserved the right to withhold wages if a worker didn't achieve a daily quota, effectively forcing laborers to tire endlessly in the fields (Fleischman & Tyson, 2000, pp. 11). Failure to attend work also resulted in a disproportionate loss of wages: if a worker showed up 15 minutes late,



Figure 4: Hawai'ian Commercial & Sugar Plantation in Pu'unene, Hawai'i. Komo News. 2010.



Figure 5: Sugar cane fields on Maui. From Matt Thayer. Hawai'i Public Radio. 2015. Copyright Matt Thayer.

they lost a quarter of the day's wages, and if a worker missed an entire day, the plantation eliminated two days' worth of wages (Fleischman & Tyson, 2000, pp. 16). In 1894, plantation owners established the Hawai'ian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA), completely designated to recruit labor and execute control over contract workers. Depending on the plantation and island, the HSPA ruled maximum wages ranging from \$18 to \$24 per month for the laborers. The plantations often paid laborers often in the form of housing, food, and medicine, or as script, only redeemable at a plantation store to create dependency on the plantation (Liu, 1984, pp. 190).

Although the shape of the land is the product of the workers, it was not controlled by them (See Figures 4 & 5) (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 162). The laborers were trapped in endless employment; they could not earn fiscal money, so they could not leave the plantation for a different life elsewhere. The workers did not control their circumstances: the plantation did. The plantation owners represented the man-made landscape as a natural one to ensure their own profit and impose a system of domination over the labor force (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 163). The owners naturalized the separation of ethnic groups, which supported racial wage differences and helped the plantations control their workers.

Laborers on Hawai'ian sugar plantations struggled against the mistreatment and dependency created by the White plantation owners through

strikes and protests. In 1909, the Japanese community created the Japanese Higher Wages Association, protesting racial differences in wage. Asian contract laborers received \$18 per month, while Portuguese and Puerto Ricans earned \$22.50, and the few Caucasian workers earned even more, at \$24 per month (Fleischman & Tyson, 2000, pp. 15). However, the HSPA imprisoned the strike leaders, effectively squashing the movement (McGowan, 1995, pp. 193). The plantation itself could not arrest strikers, but they did evict strikers from the plantations (McGowan, 1995, pp. 191). Another large strike in 1920 affected six plantations, and while it failed to immediately raise living standards and foster equality, the strike encouraged inter-racial cooperation to pressure plantations (Fleischman & Tyson, 2000, pp. 27). The Japanese and Filipino Federations of Labor on Oahu's plantations collaborated during this strike and shut down six plantations for six months (McGowan, 1995, pp. 198).

The plantation owners maintained the productive capitalist plantation through social control, minimization of social uprising, and neutralizing threatening groups (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 163). The contract laborers created the Hawai'ian landscape through their struggle against mistreatment from the plantations. Through the development of unions and resistance, the migrant workers struggled for more autonomy over their



Figure 6: Hawai'i Plantation Village on O'ahu. Each building was an ethnically homogenous housing structure at a plantation. 2024. Photo Courtesy of Author.

lives on the plantations. The fields of sugarcane hide past rebellions and inequalities. The fields now do not show the laborers that lived through inhumane circumstances, nor their attempts to improve their living conditions.

The modern memorialization of Hawai'i's dark, colonialist sugar plantation history influences how tourists view and consume present-day Hawai'i. In Waipahu, O'ahu, Hawai'i Plantation Village and Museum walks visitors through the entire history of sugar plantations on the island (See Figure 6). Authentic residences from different plantation ethnic camps have been transported from many different O'ahu plantations to the village, allowing visitors to see how each ethnicity lived. After the walking tour of the ethnic houses, visitors enter a museum that teaches the timeline and development of sugar plantations on O'ahu. While the Village requires marketing and an income to operate, they do a fantastic job with the authenticity and

quality of information provided. The promotional photographs of the village are meant to generate visitors, so they are framed in the Western sense of being 'picturesque' (Nash, 2005). Hawai'i Plantation Village succeeds in educating its patrons and keeping the memory of sugar plantations, injustice, and colonization alive, and inspires us to act to make a more equitable world.

The Village displays the Waipahu Memorial Stone, carved by a skillful Japanese immigrant in the 1930s (See Figure 7). Dedicated to the immigrant workers of O'ahu Sugar Co., the stone memorializes migrant workers without families to tend to their grave. The script says "Fellow Countrymen Who Have Gone Before Us. This Tower Is Erected For You." This large stone is impossible to miss on the plantation, asserting the importance of the people that left their families and died on the plantation. The physicality of the stone makes the forgotten remembered.



Figure 7: Waipahu Memorial Stone at Hawai'i Plantation Village. 2024. Photo Courtesy of Author.

In contrast to Hawai'i Plantation Village, Kaua'i Backcountry Adventures flaunts their exclusive access to rafting tours down sugar irrigation ditches (see Figure 8). While this is a fun adventure, it fails to respectfully memorialize Hawai'i's history of colonization. Rafting doesn't honor those who suffered for the benefit of Western capitalism; rather, it benefits from capitalism and tourists itself. Sugar irrigation ditches turned to a water ride objectifies the plantation history of Hawai'i for profit and "renew[s] investment in the notion of American innocence" (Lichtenstein & Lichtenstein, 2017, pp. 11). Improperly memorializing Hawai'ian sugar plantations doesn't make the world better, and hiding the past doesn't help the world move forward from it. As a tourist-supported industry, Kaua'i Backcountry Adventures encourages tourists to look at Hawai'i "from a position that demands no responsibility," feeding the illusion that tourism is innocent travel (Lichtenstein & Lichtenstein, 2017, pp. 12). Tourists have a responsibility to understand the colonial history of the islands, the displacement of Native Hawai'ians, and the mistreatment of

laborers for the exportation of a raw good. Hawai'i's beautiful, pristine landscape proves one thing: there can't be beauty without a simultaneous damning (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 164).

The Continental United States's methods of spatial reorganization—land privatization, irrigation ditch construction, and importation of labor—helped enforce colonial sugar plantations on the islands of Hawai'i. The Continental US

sacrificed Native Hawai'ian culture and people for the sake of profit. The memorialization of Hawai'i's sugar plantations affects tourists' viewpoints on Hawai'i's colonialist history. This memorialization can either encourage further colonialist practices or inspire a new pathway towards land decolonization.

Restoring traditional Hawai'ian land management systems could help prevent further environmental degradation due to agriculture on the islands and reduce reliance on food importation systems. Understanding the agricultural and environmental colonial history of Hawai'i can help create a more sustainable framework for future agriculture on the island. This can also restore Native Hawai'ian sovereignty and culture. Restoring traditional agriculture methods and land management in Hawai'i can provide a model for other Indigenous groups throughout Polynesia and the Continental United States.



Figure 8: Hawai'i Backcountry Adventures. Tourists leisurely rafting down sugar irrigation ditches. Kauai.com. 2015.

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