Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis

Salvatore J. Babones, Christopher Chase-Dunn

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Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203863428.ch9_4

Elena Ermolaeva
Published online on: 24 May 2012

How to cite:
Elena Ermolaeva. 24 May 2012, Chiefdom world-systems (with a focus on Hawaii, 1390–1790) from: Routledge Handbook of World-Systems Analysis Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Sep 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203863428.ch9_4
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It is extremely difficult to study chiefdom world-systems. Chiefdoms are developmentally located in between the kin-based and state societies, having features of both. The chiefdom level should be viewed on a scale which requires a precise empirical documentation of its positioning. For these reasons, the affirmative models (usually expected in sciences) are problematic for chiefdoms and can be hardly generalized.

The researchers of a specific chiefdom (e.g., Hawaii before 1779) are in disagreement about the evolutionary stage reached by pre-contact society; the trajectory of the developmental process; the mechanisms which contributed or undercut hierarchy formation; the significance of regional variations, and the role of culture in the political evolution.

In case of the ancient Hawaiian world-system, the focus is on five major islands—The Big Island of Hawai‘i, Maui, Oahu, Molokai, and Kauai. The time frame is from 1390 CE (the beginning of Early Traditional period) to 1790 (when Kamehameha fought with Kalanikupule and for the first time he used guns which were provided by Europeans).

Until recently, many Western observers had assumed that Pacific Island societies were geographically isolated and culturally homogeneous. The historical and ethnographic material presented contradicts such easy generalizations (Earle 1977; Hommon 1976; Kirch 1984; Sahlins 1985). The research on Hawaii documented more than 40 archipelago-wide differences in material culture, occupations, traditions, religion, and political behavior (Ermolaeva 1997).

The evidence allows us to speak about intersocietal differentiation and hierarchy (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1991). The islands differed in population density, degrees of stratification, size of polities, and technological intensification. During circa 400 years, the core/periphery relations within the archipelago were changing. In the Hawaiian context, the process of material accumulation is “at risk” as the result of pursuing either a wife-taking or wife-giving strategy. As explained by Valrio Valeri (1972, 1985), ruling chiefs seek to take wives only, but if they do so they risk rebellion from their dissatisfied juniors; if they give, they predispose themselves to eventual decline because ceding a sister to a junior relative carries the potential for subverting the senior line’s authority in the next generation. The history of the older cores—Kauai and Maui—fits nicely into this model. Only the Big Island of Hawai‘i had a protracted competitive advantage over the others in the system. The junior chiefs were pursuing a wife-taking strategy and they counterbalanced wife-giving by incestuous marriages.

The Hawaiian narrative on warfare presents rich evidence of the transition from a kin-based to a state order (in spite assertions that it is not possible to document the transition empirically). The
strengthening of internal structures of power is associated with the formation of hierarchical archipelago-wide power configurations. First, circa 1580–1600, Kauai became a great power, but shortly after that, in 1600–620, Maui had reached the same status in the system. This bipolarity continued for more than 100 years when, circa 1720–40, Oahu became a superpower. Oahu did not exhibit core-like characteristics based on marriage data, it pursued relatively egalitarian marriage relations with its neighbors. However, the alliances which Oahu built around inter-marriages contributed to its rise in a politico-military sense. Oahu’s dominance did not last long; in 1740–60 Maui took the firm status of a superpower up until 1775–80. At this point, we witness the rise of a new core—the Big Island of Hawai‘i.

The analysis of forms of interactions as a basis of social power would be incomplete without a study of symbolic or ideational interactions. The case here is an information exchange through the medium of travelers and messengers. The continuous measure of centrality pointed to Maui, Oahu, and Molokai as the most central in the interisland information network. Interisland news exchange can be viewed in the context of geopolitical alliances—bipolarity versus unipolarity—because of the changing number of group members in the interisland structure of news flow. The presence of six group members before 1700 (bipolarity) as opposed to four group members after 1700 (unipolarity)—with the previous group members being relegated to the position of attached isolates—indicates the process of polarization and hierarchy formation in the system.

Pololu valley on the Big Island was a particular kind of semiperiphery, a buffer zone, and it was an integral element in the Hawaiian inter-chiefdom political economy. The search for independent resources led the chiefs to gain control over the lands that had not already been allocated and, as a correlate, were spatially distant from immediate subalterns. Pololu buffer zone assisted the great powers and local usurpers in arms supply and military support.

Civilizationists (Friedman 1994; Wilkinson 1985) argue that certain conditions favor state systems, other conditions may favor empire formation. Specifically, ethnocultural heterogeneity is a correlate with state systems, homogeneity—with empires. Two tendencies were at work in Hawaii: cultural uniformity created pre-conditions for an empire formation; cultural variations supported an inter-chiefdom system. The net result was an unstable balance between the two and four hundred years of oscillation between a chiefdom social formation and a state.

References