

THE HAWAIIAN LIFE STYLE: SOME QUALITATIVE CONSIDERATIONS¹

It will be useful to consider some qualitative generalizations about Hawaiian life style before we examine the quantitative data in detail. In trying to characterize a group of people with a few words, one must always expect some bias; in our case it is more likely than anything else to be in favor of the Hawaiian people. One cannot live in Nanakuli and associate with the people without coming to believe that the less attractive aspects of the community's physical appearances are in sharp contrast to the quality of life found there. While it is popularly held that Hawaiians are deficient in all sorts of areas which we consider essential to "successful" living, such generalizations are nearly always based on an economic frame of reference and ignore the importance attached by Nanakuli residents to human relationships. If one can depict Hawaii's other ethnic groups as achievement-oriented in social and economic terms, then one must view Hawaiians as affiliation-oriented. By this we mean that most Hawaiians will choose to honor a commitment to a friend, provide aid to another person, seek out situations of good fellowship, and so forth, before they will choose personal economic gain.

Nowhere is the importance of affiliative values more evident than in the incredible energy which Hawaiians will expend in preparing a luau with friends, or helping a friend repair his home, or car, etc. And indeed, as we have often been told, Hawaiians, working as a team on construction crews and under the right conditions, will produce very impressive amounts of work. Nothing is more incorrect than the stereotype of the "lazy" Hawaiian; they are industrious and willing people, but their commitments are always more firm and productive if the goal is an intensification of human relationships rather than an accumulation of personal wealth or some individual achievement. Indeed, life in Nanakuli seems almost entirely organized around opportunities for reaffirming and intensifying affiliative ties. There is no question that the pleasure which Hawaiians find in congenial interaction, helping others, and working together toward some common goal is evidence against the myth that they are unmotivated and indifferent. It is simply that life in the dominant American society penalizes those whose sensitivities and values are affiliative--rather than achievement--oriented. Indeed, after one becomes accustomed to this life style, there are few places in American society where one can feel more comfortable than in the home of a Hawaiian friend.

Because of the importance of affiliative relationships, much effort in the Hawaiian community is directed toward avoiding interpersonal conflict and social disharmony. The general strategy for achieving the comfortableness that characterizes Hawaiian social relations entails the willingness to minimize personal gain in order to maximize interpersonal

¹ Contributed by Ronald Gallimore and Alan Howard.

harmony and satisfactions. This strategy is of course most clearly seen in those situations in which personal benefit is at odds with avoidance of conflict and disharmony. Even in rather ordinary affairs, however, this principle can be observed to operate. For example, a guest in a Hawaiian home is likely to be given a supply of food and beverage without comment. To ask someone if he "wants" something, will almost inevitably elicit a negative answer, since, in effect, it places the guest in the position of having to ask what the host has to offer. To Hawaiians such an exchange between host and guest lends to the relationship a kind of commercial, contractual quality in which the potential waste of unconsumed resources is given a higher priority than the maintenance of a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere. What is polite in Hawaiian terms is for the host to set out what the family has to offer before all present. It is made implicitly clear that one may consume as little or as much as he likes, or feels is appropriate. If one happens to arrive shortly before mealtime there will be no discomfoting exchanges of invitation and refusal, with the host attempting to convince the guest that an additional mouth at the table will create no hardship or inconvenience. To an outsider it might be more sensible to determine the desires of the guest before committing resources; to the Hawaiian family it is more comfortable to give food and drink, even if it is not wanted, than to increase the risk of social disharmony by putting someone on the "spot." When one's friends and kinsmen arrive, it is time to relax, to talk, to bring out for everyone's enjoyment what there is to share, and to promote as much as possible the feeling of aloha. To introduce a kind of "negotiation" about who shall eat and drink and how much is to spoil the situation. To ask questions about what individuals want to do and to seek an orchestrated interaction of a group is to risk embarrassment, and it is simply better to leave the situation uncomplicated by such negotiations.

Of course such casual arrangements of social relationships can lead to considerable ambiguity, and misunderstandings often occur. But, since the relationship of person to person is paramount, and those involved are highly sensitive to even faint signs of discomfort, misunderstandings are more likely to be minimized and disaffection expressed indirectly rather than allowed to become the focus of an unpleasant and direct resolution. Within the Hawaiian community it is generally accepted that "noncontractual" human relations are the most congenial, and that over-all benefits of such arrangements are worth the occasional problems they may create.

If one can grasp the significance of the principle (minimize personal gain, maximize interpersonal harmony) of Hawaiian social relations, then much of Hawaiian behavior becomes meaningful to the outsider. A visible and dramatic example involves the Hawaiian penchant for co-signing loans, a practice often regarded by non-Hawaiians as evidence par excellence of the social and economic irresponsibility of Hawaiians. Indeed even when a friend defaults on a loan which a Hawaiian man has guaranteed, the latter will adamantly refuse to sue for restitution or declare bankruptcy, although his own finances suffer. What is most important to him is to

maintain his good relationship with his friend, and to do this he must avoid a confrontation over the money. In short, when a friend needs help, and you can help, then that is what you do. To the outsider it may appear irresponsible, but to the Hawaiian it is simply a way of showing his expectation that the friend will repay, and that his sacrifice will be reciprocated at some future time. To do otherwise would be to violate the principle of putting human relationships ahead of personal gain.

Another consequence of the minimax principle which also confuses outsiders is the apparent indifference of Hawaiians to status consideration, which plays such an important role in other groups. What a man does for a living, or what kind of house or car he owns is less important than his ability to be a good friend, to be congenial, to joke with others, laugh at his own foibles, and accept hospitality as graciously as he extends it. If he has a special status, it will be known by friends and needs no continuing emphasis; the special qualities of an individual can be appreciated by others without display or lavish acknowledgment. Indeed, a person with special status must be particularly willing to be the center of gentle teasing. Anyone who seeks distinction by directly recounting his accomplishments and acquisitions is liable to be accused of being a "high nose." One modestly discounts and shrugs off individual recognition by redirecting attention to others or to group-shared interests. Those who seek the spotlight will invariably become alienated from the group if their behavior is interpreted as an attempt to make others look inferior or bad. If one is, in fact, deserving of praise or special attention, it is good manners to belittle whatever it is ("ain't no big thing") and make a mild self-deprecatory joke. One can enjoy being the focus of attention, but to pursue and relish such attention ("show off") is the avenue to rejection.

Again, the minimax principle can be used to explain the Hawaiian approach to individual status. If a Hawaiian says or does something which suggests that he is above others, he has more power or influence, or his opinions are more substantive, then he is pursuing personal gain at the risk of embarrassing, annoying, or hurting someone else. Thus, the outsider who tries to "pull rank," e.g., "I am Mr. so and so," will find that he has no special status until he publicly disavows the importance of his status. Perhaps the best illustration is the absolute necessity of anyone wanting to be accepted by a Hawaiian group to be willing to perform a dance or a song to which the group will respond with much joking and laughter. By that act the individual publicly demonstrates that he is as vulnerable as anyone else, and that the special status he may in fact have makes no general distinction between him and the rest of the group.

It would be a mistake to assume that status factors are completely irrelevant. Indeed, in many ways the Hawaiian community, like the Hawaiian family, remains a stratified system with age being perhaps the most important factor. From the outside, however, this system appears to be submerged beneath a strong egalitarian ethic, which entails verbal commitment to the idea that all are equal. Special recognition

for an individual is felt to be a function of "favoritism," rather than ability. For example, when a job is available in the community and application is open (e.g., at the school), it generally is assumed by everyone that the person who is hired has some special connection or influence. The idea that one person may be slightly more qualified for the job is only secondarily considered.

The psychology behind this impressive commitment to comfortable, harmonious human relations can be found in the profound distaste which Hawaiians feel for public failure, ridicule, shame, and, perhaps surprisingly, public recognition. Quite contrary to the stereotype, Hawaiians are highly sensitive people, and it can be said, generally, that being singled out for evaluation is always a matter of great apprehension. Although positive recognition is valued, if it entails the risk of negative attention, it is to be avoided. Again, we may usefully apply the minimax principle: if a personal gain increases the risk of public failure, shame, or ridicule, then it is preferable to avoid the whole situation. Thus any situation which involves the prospect of individual evaluation is apt to be suspiciously regarded, made the butt of a joke, or avoided. That this leads Hawaiians into difficulty in many ways is inevitable, since our society frequently requires people to put personal gain above all else and to engage in competitive relationships with others, some of which must involve social discord. Thus, the Hawaiian mother who is reluctant to attend the maternity clinic may very well be apprehensive about being evaluated as a mother. It would, however, be inappropriate to conclude that Hawaiians in general are careless in such matters as health. It may seem to some that this sensitivity is dysfunctional, and from the outsider's point of view it is. But, if one is to understand the Hawaiian people, he must put aside his own value-orientations and preconceptions about life style.

Whereas some groups of people tend to distinguish between personal and impersonal relationships, Hawaiians seem only to make distinctions of intensity. That is, for many individuals outside the Hawaiian community it is a common and comfortable practice to associate with and have business, social, and legal contracts with individuals toward whom one feels no personal involvement beyond mutual self-interest. For Hawaiians that category of detached, contractual, and mutual self-interest-supportive relationship does not seem to exist, at least not for most situations. For example, a salesman may be very successful in the Hawaiian community if he portrays himself as interested in the welfare of children. If he can get beyond what appears to be the initial suspicion which Hawaiians exhibit to strangers, then he will experience his customers responding to him on a personal basis. To be sure, it will be less intense than with friends and relatives, but qualitatively it is the same. Of course, this means that Hawaiians are vulnerable to persuasion, simply because they assume good intentions on the part of others.

Antecedents of the Hawaiian Life Style

There are a variety of factors which can reasonably be associated with

the development of what we have described as the life style of Hawaiians. Clearly, there are some fundamental aspects of the child training process that relate to adult behavior patterns. During the first few years of life most Hawaiian children are afforded such a measure of attention and affection that their basic orientation toward others becomes a fixture, indeed a stable attribute. As they mature and begin to talk and become more mobile, parents appear to grow increasingly weary of the intense dependency which they had so recently encouraged. Overtures by children become the target of more frequent rebuffs and punishment, although, to be sure, the parents continue to reward them to a degree sufficient to insure that dependency does not disappear altogether. In sum, Hawaiian children are taught from infancy to seek help, approval, and comfort from others, but with increasing maturity the form which their overtures may take is drastically altered. Since parents are apt to interpret vigorous efforts to get attention as intrusive, children begin to develop a set of subtle, passive tactics to signal needs. In other words, the child gradually learns that the chances of rebuke are decreased and the chances of a favorable reaction increased if he is careful about the timing and manner of his requests. He learns that confrontation, i.e., making an issue of what he wants, can lead to unpleasant consequences; he learns that passivity and avoidance, while they may decrease his chances of getting what he wants from adults, also diminish the possibilities of punishment and rebuke.

As he matures he also learns that helping to maintain a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere increases his opportunities to interact with parents spontaneously, and thereby to secure access to the family resources. By anticipating and being responsive to the moods of others--in effect, developing a set of sensitive social antennae--he can begin to increase his chances of avoiding punishment and obtaining rewards.

Parallel with the development of subtle tactics and social sensitivity is a gradual emergence of the sibling and peer group as an important source of affiliative satisfactions, a phenomenon which apparently continues throughout life. Beginning with the initial withdrawal of nurturance and rejection of dependency behavior in early childhood by parents, the child increasingly turns to siblings and peers. Since their aid is capricious, as well, subtlety and sensitivity are again important factors in avoiding pain and securing reward. Thus the sensitivity to others and the "gentleness" that seem to underlie the adult life style are shaped and strengthened in the socialization process.

Historical Antecedents of the Hawaiian Life Style

For the purposes of this report it will not be necessary to engage in a lengthy discussion of the history of the Hawaiian people. However, it may be useful to summarize briefly some historical factors that have contributed to the social problems experienced by contemporary Hawaiians.

The traditional Hawaiian social system was highly stratified, and for

the majority of the population subordination to authority was strictly demanded. Failures to submit to authority were severely punished, both secularly and by threat of supernatural sanction. This meant that most children had to be trained to be obedient to authority, rather than to exercise independent judgment

The loss of the aristocracy (ali'i) through their assimilation into haole society left most Hawaiian communities without viable leadership, since the credentials for being a leader were traditionally ascribed by genealogical means. The ali'i were hereditary chiefs who achieved recognition through conquest and by massive accumulation and redistribution of resources. Generosity was the trademark of a great chief. But with the establishment of a market economy an individual must violate the rule of generosity in order to achieve success, for the accumulation of capital involves the willingness to turn away friends and relatives when they ask for financial assistance. Under these circumstances it is nearly impossible for individuals to attain acceptable credentials for strong leadership.

The stratification system was supported by an elaborate set of taboos covering all kinds of situations, including many associated with domestic routine. Given these taboos, it was incumbent upon a parent to emphasize the "don'ts" of behavior rather than the "do's". In effect, the world was seen as a dangerous place within which everyone had to tread carefully so as not to provoke the supernatural into disrupting the delicate social and natural balance. The effect of this was that children were trained to avoid disruption rather than to pursue accomplishment.

With the replacement of a locally controlled subsistent economy by a haole controlled market economy, with the loss of the ali'i, and with the coming of the missionaries and later large-scale immigration, much of the cultural heritage of the Hawaiians was all but destroyed. The fact that the Hawaiians were receptive to inter-marriage with virtually every ethnic group that came to the islands contributed to the process of cultural change. The Hawaiian language was particularly vulnerable, for both in the public life of the market economy and in the private life of the mixed marriage the lingua franca, Pidgin, was generally used. As a result, the contemporary Hawaiian population (i.e., part-Hawaiian) lacks a coherent sense of ethnic identity and group pride. This has further contributed to the process of social atomization and relative political powerlessness.

The Hawaiian ethnic image has been further confused by the romanticized stereotype of the fun-loving, happy-go-lucky, good-natured but somewhat irresponsible native. Much of our evidence belies this image, but it is accepted by such a substantial proportion of the non-Hawaiian community that many Hawaiians have accommodated to it rather than tried to fight it.

The value which is the mainstay of Hawaiian identity and which is summarized as the "aloha spirit" has rendered the Hawaiians particularly vulnerable in the highly competitive market economy and subject to continuous exploitation. This has led many individuals to become highly suspicious and self-protective and to have little confidence in the benevolence

of agents of business or government.

With regard to Nanakuli in particular, social problems have been aggravated in recent years by the forced displacement of poverty families from Honolulu to Nanakuli, resulting in an artificially produced concentration of problem families in the area.