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Hawai'i's Commercial Fishing Industry: 1820–1945

Blue sampans ride in the harbor at Kewalo
under the copper brilliance of the sun;
blue sampans reel and tilt into the trade wind
on sea-paths traced by the Hawaiian moon;
blue sampans stagger and rise gallantly out of chasms of sea
in storms blowing out of the sultry south,
in hurricanes howling over the barren isles
far to the north, in a world of wind and foam.¹

HARVESTERS

Commercial fishing became important in the Hawaiian Islands with the arrival of the British and American whaling fleets during the early nineteenth century. New England whalers first rounded Cape Horn in 1791 and by 1820 had made Hawai'i their provisioning and trading headquarters.² Hawai'i's whaling industry reached its zenith in the 1850s when more than 500 whaling vessels operated from various island ports, a few of them flying the Hawaiian flag.³ As the whalers returned to Hawai'i from bowhead whale-rich Alaskan waters during

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the northern summer, millions of gallons of whale oil and several thousand tons of whalebone were transshipped in the islands. Hawaiian men were highly regarded as crew and hundreds were employed each season.⁴ During this period, European and American trading concerns, called "factors," were established to service the whalers and gradually became the dominant enterprises in Honolulu.⁵ The significance of whaling to Hawai'i's economy waned during the late-19th century, but a number of the trading companies that supported the whaling industry adjusted and remained at the heart of Hawai'i's industrial and financial structure.⁶

The establishment of a cash economy and community of foreigners in Hawai'i during the early years of the Pacific whaling industry also led to the development of commercial fisheries in the waters around the islands. As early as 1832, it was the custom for fish and other commodities to be sold in a large square near the waterfront in Honolulu.⁷ In 1851, the first regular market house for the sale of fishery products was erected, and the position of market superintendent was created under the Hawaii Kingdom.⁸ The government replaced this market in 1890 with a lofty iron and concrete structure covering an acre and a half of ground and costing \$155,000.⁹ John Cobb, a member of a team sent by the U.S. Fish Commission to investigate Hawai'i's commercial fisheries in 1901, referred to the new market building as "one of the best in the United States."¹⁰ Other fish markets were established in the towns of Wailuku, Lahaina, and Hilo on the islands of Maui and Hawai'i.

Initially, it was the indigenous Hawaiian people who supplied island markets with fish using canoes, nets, traps, spears, and other traditional fishing devices.¹¹ Their fishing knowledge and skills were noted by many early visitors to Hawai'i, including Cobb, who wrote:

Owing to the proximity of the sea to all of the habitable portions of the islands and the natural dependence of the people upon the products obtained from it for considerable part of their sustenance, the natives early developed into expert fishermen and fisherwomen, and as time went on gradually evolved newer and more effective forms of apparatus to take the place of or to aid the more primitive forms. The advent of foreigners hastened this development by the introduction of appliances in use in their own countries and heretofore unknown in the islands.¹²

As new goods and materials became available, Hawaiian fishermen modified their fishing accoutrements. Steel hooks, for example, replaced those carved from pearl-shell, and wooden spears were tipped with iron.¹³ But the Hawaiians retained many of the long-established fishing techniques that were so well adapted to Hawai'i's marine environment. Also retained were various ancient rituals to ensure safety at sea and a bountiful catch. Fishermen continued to pray to the traditional deities for success and appease them with offerings of fish.¹⁴

Commercial fishing provided Hawaiians an early opportunity to participate in the new island economy with a relatively small capital outlay and without abandoning their own customs and skills. Their role in Hawai'i's fishing industry gradually diminished through the latter half of the nineteenth century. During this period successive waves of immigrants increased Hawai'i's non-indigenous population from 5,366 in 1872 to 114,345 in 1900.¹⁵ The new arrivals included Americans, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipinos, and Japanese. The Japanese, like most immigrants, were contracted to work on Hawai'i's sugar cane plantations. When their plantation contracts expired many Japanese who had previously been skilled commercial fishermen in the coastal areas of Wakayama, Shizuoka, and Yamaguchi Prefectures remained in Hawai'i and turned to the sea for a living.¹⁶ The earnings of these fishermen were on average higher than those of plantation workers.¹⁷

There are probably several reasons why Japanese displaced Hawaiians as Hawai'i's preeminent commercial fishermen. David Starr Jordan and Barton Warren Evermann, who accompanied Cobb during his investigation of the commercial fisheries of the islands, suggested that it was because "the natives fish spasmodically as a rule, while the Japanese give it their whole time and attention, and as a result they are doing much better financially than the former."¹⁸ A. D. Kahaulelio, an expert Hawaiian fisherman, seemed to have similar sentiments when he wrote: "The Japanese go during the day and during the night. . . . If they keep it up tirelessly they are the better fishermen."¹⁹

The gradual introduction of advanced fishing techniques by Japanese also placed Hawaiian fishermen at a disadvantage.²⁰ The earliest Japanese commercial fishermen in Hawai'i simply adopted the tradi-

tional fishing methods of the Hawaiians. For example, Kametaro Nishimura, credited by some to be the first Japanese to engage in commercial fishing in Hawai'i, began his fishing career in the islands in 1885 harvesting 'ōpaka-paka, and uku.²¹ The deep-sea fishing gear and techniques used by Nishimura and others were imitations of those devised by Hawaiians.²²

Eventually, Japanese brought to Hawai'i their own fishing technology, the most significant being the sampan fishing vessel propelled by sails or oars.²³ Gorokichi Nakasuji from Wakayama Prefecture imported the first wooden-hulled sampan to Hawai'i in 1899.²⁴ Over time, Japanese boat-builders in Hawai'i adapted the original design to specific fishing conditions found in the islands, and a unique style of fishing boat evolved.²⁵ The fishing range of the Honolulu-based sampan fleet increased substantially after 1905 when the first vessels became motor powered.²⁶ With an average speed of ten knots, the larger sampans equipped with diesel or gasoline engines were able to travel to distant, previously unexploited fishing grounds. As early as 1913, sampans were fishing in the Northwestern (Leeward) Hawaiian Islands several hundred miles from Oahu.²⁷ With these larger and faster vessels the Japanese were able to land more product and lower the market price of seafood to the point that fishing was no longer an attractive occupation for many Hawaiians. Hawaiian fishermen who wished to compete with the Japanese had difficulty acquiring sufficient capital to purchase a sampan and engine.²⁸

In 1902, Jordan and Evermann predicted that the commercial fisheries in the islands would be dominated by the Japanese within ten years.²⁹ At that time the number of Hawaiians engaged in commercial fishing still outnumbered Japanese fishermen by three to one.³⁰ By 1930, the Chief Warden of the Territorial Fish and Game Division recorded that "practically all the fishing [in Hawai'i] is done and controlled by Japanese."³¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century Japanese already monopolized the deep-sea handline fishery that targeted fish such as 'ōpaka-paka.³² They also soon dominated the fishery for tuna and other pelagic species. These open ocean fish were mainly caught with either longline or pole-and-line gear. The longline method of harvesting fish, developed centuries earlier in Japan, was first employed in Hawai'i waters in 1917 off the coast of Waianae by a Japanese fisherman named Imose.³³ Vessels using this fishing method deployed long

lines to which flagged buoys and smaller lines with baited hooks were attached at intervals.³⁴ The Japanese technique of harvesting tuna with pole-and-line and live bait closely resembled a fishing method traditionally used by Hawaiians.³⁵ The pole-and-line vessels mainly targeted *aku* tuna. With an average length of 75 to 90 feet, these boats were the largest of the sampans. The pole-and-line fleet generally fished within a few miles of the main Hawaiian Islands because few vessels carried ice and the catch needed to be landed within four to five hours from the time of capture.³⁶ The sampans employing longline gear, known locally as "flag-line" vessels, were smaller than the pole-and-line boats but were able to spend a much longer time at sea because they chilled their catch with crushed ice. Traveling as far north as Midway Island and as far south as Palmyra Atoll, the flag-line vessels fished primarily for 'ahi tuna to supply the fresh fish market.³⁷

Tuna fishing received a major impetus in 1917 when F. Walter MacFarlane opened the Hawaiian Tuna Packing Company in Honolulu.³⁸ In 1922, a group of local stockholders incorporated the tuna canning company as Hawaiian Tuna Packers, Ltd. and expanded production.³⁹ The cannery enabled Hawai'i's fishing industry to expand beyond the fresh and dried markets.⁴⁰ In addition to being supplied by the local fleet, the cannery also received large quantities of frozen tuna imported from Japan.⁴¹ By the 1930s, the Honolulu cannery employed 500 men and produced nearly ten million cans of tuna per year.⁴² For several years Hawaiian Tuna Packers also operated a smaller cannery in Hilo.⁴³ Because Hawai'i residents much preferred fresh tuna over canned tuna, most of the latter was shipped to New York and other U.S. mainland cities.⁴⁴ Annual sales of canned fish in the late 1930s were \$1,200,000, making it Hawai'i's third largest commodity export.⁴⁵

Expansion of the fishing fleet resulted in a shortage of skilled fishermen. Some Japanese returned to Japan to encourage other fishermen to emigrate to Hawai'i.⁴⁶ The new Japanese fishermen brought with them ethnically-based attitudes that governed social relations and interactions among both fishermen and members of the broader immigrant community. There existed, for example, a rigid structure of authority and hierarchy among novice and experienced sampan crew members.⁴⁷ Individuals moved up from *kashiki* (ship's cook) to full-fledged fishermen only after rigorous training. On a pole-and-line vessel a fisherman was required to learn how to cast the line, jerk the

fish out of the water, catch the tuna under his left arm, snap the barbless hook out, slide the fish into the hold and cast the line back out—all in rapid succession. Months of training with a dummy fish were necessary before an apprentice was allowed to fish.⁴⁸

Japanese social conventions also compelled established residents in Hawai'i to offer guidance and support to new arrivals, who could expect assistance especially from *ken-jin*, fellow immigrants from the same region of Japan.⁴⁹ The transition to American society was eased for Japanese immigrants by the establishment of tightly knit communities.⁵⁰ The largest Japanese communities in Honolulu were the settlements of commercial fishermen in the Palama, River Street, and Kaka'ako areas adjacent to the harbor.⁵¹ Kaka'ako alone included nearly 500 Japanese fishing families.⁵²

These cohesive communities were important sources of financial and social capital for budding entrepreneurs. In his memoirs, Matsujiro Otani, who became one of the most prominent figures in Hawai'i's seafood industry, recalls the assistance he received from other Japanese immigrants after arriving virtually penniless in Hawai'i in 1908.⁵³ This social support could be critical to an individual's success in the fishing industry. Sampan ownership required considerable capital, something most immigrants lacked. When banks controlled by the wealthy plantation owners would not provide credit for new business ventures, the Japanese resorted to alternative sources of financing.⁵⁴ One way to pay for a boat was through a *tanomoshi* or rotating credit system. Organized as a social and financial group, the *tanomoshi* typically included about ten individuals who each contributed a monthly fee.⁵⁵ Money was distributed to one participant each month, either on a rotating basis or to the person willing to repay the group with the highest rate of interest. Usaburo Katamoto, the son of one of the first sampan builders in Honolulu and a shipwright himself, recalled that a boat engine was a particularly expensive item that often required a group effort to purchase.⁵⁶ As an alternative to a *tanomoshi*, two or three men might pool their money to build or buy a boat that they could operate as a joint venture.

A prospective fisherman could also generate capital through family labor. Filial piety became an integral part of the national ethic in Japan between the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and World War II and was the "backbone of family morality."⁵⁷ The principle is clearly illus-

trated in a children's book by Deborah Woodhull and Helen Berkey that tells the story of Katsu, a Japanese fisherman in Hawai'i who finds that he is unable to feed his wife and seven children with the income from operating a small boat.⁵⁸ He declares that he "must have a sampan" so that he can catch "the big fish" that bring a higher price.⁵⁹ To achieve this goal the mother tells her children, "You must work. You must work, and work, and work."⁶⁰ With the money earned by the children from growing and selling vegetables, Katsu and his family eventually save enough to buy a sampan.

The Japanese community in Hawai'i also retained traditional religious beliefs centered on fishing.⁶¹ Japanese immigrant fishermen brought a Shinto ritual that involved building a *jinsha* (shrine) dedicated to *Ebisu-sama*, one of the seven deities of good fortune.⁶² Every year during the *Ebisu matsuri* (festival) each fishing vessel in the sampan fleet was blessed. *Konpira-sama*, a famous *kami* (deity) of ships and voyages, was also adopted by fishermen as a guardian spirit.⁶³ In addition to these religious ceremonies, local fishermen adhered to less formal rituals to assure safety and a good harvest.⁶⁴ Numerous customs and taboos directed, among other things, how a new fishing boat was to be launched, when a vessel could leave or return to port, and what items could be carried on board a boat. The shipwright Katamoto described a typical ceremony:

... when the owners launch their boat, it's customary, they celebrate even they don't have any money. All the friends do it for them anyway you know. They used bamboo from Manoa valley to put up flags on the new boat for good luck. And, they start make mochi, rice cake, eh. They throw that for good luck. Sometimes they put prizes in the cake itself. They get good prizes. Was quite a few celebrations they used to have and usually they put up a tent and throw big party. And, we builders, they throw us in the water.⁶⁵

The physical danger of fishing as an occupation instilled a sense of camaraderie as well as derring-do. Describing the crews of the early sampan fleet in Hawai'i, one author wrote: "It is said that the fishermen were in a clan by themselves and were imbued with a typical seaman's reckless daring spirit of 'death lies only a floor board away.'"⁶⁶ The extreme isolation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and the limited shelter they offer during rough weather made fishing there

particularly hazardous. Tragedies such as the 1928 sinking of the *Dai-koku Maru* were common.⁶⁷ One winter, seven sampans were lost and three men drowned.⁶⁸

As the result of these close ethnic, community, and occupational ties, Hawai'i's commercial fishermen were able to organize effectively. As early as 1901, Jordan and Evermann noted that, "Japanese fishermen enter into combinations with their competing fellows thus defeating the purpose of large fishing plants to control the market themselves."⁶⁹ The Honolulu Suisan Jizenkai, one of the first formal fishermen's associations, was organized in 1911.⁷⁰ Every owner of a sampan was reportedly registered as a member.⁷¹ The principal function of the organization was to fund rescue parties for sampans that failed to return to port. In addition, the organization negotiated a minimum fresh fish and cannery price for *aku* and settled disputes between skippers and crews.⁷² In 1932, the owners of the smaller sampans, the so-called "mosquito fleet," formed their own organization. A newspaper account recorded that, "the code of the organization will include mutual helpfulness and implicit trust in each other."⁷³

By the late 1930s, there were 2,670 licensed fishermen in the Territory employing 999 licensed fishing boats.⁷⁴ The waterfront infrastructure that developed in Honolulu to support this fishing fleet contributed to the character of the city and became a well-known landmark. Initially, most sampans docked in Honolulu Harbor. In the 1920s, Kewalo Basin was constructed and by the 1930s was the main berthing area for the sampan fleet and also the site of the tuna cannery, fish auction, shipyard, ice plant, fuel dock, and other shore-side facilities. The "bright blue boats anchored picturesquely at Kewalo Basin" became a scenic attraction in Honolulu.⁷⁵ The harbor was "populous with sunset hour promenaders and Sabbath morning spectators."⁷⁶ As one commentator noted, "Kewalo Basin is the Fishermen's Wharf of Honolulu and is every bit as colorful in its way as are its counterparts in San Francisco, San Diego and New England."⁷⁷

MARKETERS

Japanese monopolization of the fishing trades in Hawai'i extended into subsidiary activities, including wholesale and retail sales of maritime hardware, boatbuilding and repair, sale of fishing gear and bait,

and processing and sale of dried fish.⁷⁸ Japanese also became prominent fish dealers or middlemen, a position that was initially held by Chinese. The change reportedly occurred in 1908, when Chinese refused to purchase fish from Japanese fishermen as a result of the boycott of Japanese goods in China aroused by the *Tatsu Maru* incident, in which a Japanese cargo ship was seized in Macao by Chinese authorities on charges of smuggling.⁷⁹ To help Hawai'i's fishermen dispose of their catch during the crisis, Honolulu physician Dr. Toshiyuki Mitamura and a group of Japanese, Hawaiian, and Caucasian businessmen established the Hawaiian Fisheries Company.⁸⁰ The company operated as an auction house, taking fish on consignment directly from the boats and conducting a public auction daily for wholesale and retail dealers. The company kept 10 percent of the selling price as its share.⁸¹ Over the next several years a number of other major auction houses were established in Honolulu, including the Pacific Fishing Company in 1910 and the Honolulu Fishing Company in 1914. In 1923, the Hawaiian Fisheries Company was succeeded by the Hawaii Suisan Kaisha, which became Hawai'i's largest auction house, annually handling fish worth a half million dollars supplied by a fleet of 130 sampans.⁸²

The auction houses also offered trucking, storage, handling, weighing, and bookkeeping services. Typically, a fishing vessel arrived at Kewalo Basin during the night and unloaded the following morning.⁸³ After the catch was transported to an auction house, it was displayed on the auction floor for inspection by fish retailers and wholesalers. A bell announced the start of bidding. Smaller fish were acquired in small lots, while larger species were individually purchased. The auction house recorded the selling price and would pay fishermen the day fish were sold.⁸⁴

Strong and long-lasting relationships developed between fishing vessel owners and auction houses. Auction houses often financed maintenance, construction, and equipment of fishing boats and would advance boat owners funds for operating expenses such as fuel, ice, and bait.⁸⁵ In return, a boat owner was expected to let the auction house handle all of his catch.

Some auction houses made a special effort to maintain the loyalty of their suppliers. Matsutaro Yamashiro, one of the founders of the Pacific Fishing Company and vice-president of Hawaiian Tuna Pack-

ers, helped fishermen form a *kumiai* (cooperative) and established a \$1,000 revolving loan fund.⁸⁶ He encouraged fishermen to maximize their fishing effort with awards of three undershirts and three dollars to the boat captain with the largest catch for the month. Yamashiro also hosted a large banquet on New Year's for fishermen and fish sellers.

Japanese did not acquire control of the retail fish industry; this activity largely remained the province of Chinese. Chinese were the first contract laborers on Hawai'i's plantations and preceded the Japanese in starting small businesses in the islands after their plantation jobs ended.⁸⁷ Like the Japanese, Chinese businessmen found mutual support in organizations. One of the earliest Chinese trade guilds in Hawai'i, the Wing Lok Ngue Hong, was established by fish sellers in 1903.⁸⁸

Fish were sold from leased open-air stalls located in downtown markets. Stalls were single proprietorship-family type operations. Typically, prices were negotiated. Retailers worked to maintain good relations with their customers because a stable clientele was key to success.⁸⁹ As noted previously, early market places in Hawai'i were owned and managed by the government. In 1904, the wealthy businessman Chung Kun Ai, who had immigrated to Hawai'i from China as a young boy in 1879, constructed the first privately-owned fish market in Honolulu in response to complaints from Chinese fish retailers that the government fish inspector was cheating them.⁹⁰ He named it City Market because it was located opposite his City Mill Company. City Market spawned a number of competitors. Within a year, Oahu Fish Market was established by a group of Chinese entrepreneurs led by Anin Young.⁹¹ King Fish Market was established in 1907, and Aala Market began operations around 1920.

Seafood was a significant item in the diets of local residents, and fish markets became important institutions in Hawai'i society. Sanford Dole noted that the fish market in Honolulu at the end of the nineteenth century was more than a commercial establishment; it was also "Honolulu's political center where impromptu mass meetings were held . . . ; it was, in a way, a social center also, especially on Saturdays for then business was at its height."⁹² According to one observer, "the fish market on a Saturday afternoon is gay as any Cairo bazaar and one of the sights of Honolulu town."⁹³ Descriptions of visits to the

fish market appeared in many popular travel books, such as Charles Taylor's *Vacation Days in Hawaii and Japan*:

I will never forget my first impressions of this curious scene. Sellers and buyers, of all nationalities—Kanakas, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, English, and Americans—mingle together as one nation.⁹⁴

The travel writer Isabella Bird was impressed by the “brilliant, laughing, joking crowd” and by the stalls “piled up with wonderful fish, crimson, green, rose, blue, opaline.”⁹⁵

Hawai'i residents could also buy seafood from some 125 fish peddlers who purchased their stock at auction and from retail booths in the central markets.⁹⁶ After its start in the early years of the 20th century, the selling of fresh fish and other goods door-to-door developed into an important and colorful component of Hawai'i's economy:

A bit of the romantic picturesqueness and color from the streets of century-old Chinese ports—Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai—has been added to the charm and fascination of Honolulu, the city at the crossroads of the great Pacific, which has been enriched by the customs and traditions of far-away lands. Fish vendors and other peddlers of wares, descendants of street hawkers of famous cities of old China, have become a part of the modern work-a-day world here.⁹⁷

From the perspective of consumers, fish marketing in Hawai'i also had its negative aspects, the most notable being unusually high prices. In Cobb's description of the Honolulu fish market he stated, “the most noticeable feature in this market is the extremely high price charged for fishery products, exceeding any other retail market of the United States, and possibly of the world.”⁹⁸ In 1908, the average price per pound of fish in Hawai'i was 15 cents as compared to 3 cents in the Pacific Coast States or 2.5 cents in New England States.⁹⁹

High prices for fresh fish in Hawai'i inevitably led to accusations of collusion within the fishing industry. Lorrin Thurston, President and General Manager of *The Honolulu Advertiser*, used the newspaper as a forum for vehement attacks on the “fish trust” allegedly established by “alien” middlemen to fix the retail price of fresh fish.¹⁰⁰ Frank Bell and Elmer Higgins, after conducting a survey of Hawai'i's commer-

cial fisheries for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries in 1938, surmised that “racial solidarity and oriental conservatism” had much to do with high prices of fish in the islands.¹⁰¹ Although Bell and Higgins discovered no evidence that fishermen or dealers were colluding by restraining trade or fixing prices, they concluded that, “it is apparent that voluntary understandings of a most effective nature exist in [Hawai‘i’s] fishing industry.”¹⁰²

Hercules Kelly, the Territory’s Fish and Game Commissioner, attempted to counter these accusations with a reasoned explanation of the high fish prices based on the law of supply and demand.¹⁰³ He pointed to the unusually high demand for fish in Hawai‘i resulting from a population comprised of ethnic groups accustomed to eating fish as a main article of diet. On the supply side, Kelly described how the quantity of fish that could be harvested in the waters around Hawai‘i was limited because steep slopes surrounding the islands provided relatively little fish habitat. Kelly also noted that “wasteful methods of Americans,” including use of destructive fishing techniques, pollution and overfishing, had further reduced the abundance of fish in Hawai‘i’s waters.¹⁰⁴

Despite the logic of such arguments, the belief in a conspiracy persisted. In 1938, high fish prices were the subject of an inquiry by a special investigating committee of the Territorial Legislature.¹⁰⁵ Although a great many individuals testified before the committee, no proof was found that a “fish trust” existed.¹⁰⁶

CONSUMERS

Despite “exorbitant” fish prices, seafood consumption remained high. One early commentator observed:

In the Honolulu market 2,000,000 pounds of fresh salt water fish valued at \$5,000,000 are sold annually. These figures represent a high price for a food that abounds in the waters all around the Islands, yet the people of this community, who are great lovers of the products of the sea, will gratify their tastes even at this expense.¹⁰⁷

Hawai‘i’s residents were known for an insistence on variety and quality in their seafood, as well as quantity. The naturalist William

Bryan remarked on the wide range of fresh seafood products that could be purchased in Hawai'i:

... of the six hundred or more species of fish that scientists have found in the island waters, more than three hundred and fifty are sold in the markets of Honolulu for food, each species having a Hawaiian name by which it is usually designated. Often several dozen species may be seen in the market in a single day.¹⁰⁸

The variety of marketed fish reflected the diverse preferences of ethnic groups in Hawai'i. Bryan developed a list of the fish used by each of the principal "nationalities" visiting the Honolulu market.¹⁰⁹ Many of the immigrant groups that came to Hawai'i brought with them cultures in which fish were not only an integral part of the diet but given symbolic and even transformative connotations. Certain fish communicated messages of solidarity, favor, or opulence, or were believed to impart specific desirable traits.¹¹⁰ For example, deep-water red "snappers" found acceptance within the Japanese community in Hawai'i as a substitute for red *tai*—a traditional Japanese symbol of good luck and, therefore, an auspicious fish to be served on festive occasions.¹¹¹ The December peak in landings of *ʻōpakapaka*, *onaga*, *kalekale* and *ʻehu* reflected the demand for them during *Oshogatsu* (Japanese New Year's), considered the most important cultural celebration for people of Japanese ancestry in Hawai'i. The red fish were also important for weddings and birthday banquets. For Hawai'i residents of Chinese descent, fish or *yu* was an important item during feasts celebrating *Tin nien* (Chinese lunar New Year) because *yu* is a homophone for abundance.¹¹² In traditional Chinese society fish symbolize regeneration and freedom because of their ability to propagate rapidly and their speed and unconfined lifestyle.¹¹³

Seafood quality was emphasized by most ethnic groups in Hawai'i. Japanese immigrants, for example, came from a society in which fishermen, fish dealers and even cooks typically handled prized fish with considerable care.¹¹⁴ Quality was typically equated with freshness. Hawai'i statutes required that fish refrigerated in any way be labeled "iced fish," and this fish usually sold at a low price.¹¹⁵ Fish dealers in Honolulu generally refused to buy fish that had been frozen because the demand for the product was so low.¹¹⁶

Both the discriminating tastes of local residents and the symbolic meanings with which some fish were imbued were linked to the importance of fish as gifts from one person or family to another. Such sharing and gift giving played an important role in initiating and maintaining social relationships, as exemplified by the traditional Japanese obligation to engage in reciprocal exchanges of gifts according to an intricate pattern of norms and procedures.¹¹⁷

END OF AN ERA

On the eve of the Second World War, commercial fishing in Hawai'i was a multi-million dollar industry that directly employed hundreds of people and indirectly provided work for thousands more.¹¹⁸ Although many of the first Japanese immigrants who had contributed to the development of the fishing industry were retiring, there was confidence that *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) fishermen would "tackle this job [of fishing] with all the daring and skill that is their divine heritage."¹¹⁹ Such optimism was misplaced, however, because world events would quickly overtake Hawai'i's fishing industry and inexorably alter it.

Growing tensions between the United States and Japan during the 1930s led the United States military to view Hawai'i's fishing fleet as a serious threat to national security.¹²⁰ For example, when the Japanese government arranged for many of Hawai'i's Japanese fishermen to attend fishing schools in Japan, there were concerns that the fishermen were being interrogated by Japanese Navy officials on hydrographic conditions in Hawai'i.¹²¹ In 1940, suspicions about the loyalty of Japanese immigrants resulted in implementation of a federal statute that prohibited fishing vessels of five tons or more from obtaining licenses unless the vessel owner was a U.S. citizen.¹²² The next year, the Territory passed a law prohibiting aliens from fishing with *hukilau*, gill, or purse seine nets within one mile of shore in order to preserve fishery resources for native Hawaiians and other U.S. citizens.¹²³ This legislation abruptly ended the careers of many fishermen in Hawai'i. In an attempt to circumvent the federal law a number of Hawai'i boat owners registered their vessels under false bills of sale that were made out to U.S. citizens who were relatives or friends.¹²⁴ When an investigation by the U.S. Customs Service and Federal Bureau of Investiga-

tion uncovered the deception in early 1941, most of the large sampans in the Territory were seized, severely curtailing the supply of fish for the tuna cannery and local consumers.

Suspicious of espionage on the part of Hawai'i's fishermen were never substantiated. Even so, after the Japanese raided Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, many fishermen were among the first to be arrested and interned.¹²⁵ At least six Japanese fishermen at sea during the Pearl Harbor attack were killed by U.S. soldiers as they returned to their home port of Honolulu. The soldiers feared that the fishermen had rendezvoused with ships from Japan.¹²⁶

With the entry of the United States in the Second World War came the imposition of area and time restrictions on fishing activities in Hawai'i that virtually eliminated offshore harvesting operations.¹²⁷ Many fishing boats were requisitioned by the Army or Navy. The tuna cannery was converted into a plant for the assembly of airplane auxiliary fuel tanks and the shipyard was converted to the maintenance of military craft.¹²⁸ Hawai'i's fishing industry was forever changed. The Second World War was a severe economic setback for much of the fishing industry, and after the war ended many fishermen were unable or unwilling to try to recoup their financial losses by returning to fishing as a livelihood.¹²⁹

NOTES

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- ³ R. O. Matheson, "One Hundred Years of Honolulu," *PCA Fiftieth Anniversary*, 54 (1906): 2.
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- ⁹ Cobb, 752.
- ¹⁰ Cobb, 752.
- ¹¹ David S. Jordan and Barton W. Evermann, "An Investigation of the Fishes and Fisheries of the Hawaiian Islands: A Preliminary Report." *U.S. Fish Commission Report for 1901* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902) 378; Cobb, 719-45.
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- ¹³ Richard A. Scobie, "The Technology and Economics of Fishing in Relation to Hawaiian Culture," (M.A. thesis, London School of Economics, 1949) 289.
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