

# ARCHAEOLOGY OF POVERTY ('ILIHUNE) IN THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

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## Abstract

Poverty ('ilihune) is a commonplace social problem rarely discussed by anthropological archaeology. The purpose of this editorial is to demonstrate how metrics of food abundance/scarcity, status, and exchanged goods can achieve a fuller picture of the political economy and address the roots of poverty. In the case, historical evidence from Hawaiian language newspapers suggests the mid-19th century is when we can expect to find more people began to experience poverty.

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Poverty is a major problem in modern Hawai'i and among the groups most disproportionately impacted are Kānaka Maoli. According to one study, Kānaka Maoli families have the lowest mean income in the state, and when adjusted for the high cost of living in Hawai'i, rank below national averages (Kana'iaupuni *et al.* 2005). This disparity in income, and other measures of quality of life, must be understood in terms of disenfranchisement after U.S. annexation in 1900 (see Trask 1999). But what do we know of poverty in the Hawaiian Islands before annexation?<sup>1</sup>

Social inequality has been a central concern of political economy approaches in archaeology. However, there is a tendency toward generalization and cross-cultural comparison, as opposed to historically particular studies, and for results to be divorced from modern social problems like poverty. Further, political economy has been slow to come to terms with uneven attention toward elites and top-down perspectives (Furholt *et al.* 2019). Historical archaeology, while often focused on reconstructing particular cases of inequality, has only recently focused on poverty (see Orser 2011). For the more distant past, we are beginning to see more qualitative and quantitative metrics of inequality, as well as a shift toward discussing quality of life, but these have yet to be taken up in the Pacific (e.g., Hegmon 2013; Kohler *et al.* 2017; Smith 2018).

I argue here that to trace poverty over the long term through anthropological archaeology we should first detangle several metrics we might naturally associate with poverty: necessities, status, and exchange. To

be clear, my purpose here is not to shift the blame for poverty in the modern day onto the Kingdom of Hawai'i. That would be a perverse amnesia of over a century of disenfranchisement since annexation. Nor is it my purpose to present earlier Kānaka Maoli society as idyllic. My purpose is to challenge archaeologists to think more critically about poverty, address gaps in political economy models of social change, and help make archaeology more relevant (e.g., Kawelu 2015).

## Elements of Poverty: Necessities, Status, and Exchange

Definitions of poverty vary widely but tend to stress experiencing a scarcity of basic necessities that is born of structural inequality. For economies centered on capital, structural inequality is more than a lack of capital as the common means to obtain necessities through exchange. It is something that is reinforced by the lack of opportunities to change one's situation due to social identity, including race and gender. Therefore, at a minimum, any consideration of poverty must reference necessities, status, and exchange.

If we look broadly at world history, there is strong archaeological evidence demonstrating that the origins of social inequality lie well before the advent of capital (Flannery and Marcus 2012). In the absence of capital, those who ruled pre-modern states did so through the strategic dispatch of other types of wealth and power tied to their status. They managed to promote a specific social order that kept

their descendants divorced from, and above, other classes. Structural inequality comes from a lack of status, rather than capital, and could be used to impose logistic and social limits on exchanges. For example, elites at times situated themselves as brokers to manage exchange in the form of redistribution and enforced sumptuary laws that banned lower classes from owning certain goods.

In the Hawaiian Islands, we are fortunate to have a strong body of non-material traditional evidence to help unpack the history of poverty. But, as Johnson (2008: 243–244) notes, traditions have been “misconstrued in non-Hawaiian hands, whether through exaggeration, truncation or neglect.” Further, we cannot presume cultural concepts will be static over centuries. For example, *maka‘āinana*, literally ‘the people of the land,’ is sometimes translated as lower class or non-elite. While this shorthand is useful for cross-cultural comparison, it masks a great deal of culturally-specific, relevant information. Historical linguistics suggests *maka‘āinana* can be traced back to a time when kin groups held sway over land (see Kirch 2010, Proto-Polynesian \**mata-kainanga*) before elites (*ali‘i*) were the sole owners of landed property (see Hommon 1986, 2013).

With these important caveats—that *Kānaka Maoli* cultural values are not necessarily static over time and will not always map neatly onto a modern economic framework—the 19th century historian David Malo offers us some insights into poverty. Malo writes: “Any one who was an active farmer or fisherman was deemed a man of great wealth. If one but engaged in any industry he was looked upon as well off” (Malo 1951: 79). Putting aside the gendered aspect of this comment there are two critical points. First, the emic definition of status is simple that, a reference to status, and not the sole determinate of wealth or poverty. Second, the capacity to provide ample food, a necessity, is a good indicator of wealth. The term for wealth, *waiwai*, itself points to the value of water for life and specifically for growing taro (Pukui & Elbert 1986).

Turning once again to Malo’s (1951) *Mo‘olelo Hawaii*, “poverty” appears twice in the English translation, first in reference to the training of a young man of high status to become a chief. Malo (1951: 52–53) writes:

“The young man had first to be subject to another chief, that he might be disciplined and have experience of poverty, hunger, want and hardship, and by reflecting

on these things learn to care for the people with gentleness and patience, with a feeling of sympathy for the common people...”

The implication here is two-fold, first that life for lower status people included experiencing, “poverty, hunger, want and hardship,” and that sympathy for these things was a positive quality for a chief.

Malo’s other comment on poverty is in reference to gambling, specifically, the game *noa*, “a sport that was extremely popular with people and chiefs” (Malo 1951: 225). Malo (1951: 225) writes: “Sometimes a man, when he lost his property and was reduced to poverty, took it so greatly to heart that he became bitter and desperate. He would then, perhaps, risk everything he had and become beggared, or actually go crazy through grief.” In a footnote the reader is told, “[i]t was not an unknown thing for a man, having exhausted other resources, to stake his own body, *pili iwi* as it was called. If he lost, he was at the least the slave of the winner, who might put his body to what use he pleased” (Malo 1951: 226). While there is no reason to think that gambling accounted for the majority of exchanges in the past, the scale of gambling-induced poverty is described to have been “enormous” and included common people and chiefs, “who were beggared by this game” (Malo 1951: 225).

If we take Malo’s comments as indications on how poverty may have been in the pre-European contact era, then there is good reason to think that poverty needs to be examined through parallel investigation of necessities, status, and exchange rather than presume that they were universally correlated.

## Archaeological Metrics of Poverty

Most archaeologists would agree that the primary challenge for studying poverty is defining reliable metrics given known confounding factors. Without listing out all those factors, one is the distinct disadvantage that wealth, we often assume, leaves behind an over-sized mark on the archaeological record. In contrast, material consequences of food scarcity, lower status, or limited exchange networks, in some cases, leaves behind an absence of evidence. But I would argue, we already look at the fundamental elements of poverty. Thus, for the remainder of this essay, I want to highlight archaeological metrics for elements of poverty in the pre-contact era based on previously published research. I end with a suggestion on how to focus efforts to study poverty in the historic period.

*Necessities*

The necessity we most commonly study is food. Kirch and O’Day’s (2003) analyses of the quality and quantity of food remains in Kahikinui, Maui Island shows the value of contrasting households with higher and lower status (see also Kirch *et al.* 2010; Kirch 2014). For their analyses, they classify the status of households as elite, probably including a lower ranked chief or land manager (konohiki) and priest (kahuna pule), and a number of smaller, more modest households consistent with lower ranks. Status is assessed by the size and quality of architecture at house sites (see more below).

At the homes of the elite they found a higher concentration of bird and fish (Figure 1), but surprisingly, there is no appreciable difference in the concentration of medium mammal, which includes

highly valued pigs. Kirch and O’Day (2003) looked closely at the types of meat cuts present at sites and found elites had more choice cuts, therefore, quality rather than quantity is what separates them. Another remarkable discovery is the commonplace evidence for consuming rat by the non-elite. Further, elite appear to have exercised rights of ‘first fruits’ when it came to harvesting shellfish (i.e., larger shellfish), but that shellfish was a much smaller proportion of their subsistence (Figure 1). This is not to say that shellfish should be presumed to be a food of last resort. What it does mean is we should look closely at the quantity and quality of food across households as one window into scarcity.

One often overlooked necessity is firewood. Dye (2010) has convincingly linked the struggle for control over former kin-owned land to a continuous

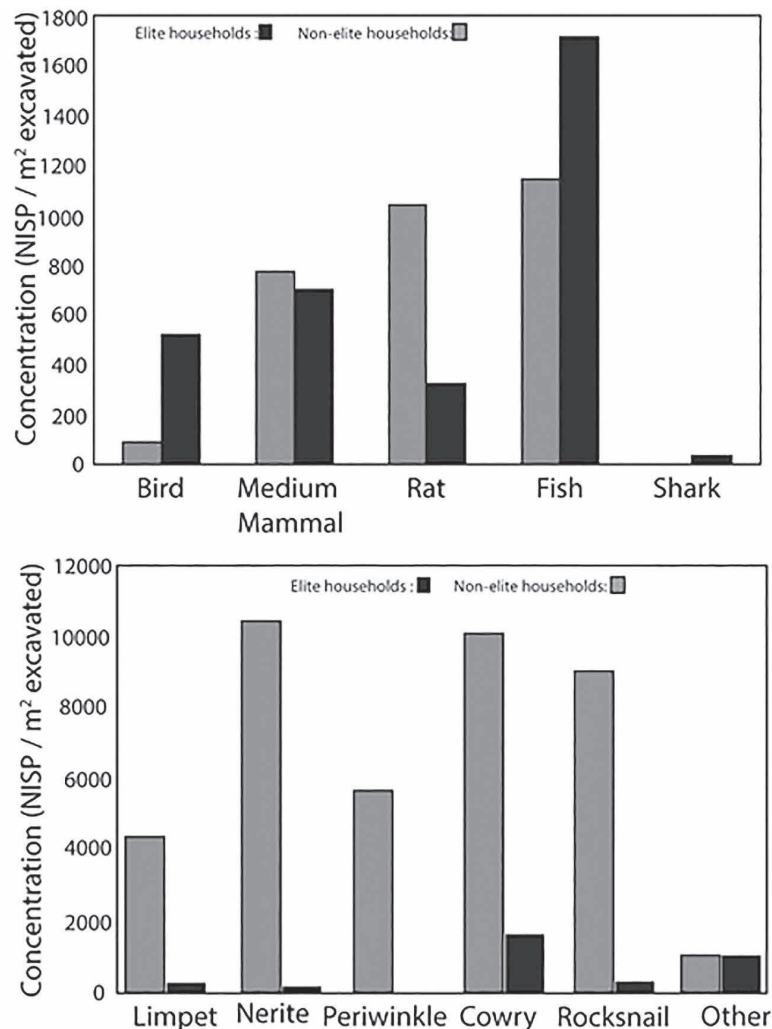


Figure 1. Concentration of Food Remains at Elite and Non-Elite Households in Kahikinui, Maui Island. Source: Kirch and O’Day (2003).

decline in the use of higher valued trees for firewood, as well as a shift in where people gathered their stones for creating ovens. The commodity chain (e.g., Earle 2010; Earle and Spriggs 2015) of firewood is short and simple, since no special effort is required beyond collection. Thus, it is a good metric for how other more complex commodities may have been controlled. Another factor to consider is the cultural as well as functional demand for firewood since the kapu system required making separate cooking fires for men and women (Hommon 2013: 53).

### *Status*

Perhaps the most commonplace metric for status in the archaeology of the Hawaiian Islands today is household architecture. For example, in a small survey of household architecture in Manukā, Hawai‘i Island, the summed internal floor area of complexes was used to identify the homes of low, middle, and high ranked families (McCoy and Codlin 2016). This is not inherently problematic. It is a material indicator of status used around the world. There are, however, a number of problems with how it is used in Hawai‘i, including, but not exclusively, there are no agreed upon criteria for classifying a particular compound by rank, disagreements on how to deal with contemporality of features, and few are excavated beyond small test pits making it difficult to use anything except surface architecture in assessments of status.

In other parts of the world, burial practices and material symbols of rank are used to assess status in the past. In the Hawaiian Islands academic research on the graves and remains of the ancestors of Kānaka Maoli essentially ceased in the 1980s after several high-profile development projects spurred on desperately needed regulatory action. One of these high-profile development projects took place at Honokahua Bay, Maui Island.

At Honokahua Bay, the remains (iwi kūpuna) of somewhere between 870 and 1,000 people were disturbed before work was finally halted and the planned 450-room hotel moved to a new location. The cultural sensitivity of the topic, and this specific project, cannot be underestimated and it is unsurprising that little has been written about what was discovered at Honokahua other than a descriptive project report (Donham 2000). However, there are a few facts that are important how archaeologists interpret status from artifacts. First, the discovery of burials with preserved personal adornments was incredibly rare, accounting for less than 9% of burials.

A traditional pendent, called lei niho palaoa, a sign of high status well documented in the post-contact era was exceedingly rare, found with just 15 individuals, or less than 2% of people. Based on the longevity of this tradition (Kirch 1985), and rarity, I would argue it is our best single type of artifact signaling high status. I raise this because it is not unheard of to find evidence of personal adornment, including lei niho palaoa, in the excavation of non-burial contexts; however, there is currently no systematic accounting of them.

### *Exchange*

We have more data on exchanges today than ever before. Geochemical testing of basalt artifacts to determine the geographic size of social networks has been conducted at the same Kahikinui households discussed above (Kirch *et al.* 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, high-quality basalt from outside the local district, and from neighboring islands, was found at “the residence of a prominent household, quite likely the community leader for this part of Kahikinui” (Kirch *et al.* 2012:1060). Evidence cited as pointing to the high status of this household includes architecture, dog bone, and formal hearths (Kirch *et al.* 2012: 1059).

Geochemical sourcing and quarry studies have helped shed light on craft specialization (Mills *et al.* 2011). Bayman and Dye (2014: 67–82) give an up-to-date summary of debates over evidence of specialization in the production of basalt tools and other goods, and how that evidence has been interpreted in terms of the existence of attached or independent specialists, and elite control of raw material and finished goods. In short, there is no consensus on the place of craft specialists in the economy but there is good evidence that single territories were not “autonomous economic units” as has sometimes been inferred from ethnohistory (Bayman and Dye 2014: 82). Importantly, material evidence of craft specialization to create the most prized goods, symbols of authority and status, rarely or never preserve in the archaeological record.

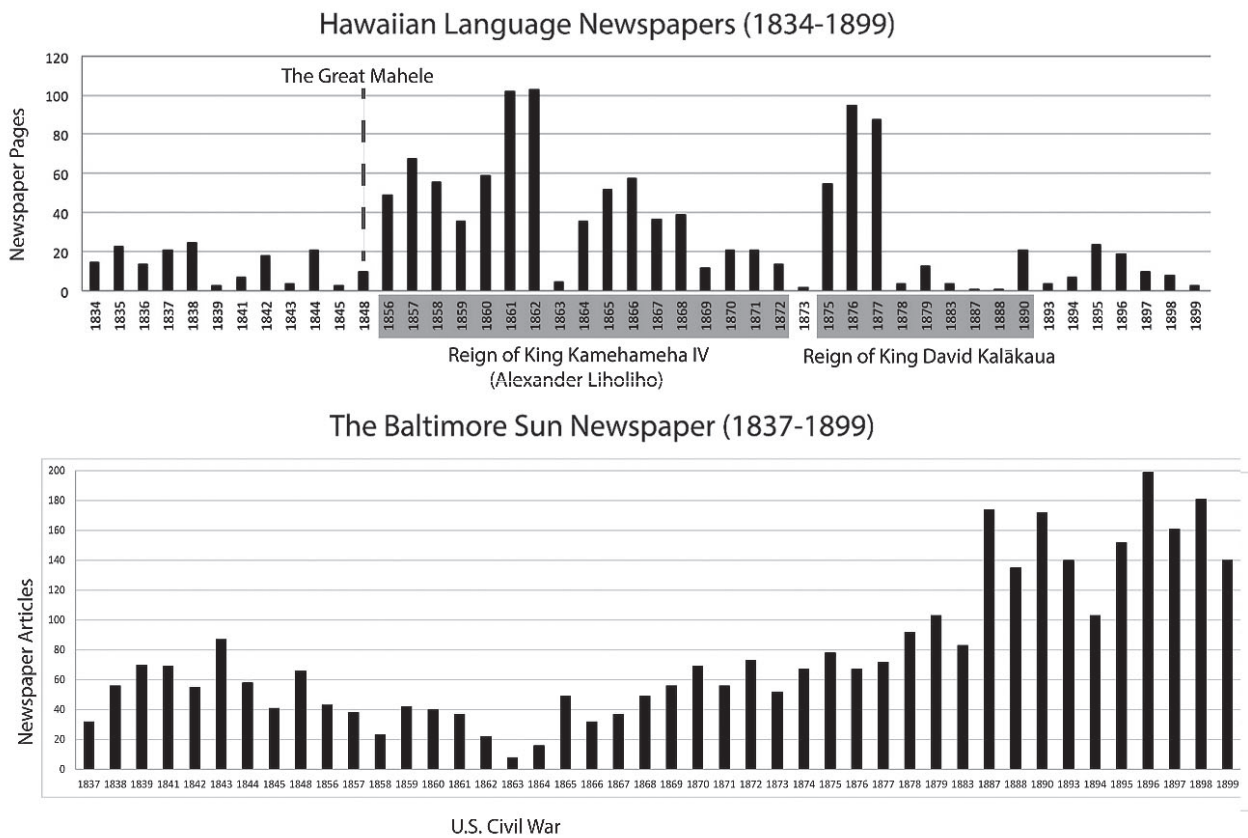
One line of evidence that suggests the existence of local exchange networks between neighboring maka‘āinana is the use of a much more abundant material class: volcanic glass. Volcanic glass occurs naturally in hundreds of places and is often the most common artifact found at pre-contact era sites as debitage and discarded expedient tools. My colleagues and I conducted a study of +3,300 volcanic glass artifacts and discovered some interesting patterns in the distribution of glass from the volcanic dome

called Pu'uwa'awa'a on Hawai'i Island (McCoy *et al.* 2011). By combining a GIS model for hiking time with lithic technology analysis, we found a sharp decline in the amount of cortex on artifacts found at sites beyond what would have been a single day's walk. We interpreted that as evidence the source had been used as common pooled resource by those living closest to it (see also Putzi *et al.* 2015). Beyond a single day's return trip, we found that wasted cores were exchanged or gifted down-the-line without regard to territorial boundaries. We argued that these reflect, "a dense population with an intimate localized network of social obligations" (McCoy *et al.* 2011: 2558). For maka'ainana families these exchange networks may have been what allowed them to stay in place during hard times. The choice to leave the territory, for example because a chief's demands were too high or some natural disaster, was a serious one as it would forfeit usury rights.

### Historical Metrics of Poverty

There is good reason to believe that poverty, or at least the public discourse surrounding poverty, varied drastically over the 19th century in Hawai'i. Kānaka Maoli took up literacy at an incredible rate, and thanks a huge effort to digitize printed material from this era, archaeologists have a rich independent line of evidence to work with (Hilo 2011). For this study, I searched for how frequent the most common term for poverty – 'ilihune – appeared in Hawaiian language newspapers from the Kingdom Era (Figure 2). The term 'ilihune, meaning "poor, destitute" or a "poor person" (Pukui & Elbert 1986), appeared on +1,400 pages in newspapers (Table 1). The term shows semantic stability over this period and is not the only term used to in some way connote poverty.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-19th century the Kingdom of Hawai'i passed a series of land reform laws that culminated in



**Figure 2.** Frequency of the Appearance of the Term "Ilihune" in Hawaiian Newspapers (above) and "Poverty" in a U.S. Newspaper (below). For Hawaiian papers there are two spikes, one in the 1850s-1860s after the Great Mahele and the other after an 1875 trade treaty with the United States. For comparison, the Baltimore Sun shows a steady use of the term poverty, except for a dip during the Civil War, and an uptick in the 1880s-1890s after poverty became the subject of greater political and social discourse (Gillie 2008). Sources: <http://nupepa.org/>, accessed in Oct 2015; <https://www.newsbank.com/>, accessed in May 2020.

the Great Māhele, or great division, of 1848 whereby lands not already claimed by the crown could be claimed by chiefs and commoners who would hold outright individual ownership, with the option to buy and sell land (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992; Fuchs 1961: 14–17). In the end, most property went to the crown or individual chiefs. The entry of land into a capitalist market system was fraught with abuses of power as foreign interests and extractive industries established

themselves, especially industrial plantation-style farming, and ruling chiefs turned their sights on creating commercial wealth. The Great Māhele also coincides with when the Kingdom of Hawaii began minting its own currency (i.e., the Hawaiian dollar, 1847–1903), which also may be contributing to the increased discussion surrounding poverty.

The second peak in references to poverty (‘ilihune) in newspapers, at the start of King David Kalākaua’s

Table 1. List of Terms Referring to Poverty. Sources: Pukui and Elbert (1986); <http://nupepa.org/>.

Term (Hawaiian)	Term (English)	Dates of appearance in Newspapers	Number of appearances
‘ilihune	“Poor, destitute; poverty, poor person.” Literal meaning: “tiny skin.”	14 February 1834 to 29 December 1927	2,460 (word count), 1,418 pages
hune	“Poor, destitute; a poor person.” “ <i>He hune kō lākou nohona</i> , their way of life is poverty-stricken.”	28 March 1834 to 29 September 1927	395 (word count), 296 pages
‘ilikole	“poverty-stricken, very poor, destitute; pauper (stronger than ‘ <i>ilihune</i> ).” Literal meaning: “bare skin.”	5 December 1834 to 10 June 1876	45 (word count), 30 pages
māhune	“Poor, destitute.” Other meanings: “small particle, speck; fine.” “Barely, with difficulty.”	19 August 1835 to 3 June 1926	23 (word count), 15 pages
hō‘o‘ilihune	“To cause poverty; to behave as if poor. <i>He hō‘o‘ilihune kona noha ‘ana</i> , he lives as if in poverty.”	25 May 1836 to 14 December 1922	12 (word count), 12 pages
puhikole	“Poor, destitute; poverty.”	21 April 1858 to 2 September 1895	11 (word count), 11 pages
hō‘ohune	“To cause poverty.” “ <i>E hō‘ohune iā mākou...</i> , to impoverish us.”	30 August 1837 to 9 May 1913	8 (word count), 8 pages
hō‘ilikole	“To cause poverty. <i>He keiki hō‘ilikole</i> , a child that makes paupers of the parents, as with expenses” “Flesh of half-ripe coconut”	5 November 1864 to 3 October 1868	5 (word count), 4 pages
‘akole	“Poor, destitute, shiftless.”	10 April 1862 to 2 November 1896	5 (word count), 4 pages
ka‘a ka lolo	Literal meaning: “dizziness”. Figurative meaning: “destitution, poverty”	12 December 1861 to 18 August 1866	2 (exact phrase), 2 pages
ka‘a‘owē	Literal meaning: “To roll along with a rustling sound.” Figurative meaning: “a person with no property or means of support.”	6 June 1838	1 (word count), 1 page
pakaneo	“Destitute, poverty-stricken.”	–	–
hō‘opakaneo	“To bring destruction or poverty. <i>He mea hō‘opakaneo ka piliwaiwai</i> , gambling causes poverty.”	–	–
akakole	“Destitution, poverty; poor.”	–	–
‘ilikonene	Rare variation of ‘ <i>ilikone</i> (see above).	–	–
He manu hulu ‘ole	Literal meaning: “a featherless bird”. Figurative meaning: “a poverty-stricken person”	–	–
laho kole	Literal meaning: “raw scrotum.” An insulting epithet referencing poverty.	–	–
laho pōka‘oka‘o	Literal meaning: “dry scrotum.” An insulting epithet referencing poverty.	–	–

reign, corresponds to a time when Hawai‘i was in the grips of an economic depression. This economic strife spurred King Kalākaua to negotiate a trade deal that allowed Hawaiian agricultural goods (sugar, rice) to be imported tax-free to the United States in 1875 when we see another peak in references to poverty. Again, there are several factors that could account for this rise after the treaty was signed such as the further disenfranchisement of Kānaka Maoli as land became valuable for export oriented agricultural production, or continued immigration.

## Conclusions

How can archaeology contribute to the writing the long-term history of poverty in the Hawaiian Islands? I have argued here that through archaeology we can look at where, when, and why we see a correlation between scarcity, status, and exchange. In the pre-European contact era, the traditional land tenure system and the kapu system of sumptuary laws are likely at the heart of how systemic inequality translated to scarcity for the lower classes. It is also important to keep in mind that there was a social contract between the ali‘i and the maka‘āinana. A good chief would show sympathy for those experiencing poverty and, ideally speaking, that sympathy could counter-balance the problems associated with scarcity. If we carry that premise out to its logical conclusion, the focus on luxury food makes a certain sense; when it came time to tax the maka‘āinana it was understood which foods were likely to be taken and which could be passed over and kept by the maka‘āinana so they could feed themselves.

In looking at 19th century Hawai‘i there are a number of historical factors that make poverty seem inevitable: a shift from rural to urban population, the transfer of land tenure to a fee-simple ownership model, and the new capital-based economy. Certainly the loss of rights to land by Kānaka Maoli may be linked to an upswing in references to poverty in Hawaiian language newspapers after 1848. The archaeological evidence from this period calls out for more quantitative and qualitative evidence brought to the question of poverty here and around the Pacific.

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## Endnotes

1. I have chosen to focus this editorial narrowly on the history of Kānaka Maoli society from the pre-European contact era with some references to the Kingdom Era. A broader synthesis would include more on groups not well represented in the written record, especially women, children, and immigrants to Hawai‘i.
2. A few comments on the term ‘ilihune, sometimes used in an abbreviated form (hune). The term ‘ilihune appears consistently across all printings of the Bible (see for example Genesis 45:11; Source: <http://baibala.org>) and in print as recently as a 2012 Hawaiian language editorial in the Honolulu Star Advertiser newspaper’s online edition. After the Great Māhele, the more severe term for poverty – ‘ilikole – begins to appear more frequently in newspapers. It shows up a handful of times before the Māhele, and once later on during the reign of Kalākaua, but it is mainly found in the 1860s at the same time we see a peak in other references to poverty during the reign of King Kamehameha IV (Alexander Liholiho). This term literally refers to ‘bare skin’ and it should be noted comes when Western clothes had been the norm for many years (Bayman 2009).

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