

REVIEWS

Timothy Earle. *Economic and Social Organization of a Complex Chiefdom: The Halelea District, Kaua'i, Hawai'i*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978. Pp. xii, 205, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$6.50.

Since Karl Wittfogel promulgated his "hydraulic" theory of social organization in 1957, anthropologists have pondered its applicability to various agricultural societies. Earle discusses at length the viability of "hydraulic" theories with respect to the evolution of ancient Hawaiian chiefdoms. Evidence is based on detailed archaeological data on the Halelea irrigation system patterns and from ethnographic, historical, and travel literature on Hawai'i.

The basic "hydraulic" theory proposes that there is a casual chain of evolutionary social development in which a society, under the influence of a complex irrigational technology, selects a centralized systems management for the proper and efficient mobilization of labor, reallocation and redistribution of resources, and for protection in time of war. Earle notes that Hawai'i is ideal for testing such propositions because prehistoric Hawai'i "showed definite evolutionary trends towards specialization and centralization of leadership." Wittfogel himself characterized traditional Hawaiian society as a "crude, agrobureaucratic state," result-

ing from the need for centralized and specialized management, i.e., chiefs, in directing the functions of complex irrigation systems.

While it is not disputed that traditional Hawaiian chiefly society evolved to a “complexity beyond the simple chiefdom,” it is a matter of concern for the author as to whether such a trend resulted from conditions originally proffered by Wittfogel. Earle concludes that the extensive irrigation systems in Halelea does not reveal any evidence of a “preliminary overall design,” but rather appears to have resulted “largely by extension and gradual intensification” of existing irrigation patterns. Hence, concludes Earle, no Wittfogelan centralized management infrastructure existed. The author then addresses the question of resource allocation and redistribution among self-sufficient Hawaiian land unit communities (*ahupua'a*). The closely situated settlement patterns in the *ahupua'a*, reasons Earle, did not require any form of centralized management since *ahupua'a* communities could freely transact among themselves and with other *ahupua'a* communities as well.

The “hydraulic” theory contemplates that warfare in a complex irrigation community results from increased population pressures on scarce prime land needed for subsistence which requires a specialized class skilled in the art of war. At this point Earle suggests an alternative theory of warfare in traditional Hawaiian society. First, it is necessary to accept the idea that competition for political power among Hawaiian chiefs was an “explicit aspect of social existence,” whereby the primary goal of many chiefs was to maximize political advantage through the use of accumulated wealth to finance political activities. Though such advantages and ambitions could be achieved peacefully through kinship bonds and friendship pacts, warfare was seen as an alternative strategy and could be, in the author’s view, seen as a form of capital investment. In support of this, Earle concludes from ethnographic evidence that the Hawaiian population, on the eve of contact with the West, had not reached an optimum number sufficient to produce warfare, as perceived by Wittfogel, over subsistence land. Halelea cultivation patterns do not indicate intensive and extensive use of land which would readily indicate population pressures. Warfare is seen by Earle as a derivative feature of political competition over local subsistence communities which were necessary for the production of excess wealth necessary to maintain an expanding political following.

Earle’s monograph will do much to stimulate rethinking on the nature of chiefly power in Polynesia. Aside from providing data which, in the author’s opinion, destroys the vitality of “hydraulic” theories, Earle sets

forth new propositions in social theory which may be the catalyst for new criticism and renewed debate.

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