

HAWAIIAN CULTURE

LOCATION:

Hawaii consists of a number of tropical islands about 3000 kilometers from the west coast of the United States, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Today, of the more than one million Hawaiians, about 200,000 claim some native Hawaiian roots. About 8,000 people are of full Hawaiian descent.

HISTORY:

All of the Hawaiian islands were created by the kind of volcanic activity that continues today. Until two thousand years ago there were no human inhabitants on these islands. The first people to arrive and stay were Polynesians who came from Marquesas between the 4th and the 8th century. A few hundred years later other people came from Tahiti. The Tahitians enslaved the people they found and created a new Hawaiian culture.

Although the Spanish navigator Gaetano visited the islands briefly in 1555, it was not until 1778 that Europeans started to have a real influence on Hawaii. In this year Captain Cook arrived on the island of Kauai (he was killed in Hawaii the next year). His sailors estimated that there were up to 1 million native Hawaiians. At first the Hawaiians thought the white men were gods, also because of their guns and mirrors. Soon they realized that the white men could experience pain and could die, so they could not be gods after all.

The use of guns led to a major change in the Hawaiian political system. The first king of Hawaii, King Kamehameha, took the throne (in 1795) after he used the guns given to him from the Westerners to conquer most of the islands. For almost a hundred years after this Hawaii was a monarchy.

After the arrival of Captain Cook a lively trade developed with China and the Pacific Northwest of what is now the United States and Canada. Trade in fur and sandalwood led to the cutting down of most of Hawaii's great forests and the destruction of many native plants and animals. Most of the population fared even worse. Most native Hawaiians were either killed or died of disease, so that there very few native Hawaiians left today.

Events took place rapidly at the end of the 19th century. In 1887 King David Kalakaua was forced to give up his power by white businessmen. As a consequence, the monarchy became a republic in 1894. In 1896 English became the official language of Hawaii and the Hawaiian language was no longer accepted in schools or elsewhere. A couple of years later, in 1898, Hawaii became a US territory. Finally, in 1959 it became the fiftieth state of the United States. The only people in Hawaii who voted against becoming a state were the native Hawaiians.

Since then, native Hawaiians have begun to use the old Hawaiian language again in their schools. They feel proud of their past and their language. Most recently, in 1993, President Clinton and the US Congress offered their official apology to the native Hawaiians for the fact that the Kingdom of Hawaii was illegally overthrown.

RELIGION:

Traditional Hawaiians believed in many gods, and many stone temples were built to honor these gods. Temples were surrounded by wooden posts that had images carved in them. Inside were idols of wood, stone or sea urchin. Wooden platforms that were six meters above the ground contained offerings to the gods. The offerings were supposed to keep evil spirits away. The gods were called upon, for instance, to improve the growth of crops. Not all of the religious activity was peaceful, however. On important occasions (especially to honor the war god) human sacrifices took place.

Just before the first missionaries arrived in Hawaii many of the religious objects were destroyed, and people stopped worshipping the old gods. The missionaries first arrived from New England in 1820 and tried to turn Hawaii into a Christian paradise. Their strict system of beliefs was quite different than the more flexible lifestyle of the Hawaiians. As a result there was great religious chaos on the islands. Traditional Hawaiian religion fell apart. Hawaiians, for instance, were used to wearing very little clothing due to the tropical climate; this was seen as improper by the missionaries.

Though Christianity is the main religion today in Hawaii, many ceremonies use a combination of Christian prayers and Hawaiian chants.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS:

In ancient Hawaii there were different social classes. First, there were chiefs who had a lot of power and were treated with great respect. They were allowed to have more than one wife, and their feet were not supposed to ever touch the ground. There was also a commoner and an outcast class. The outcasts served the chiefs and it was not proper to eat with outcasts or to sleep close to them. Men and women also ate separately in ancient Hawaii.

Hawaiians lived on islands rich with food. Trade between the islands and fishing in the ocean was made easy because of canoes that were sometimes 30 meters long. The Hawaiians caught fish in the ocean, ate coconuts from the trees, and sweet potatoes and yams. A favorite food, in the past, and still today, is mashed taro root (called "poi"). In addition to fishing in the ocean, the Hawaiians made fish ponds. Some of these are now more than 1,000 years old. Traditionally Hawaiians did not eat bananas or pork. This changed around 1820 when Hawaiian culture went through a crisis due to Western influence.

Westerners gained more and more power in Hawaii in the 19th century. Early in the 19th century traditional activities were replaced by whaling and growing sugar cane, economic activities that the Westerners felt were more important. Native Hawaiians were pressured to give up their traditional economic activities. Later In the 19th century the western missionaries and white immigrants claimed most of the land in Hawaii. Their children quickly became the richest and most powerful people in Hawaii. The native population lost almost everything they had and started to live in poverty.

CULTURE:

Native Hawaiians have a culture and language that closely resembles other languages found throughout the South Pacific. The written Hawaiian language (created by missionaries) uses only 12 letters (a,e,i,o,u,h,k,l,m,n,p, and w). One still encounters the Hawaiian language in place names and in Hawaiian music.

Though the Hawaiians did not have metal or pottery, they made many beautiful objects from stone, wood, shell, bone and teeth. Especially their work with feathers is very famous. Feathers were used to make robes, capes and the well-known leis. Leis are strings of flowers and feathers that are put around a person's neck as decoration. This is still common today.

There is very little traditional Hawaiian architecture and culture left. There are still some temple ruins, mostly on the Big Island, but they are not easy to find. What remains of traditional Hawaiian culture has turned into entertainment for the more than 6 million tourists that come to Hawaii every year.

