

The government, so far as one was established in past times, was mainly of a feudal character, and vested in the various ranks of landlords, the king being considered as the head. The power of each particular chief was, in most cases, supreme over his own immediate vassals or tenants, and this power was not entirely confined to his own dependants. The chiefs having a common interest in preserving their power, showed great politeness and respect towards each other, so much so that they felt themselves at liberty to call upon the dependants of another without the fear of giving offence: this operated to the disadvantage of the people, for instead of serving but one master they were subject to several.

As a general rule, however, the authority descended in the scale of rank, rising from the lowest class of servants to tenants, agents, landholders, land-owners, petty chiefs, high chiefs, and the king, each one ruling according to his own understanding, or that of his superiors. Of course, civil rights could not be expected under such a state of things, nor were any acknowledged to exist. Some general rules seem to have had place, and when they were infringed, the offender was punished, particularly if the crime was of an aggravated nature.

Murder was punished by death; and in the time of Kamehameha I. repeated instances of this crime and its punishment occurred.

Grand larceny was also a capital offence, provided the injured person had power to execute the law; the king and chiefs not unfrequently espoused the cause of the injured party, and inflicted the punishment.

Adultery was likewise often punished by death, and, in a celebrated case, Kamehameha called upon his highest chiefs to act as executioners.

The taboo, or sacred law, restrained and regulated, in a considerable degree, the will of those in authority, although it was in other respects very oppressive to the people. A chief, who was a notorious violator of taboo, soon became unpopular, and was eventually supplanted by some other who stood in higher estimation.

As far as there was any system in their government, it was deeply interwoven with their religious taboos, and partook of law, custom, and will. The taboos that were fixed may be considered as embraced in the first; the second was founded on their superstitions; and the last on the power the chiefs had to enforce them. Thus, no kings have been thought to have governed exclusively by will and taboos; custom and the fear of other chiefs had placed many restraints on them. Among these was the influence of a certain class of men whose business it was to give instruction, and rehearse the proverbs