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# The Population of Hawai‘i from Initial Settlement to Cook’s Visits in 1778 and the Post-Contact Year of 1850

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**Abstract**
There are no comprehensive sets of population estimates associated with the generally accepted “cultural periods” established by archeological work that are believed to have occurred between the initial settlement of Hawai‘i and Cook’s visits in 1778. We present a series of scenario-based population estimates for these periods. In evaluating these estimates, we are inclined to accept the two scenarios based, respectively, on 1778 estimates of 450,000 and 683,000. We suggest subsequent research that is aimed at the generation of age-related information from 1778 back to the initial settlement of Hawai‘i circa AD 1000. This would provide the foundation needed for determining the likely demographic path from first settlement to 1850, one that not only consistent with the archaeological evidence, the historical record, and demographic dynamics but provides a demographic foundation for a discussion involving sovereignty, a topic at the heart of social justice in regard to the Hawai’ian people and their descendants.
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## Introduction

As noted by Swanson (2019), the historical demography of Hawai‘i was once a domain of work subject largely to academic discussion (Adams 1937; Adams et al., 1925; Cordy, 2007; Daws, 1968; Dye, 1994; Dye & Komori, 1992; Gardner & Nordyke, 1974; Hommon, 2008; Kirch, 1985, 2010, 2011; Kirch & Rallu, 2007; McArthur, 1970; Nordyke, 1989; Rallu, 2007; Schmitt, 1968, 1970a, 1970b, 1971; Stannard, 1989, 1992; Thornton 1987). Swanson (2019) continued with the observation that the academic discussion about the size of pre-contact indigenous populations in the Americas and the Pacific Basin had spilled over into the public domain and not without contentious dimensions (Churchill & Venne, 2005; Smith, 2017; Stannard, 2000; Trask, 1993; Trask, 2010; Wright, 1992) because the historical demography is inextricably bound to the issue of sovereignty (see, e.g., Warne, 2021), which is at the heart of the social justice perspective.

This paper is aimed at providing a comprehensive history of the demography from first settlement to the year of first European contact. It provides a series of 10 scenario-based estimates of the population of Hawai‘i designed to show the change in population over "cultural periods” of Hawai‘i (Exhibit 1) identified by Kirch (2010: 128) as having occurred between the year of first settlement and the year of first documented European contact, 1778.[1] These scenario-based and assumption-based estimates are designed to partially fill a gap in our knowledge of the demographic history of Hawai‘i because there are no comprehensive population estimates for Hawai‘i that are linked to these cultural periods that go from initial settlement to 1778. For purposes of this study two of the cultural periods shown in Exhibit 1, Early Expansion (1200-1400) and Late Expansion (1400 – 1650) are combined into a single “Expansion Period,” 1200-1650 because it appeared the demographic processes in each of them were similar. Thus, we examine three cultural periods: (1) Foundation, 1000 – 1200; (2) Expansion, 1200- 1650; and (3) Protohistoric, 1650-1778. For purposes of context, we also look at what we call the “Post-contact Period,” which we define as 1778 to 1850.

## Exhibit 1. Time Span (AD), Cultural Period, and Salient Characteristics*

**1000–1200 Foundation**. Initial discovery and settlement by Polynesian colonists from central Eastern Polynesia. Small founding population; Island Settlements in a few ecologically favorable locations, primarily on O'ahu and Kaua'i

**1200–1400 Early Expansion**. The last period with long-distance voyaging contacts with central East Polynesia. Beginning of major phase of exponential increase in population. Adaption of technology and subsistence economy to local conditions. Development of significant taro irrigation systems on O'ahu, Kaua'i, and Moloka'i islands.

**1400–1650 Late Expansion**. Population growth peaks and begins to stabilize. Expansion of settlements into leeward and marginal zones, and initial formation of large-scale dryland field systems on Maui and Hawai'i islands. Considerable investment in monumental architecture. Archaic states emerge at the end of this period.

**1650–1778 Protohistoric**. High-density but stable (not expanding) population. Settlements across all ecological zones. Secondary intensification of dryland field systems. Conquest warfare endemic.

*Kirch (2010: 128).

Each of the ten scenarios is based on an estimate of the Hawai‘ian population in 1778, which, in turn, is linked to a “peak population” as of AD 1650, a year selected from a range of years corresponding to the expansion period (1200 to 1650) in which the population of Hawai‘i reached a maximum before 1778. This is a pivotal year we derived from work by Kirch (2010: 128), among others (Dye, 1994; Hommon, 2008). It is important here to note, for example, that there also is an empirically supported, well-researched argument for a plateau reached around 1550 with a population of 500,000 that is presented by Hommon (2008), who goes on to argue that by 1778, the Hawai‘ian population had declined by 10 percent to 450,000. Hommon’s (2008) 1778 number is used in one of the ten scenarios we employ in this paper.

These 10 scenario-based estimates are provided in conjunction with estimated populations of 100 in AD 1000, (the likely initial year of settlement by Polynesians) and 20,000 in 1150 (Dye, 1994), a year that closely approximates AD 1200, the end of the "Foundation Period" identified by Kirch (2010: 128).

Having a "peak" population estimate supports the major objective of this research, which is to show the change in population over the cultural periods of Hawai‘i that occurred between the year of first settlement and the year of first documented European contact, 1778. These scenario-based and assumption-based estimates are designed to partially fill a gap in our knowledge of the demographic history of Hawai‘i because there are no comprehensive sets of population estimates for Hawai‘i that are linked to these four cultural periods that go from initial settlement to 1778.

Each of the 10 scenarios is based on an estimated population for 1778, the year of first European contact. We assumed that the 1650 peak population is five percent higher than the year of first European contact. We derived this relationship from work by Kirch (2010, 2011), particularly his observation that 1650-1778 was a period of endemic conquest warfare (Kirch, 2010: 128), which not only suppressed population growth but may have acted in concert with other factors identified by others (Dye, 1994; Hommon, 2008), to push it downward.

What we have in terms of the estimated population of Hawai‘i at the time of first European contact in 1778 can be seen in Exhibit 2. There is a wide range of estimates of the total population of Hawai‘i at the time of first European contact in 1778 and they reflect a wide range of “methods,” only one of which is transparent, replicable, and based on demographic dynamics, namely Swanson’s (2019) estimate of 683,000.

EXHIBIT 2. EXAMPLE RANGE OF ESTIMATES OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF HAWAI'I IN 1778*

| Number | Source | Citation |
|---|---|---|
| 200,000 | Captain Dixon, visit of 1787 | Schmitt (1968: 20) |
| 242,000 | Bligh, with Cook, 1st Visit, 1778 | Schmitt (1968: 20) |
| 200,000-250,000 | Schmitt, 1971 | Schmitt (1971) |
| 300,000 | Schmitt & Zane 1977 | Nordyke (1989: 173) |
| 400,000 | King, with Cook, 2nd Visit, 1779 | Adams (1937: 1) |
| 450,000 | Hommon, 2008 | Hommon (2008:53) |
| 500,000 | Officers with Cook, 1st Visit, 1778 | Schmitt (1968: 19) |
| 683,000 | Swanson, 2019 | Swanson (2019) |
| 800,000 – 1,000,000 | Stannard, 1989 | Stannard (1989: 50) |

*There are more, often expressed as opinions concerning the initial estimates by Bligh, Dixon, King, and other British Naval officers, but most are in the range shown above (see, e.g., Schmitt, 1968: 18-23.)

It is not surprising that uncertainty would surround the number of Hawai‘ians at the time of first European contact. Hawai‘ians did not have a writing system (Kirch, 2010: 75-76) and even though arithmetic was “primitive and laborious,” counts were taken of certain items, and records were kept via cordage (Schmitt, 1981: 1). In addition, although there is no known census of the Hawai‘ian population that was taken circa 1778, it appears that King Umi may have conducted a complete census of Hawai‘i around the year 1500 (Schmitt, 1981: 1).

Without a count, the only recourse is to estimate the size of the 1778 population. The retrospective estimates by Schmitt and Stannard, as well as some of those provided by the first Europeans known to have contacted the Hawai‘ians, are informed by methods; others are much more speculative (Schmitt, 1968: 18-22). As can be seen in Exhibit 2, the estimates range from 200,000 to 1,000,000.

The estimates for which methodological descriptions are available represent attempts to reconstruct the Hawai‘ian population in 1778 using information available at the time of European contact or earlier. These estimates include the use of counts of houses in villages visited or observed by the Europeans, their estimates of average household size, and extrapolation of these estimates to all Hawai‘i. In addition, Europeans estimated the size of the population by multiplying estimates of the land area of Hawai‘i by assumed levels of population density, a technique also applied retrospectively. Sometimes a variation of this method was used, by multiplying estimates of cultivated land at the time of first contact by assumed levels of population supported by the cultivated areas (Cordy, 2007; Hommon, 2008; Kirch & Rallu, 2007; Rallu, 2007; Schmitt, 1971; Stannard, 1989; Schmitt, 1968).

A review of these estimates showed that, except for Swanson (2019), no attempt has been made to leverage demographic dynamics to estimate the Hawai‘ian population in 1778. That is, to use post-contact data in the

form, say, of 19th and 20th-century census data in a retrospective extrapolation, a "backcast," the method used by Swanson (2019).

The 1778 estimate of 683,000 by Swanson (2019), which forms Scenario H in this paper, is based neither on a model of continuous population growth from the settlement in 1778 nor a model that includes cultural periods that are associated with different levels of population change over this same timeframe (Dye, 1994; Kirch, 2010, 2011). While one or more of the other nine scenarios used here may implicitly or explicitly be based on one of these conceptual models, a backcast is independent of both conceptual models. Of all the 10 estimates of the 1778 population of Hawai'i used here, Swanson's (2019) 1778 estimate is the only one that is empirically based on known population data, constructed using a standard demographic method, consistent with population dynamics, transparent, and replicable.

## Results

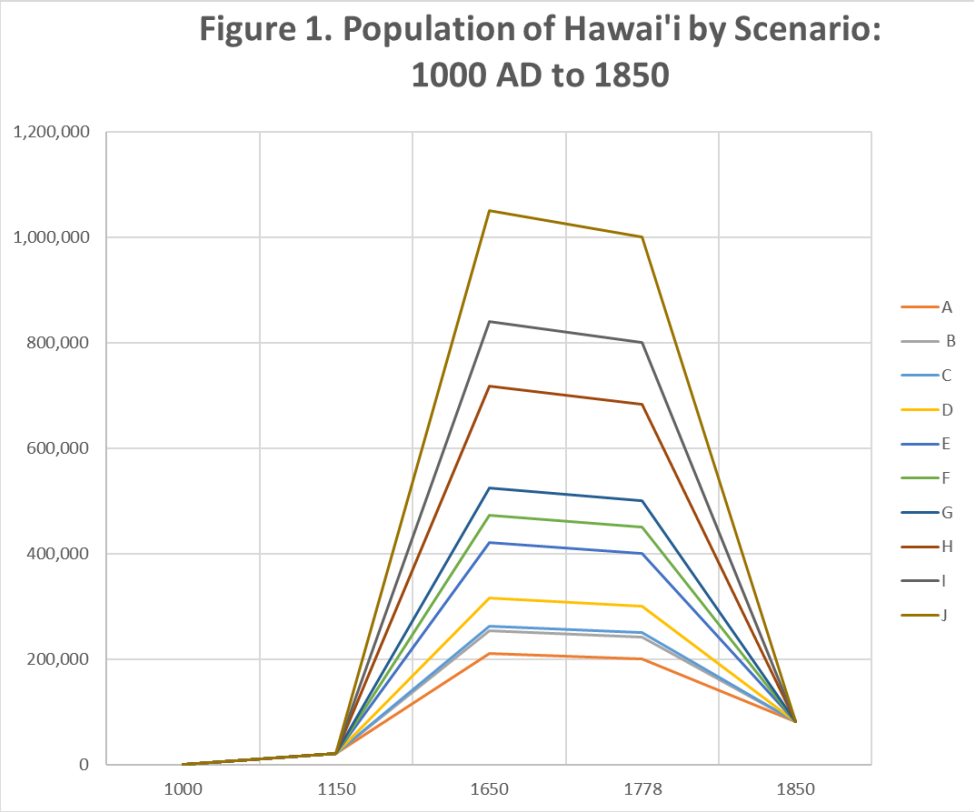
Results are summarized by cultural phase and scenario in Table 1, which has four parts. The first part (1.a) shows the estimated population at the start of each cultural period while part 1.b provides the change in population during each cultural period. Part 1.c shows the average numeric change during each cultural period and 1.d, the annual rate of population change during each cultural period. Included with the cultural periods is the "Post-contact period (1778 to 1850). Figure 1 shows the total population data at each time point. The 10 scenarios are labeled A to J in the Figure.

**Table 1. Demographic Indicators by Scenarios and Period**

| 1.a | Scenario (1778 Estimates) | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pivotal Point of Period** | **Year** | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** | **G** | **H** | **I** | **J** |
| Start of the Foundation Period | 1000 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Start of the Expansion Period | 1150 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 | 20,000 |
| Start of the Protohistoric Period | 1650 | 210,000 | 254,100 | 262,500 | 315,000 | 420,000 | 472,500 | 525,000 | 717,150 | 840,000 | 1,050,000 |
| Start of the Post Contact Period | 1778 | 200,000 | 242,000 | 250,000 | 300,000 | 400,000 | 450,000 | 500,000 | 683,000 | 800,000 | 1,000,000 |
| End of Post Contact Period | 1850 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 | 82,000 |
| **1.b** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Period** | **Years** | **Numeric Change** | | | | | | | | | |
| Foundation | 1000-1150 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 | 19,900 |
| Expansion | 1150-1650 | 190,000 | 234,100 | 242,500 | 295,000 | 400,000 | 452,500 | 505,000 | 697,150 | 820,000 | 1,030,000 |
| Protohistoric | 1650-1778 | -10,000 | -12,100 | -12,500 | -15,000 | -20,000 | -22,500 | -25,000 | -34,150 | -40,000 | -50,000 |
| Post Contact | 1778-1850 | -118,000 | -160,000 | -168,000 | -218,000 | -318,000 | -368,000 | -418,000 | -601,000 | -718,000 | -918,000 |
| **1.c** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Period** | **Years** | **Average Annual Numeric Change** | | | | | | | | | |
| Foundation | 1000-1150 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 | 133 |
| Expansion | 1150-1650 | 380 | 468 | 485 | 590 | 800 | 905 | 1,010 | 1,394 | 1,640 | 2,060 |
| Protohistoric | 1650-1778 | -78 | -95 | -98 | -117 | -156 | -176 | -195 | -267 | -313 | -391 |
| Post Contact | 1778-1850 | -1,639 | -2,222 | -2,333 | -3,028 | -4,417 | -5,111 | -5,806 | -8,347 | -9,972 | -12,750 |
| **1.d** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Period** | **Years** | **Annual Exponential Rate of Growth** | | | | | | | | | |
| Foundation | 1000-1150 | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% | 3.53% |
| Expansion | 1150-1650 | 0.47% | 0.51% | 0.51% | 0.55% | 0.61% | 0.63% | 0.65% | 0.72% | 0.75% | 0.79% |
| Protohistoric | 1650-1778 | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% | -0.04% |
| Post Contact | 1778-1850 | -1.24% | -1.50% | -1.55% | -1.80% | -2.20% | -2.36% | -2.51% | -2.94% | -3.16% | -3.47% |

**Sources:**
Years 1000 and 1150 (Dye, 1994)
Year 1650 (1.05 * 1778 Pop)
Year 1778 Scenarios (Exhibit 2)
Year 1850 Estimate




In Scenario A, the highest level of numeric population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (380 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-78 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs during the "Post-contact period" between 1778 and 1850 (-1,639 persons per year). A somewhat different picture emerges between the foundation and expansion periods when looking at the annual rate of population change (where the rate is $r = (\ln(P_{t+k} / P_t))/(k - t) \times 100$. The foundation period r is much larger than the expansion period r because of the small starting population in the year 1000 and the shorter foundation period (150 years compared to the expansion period 500 years). The variance between the numeric and percent changes for the foundation and expansion periods is seen in all scenarios. For each cultural period, the r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.47%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is -1.24%.

In Scenario B, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (468 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-95 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-2,222 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.51%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-1.50%.

In Scenario C, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (485 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-98 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-2,333 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.51%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-1.55%.

In Scenario D, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (590 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-117 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs

between 1778 and 1850 (-3,028 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.55%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-1.80%.

In Scenario E, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (800 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-156 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-4,417 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.61%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-2.20%.

In Scenario F, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (905 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-176 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-5,111 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.63%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-2.36%.

In Scenario G, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (1,010 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-195 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-5,806 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.65%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-2.51%.

In Scenario H, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (1,394 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-267 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-8,347 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.72%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-2.94%.

In Scenario I, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (1,640 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-313 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-9,972 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.75%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-3.16%.

Finally, in Scenario J, we also see that the highest level of population change occurs during the expansion period, AD 1150 to 1650 (2,060 persons per year). This is followed by the second-highest rate of population increase during the foundation period, 1000 to 1150 (133 persons per year). In 1650, the population reaches a peak and declines during the prehistory period, from 1650 to 1778 (-391 persons per year). The greatest level of decline occurs between 1778 and 1850 (-12,750 persons per year). For each cultural period, r is (1) foundation = 3.53%; (2) expansion = 0.79%; and (3) protohistory = -0.04%. The rate from 1778 to 1850 is r =-3.47%.

## Discussion

Given the assumption we have employed concerning the initial year of settlement (AD 1000), the beginning of the cultural period of expansion (1150), along with their respective populations of 100 and 20,000, there are only two cultural periods, expansion and protohistory, where the rates of population change can vary. Both periods are governed by one of the 10 scenarios concerning the 1778 population. These assumptions and the scenarios place limitations on the rates of population change that can be seen. This is manifested in the fact that the shape of the temporal pattern of population change seen in Figure 1 is generally similar for all the scenarios while the observed rates of population change vary from 1150 to 1650 and from 1778 to 1850. This means that the different scenarios mainly impact the pace of the expansion and rapid decline after 1778, but not the sequence of population change epochs. Given this limitation, we believe that these rates and their associated numbers are both realistic and have “face value.” They are generated from a plausible range of population estimates in conjunction with cultural periods that are based on a carefully researched and well-documented archaeological record.

While the 10 scenarios represent a plausible range of population estimates, they simultaneously represent the high level of uncertainty regarding the demographic history of Hawai‘i, as indicated by Exhibit 1. The estimates

for 1778 by Cook and members of his party are largely judgment calls, but they are (the only) first-hand, direct observations and have, in this regard, empirical bases. Moreover, some of these estimates were done in conjunction with demographic estimation methods (i.e., the "housing unit method," as mentioned earlier).

The remaining estimates are all based on secondary, indirect information. The 1778 estimate by Hommon (2008), for example, is based on applying demographic methods such as the housing unit method (Swanson & Tayman, 2012: 130-162) to the empirical evidence gained from archaeological work. Stannard's (1989) range of estimated 1778 population is based on carefully researched historical events corresponding with initial European contact with indigenous populations in the Pacific and the Americas, which are extrapolated to Hawai'i in conjunction with information concerning these contacts that directly related to Hawai'i. The estimate by Swanson (2019) uses a demographic estimation method (the reverse cohort change ratio method) that is based on empirical demographic data, one that is consistent with demographic dynamics and grounded in demographic theory (Baker et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2023).

As this summary suggests, each of the 1778 estimates found in Exhibit 1, has strengths and weaknesses. They can largely be summarized as follows: What is the likely accuracy of estimates based on judgments made on first-hand observations compared to the accuracy of estimates that are made from demographic methods based on second-hand observations? As demographers, we are more inclined to accept the latter, which leads us to lean toward the 1778 estimates of 450,000 (Hommon, 2008) and 683,000 (Swanson, 2019).

One advantage of the method used by Swanson (2019) to estimate the population of Hawai'i in 1778, is that it could, with modifications, be used to generate age-related information from 1778 back to AD 1000, the likely year of initial settlement. It would need modifications to reflect the Cultural Periods identified by Kirch (2010: 128) as well as the related ideas by others about population change from the time of a small initial resident population to 1778 (Dye, 1994; Hommon, 2008; Rallu, 2007). However, while laborious, all of this is tractable and the consistency of the age-related information could be evaluated in terms of the dynamics by which age-structured populations change (Baker et al., 2017; Burch, 2018; Caswell, 2001; Coale, 1972; Preston et al., 2001; Stott et al., 2010; Swanson, 2020). Any inconsistencies could then be examined and used to refine the estimates, with the idea that a demographic path from first settlement to 1850 could be identified that is consistent with the archaeological evidence, the historical record, and demographic dynamics.

Returning to the "social justice" perspective that introduced this paper, we note that he road to resolving the sovereignty issue is a hard one and it compounds the difficulty of developing a consensus on an accurate story of Hawai'i's demographic history. While the exact form of the hurdles affecting a clear understanding of Hawai'i's demography history is unique, it shares a general outline with those affecting all forms of inquiry. As such, it is fitting that we conclude with an observation by Thomas Kuhn (1962: 15): "History suggests that the road to a firm research consensus is extraordinarily arduous**."**

**Endnote**

1. Although there are arguments that both the Spanish and Japanese visited Hawai'i before Cook's visits in 1778, it appears likely that they were basically "ship-wrecked" (Dye, 1994: 14). The English were the first Europeans to visit, record the visit, and be able to depart (Nordyke, 1989: 15-18). This paper conforms to the argument that English contact in 1778 was the first.

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# Dutch Colonial Expansion and Local Power Dynamics on Rote Island in the Seventeenth Century

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**Abstract**

This study examines the dynamics of Dutch colonial expansion and local power relations on Rote Island in the seventeenth century. Located at the southernmost edge of the Indonesian archipelago, Rote occupied a strategic position within a contested maritime frontier where Dutch and Portuguese ambitions intersected with fragmented local politics. Drawing on VOC archival records, Batavia resolutions, and officials' reports, this study demonstrates that Dutch authority on Rote was not established through straightforward conquest but through negotiation, coercive diplomacy, and strategic alliances. Treaties imposed by the VOC functioned as instruments of indirect rule, restricting trade, demanding tribute, and positioning the Dutch as mediators in local conflicts. However, these agreements often exacerbated internal rivalries and drew the VOC deeper into local politics. Repeated military expeditions, including the violent campaign of 1681, reveal the limitations of colonial governance in peripheral areas, where control was frequently exercised through violence delegated to local allies rather than direct administrative command. The Rote case thus shows that colonial power in peripheral maritime zones was contingent, negotiated, and contested, shaped by local agency, strategic geopolitical interests, and episodic violence. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Dutch colonial authority was constructed and maintained in the island frontiers of Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Dutch colonialism; VOC; Rote Island; Peripheral governance; Indirect rule; Colonial violence; Dutch–Portuguese rivalry; Maritime frontier
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## Background

Rote Island is a small island located at the southernmost edge of the Indonesian archipelago, lying southwest of Timor and bordering the Savu Sea and the Indian Ocean. In the seventeenth century, its position placed it within a volatile maritime frontier where European colonial ambitions intersected with fragmented indigenous political systems. At that time, Rote was divided into a number of small, competing polities whose relationships were shaped by rivalry, alliance, and recurring violence. These local dynamics formed the immediate context in which Dutch colonial intervention unfolded.

Dutch involvement on Rote Island intensified during the mid-seventeenth century as the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) sought to consolidate its precarious foothold in western Timor. Although the VOC had occupied Kupang, Dutch authority in the region remained limited and continuously challenged by indigenous kingdoms allied with the Topasses, or "Black Portuguese," who exercised significant influence across much of Timor (Hägerdal, 2012). Within this contested environment, Rote Island was perceived by Dutch officials as strategically valuable—not for its commodities, but for its potential role as a defensive buffer, a logistical refuge, and a base from which Portuguese influence could be monitored and contained.

Unlike Timor, where sandalwood shaped the logic of colonial competition, Rote lacked major export commodities that could sustain long-term commercial exploitation. Nevertheless, the island occupied a critical position within regional networks of mobility, warfare, and political negotiation. Prior to sustained Dutch intervention, Rote's rulers had maintained intermittent contact with Portuguese missionaries and traders, while groups affiliated with Portuguese interests continued to circulate in the area. These connections heightened Dutch concerns regarding loyalty and rebellion, reinforcing the perception of Rote as a vulnerable yet strategically indispensable space.

 

From the outset, relations between the VOC and the indigenous polities of Rote were characterized by reciprocal manipulation. Local rulers actively sought Dutch military support to strengthen their positions against rival kingdoms, while the VOC exploited these rivalries to extend political control without committing substantial military resources (Hägerdal, 2010). Treaties imposed by the Company formalized this arrangement, binding Rote's rulers to trade restrictions, military obligations, and Dutch arbitration in internal disputes. Rather than stabilizing the island, however, these agreements often intensified existing tensions and drew the VOC deeper into local conflicts.

Throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, repeated military expeditions were launched against Rotean kingdoms deemed disloyal or rebellious. These interventions culminated in episodes of extreme violence, most notably in 1681, when large-scale killings and enslavement accompanied Dutch-led campaigns involving indigenous allies (Boxer, 1965; Hägerdal, 2012). Although authorities in Batavia officially condemned indiscriminate violence against non-combatants, such events exposed the structural limitations of Dutch colonial governance on the periphery, where control was exercised through delegated force and minimal oversight rather than centralized command.

The case of Rote Island thus illuminates broader patterns of Dutch colonial expansion in eastern Indonesia. It demonstrates that VOC power in peripheral maritime zones was not imposed through unilateral dominance, but emerged from continuous negotiation with local actors, strategic alliances, coercive diplomacy, and episodic violence. By situating Rote within the wider context of seventeenth-century colonial rivalry and indigenous political fragmentation, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how colonial authority was constructed and contested in Southeast Asia's island frontiers.

**Research Problems**

Although Rote Island played a strategic role in the Dutch–Portuguese rivalry in eastern Indonesia, its contribution to the formation of colonial power has received limited scholarly attention. Existing research on seventeenth-century Timor and the VOC tends to focus on major centers such as Kupang or on the sandalwood trade, leaving peripheral islands like Rote underexplored. As a result, the ways in which Dutch power was negotiated, contested, and implemented at the local level remain insufficiently understood.

Moreover, colonial expansion in the eastern Indonesian archipelago is often depicted as a process driven primarily by European initiative and control. Such perspectives risk overlooking the role of local rulers and the extent to which local rivalries influenced colonial intervention. In the case of Rote, Dutch authority emerged within a complex landscape of competing local polities, where alliances with the VOC were frequently tactical, temporary, and manipulated by local actors.

Finally, episodes of large-scale violence on Rote, particularly during military campaigns in the latter half of the seventeenth century, raise important questions about the nature of colonial governance in peripheral areas. The discrepancy between official VOC policies condemning indiscriminate violence and the reality of warfare involving indigenous allies highlights structural limitations in colonial rule that have not been sufficiently examined.

Based on these issues, this study addresses the following research problems:

1. How did local political rivalries among Rotean kingdoms shape Dutch colonial intervention on Rote Island in the seventeenth century?
2. In what ways did the VOC employ treaties, alliances, and coercive force to establish and maintain influence on Rote Island?
3. How did episodes of colonial violence reflect the limitations of Dutch authority and governance in peripheral maritime regions?

**Research Objectives**

This study aims to analyze Dutch colonial expansion on Rote Island as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between European colonial strategies and indigenous political structures. Specifically, the objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the role of inter-kingdom rivalries on Rote Island in facilitating and constraining Dutch colonial intervention during the seventeenth century.

 

2. To analyze the function of VOC treaties and alliances as instruments of indirect rule and political control in a fragmented indigenous landscape.
3. To assess the relationship between colonial violence and the structural limitations of VOC governance on the eastern Indonesian periphery.

**Methodology and Sources**

This study adopts a historical-archival methodology, focusing on primary documentary sources to reconstruct the dynamics of Dutch colonial expansion and local power relations on Rote Island during the seventeenth century. The research employs a qualitative approach that emphasizes interpretive analysis of colonial records, treating them not merely as neutral accounts but as texts shaped by political interests, administrative priorities, and the colonial gaze.

**Primary Sources**

The primary sources used in this research include:

VOC Archives (Dutch East India Company Records)
The VOC archives constitute the core source base for this study, providing detailed accounts of military expeditions, diplomatic negotiations, trade regulations, and administrative correspondence. These documents include letters, reports, and minutes from the *Hoofdcommissie* (main committee) and other VOC administrative bodies, which reveal how the Company perceived and managed relations with Rote's indigenous polities. VOC records are especially valuable because they offer insight into Dutch strategic thinking, the implementation of treaties, and the rationale behind coercive actions.

Batavia Resolutions and Official Correspondence
Resolutions issued by the Governor-General in Batavia, along with official correspondence between Batavia and regional VOC offices, are essential for understanding the broader imperial framework that shaped local policies in Timor and Rote. These documents often contain directives, policy evaluations, and reprimands regarding the conduct of VOC officers, including responses to reports of excessive violence or misconduct. By analyzing Batavia resolutions, this study can assess the extent to which local actions were sanctioned, criticized, or corrected by central colonial authority.

Officials' Reports and Expedition Accounts
Reports written by VOC officials, military commanders, and explorers (e.g., Hendrik ter Horst, Arnold de Vlaming, Cuylemburg) provide first-hand descriptions of interactions with Rotean rulers, details of military operations, and evaluations of local political conditions. These narratives are used critically, considering the potential biases and the strategic motives behind the depiction of indigenous actors. The study also compares multiple reports to identify inconsistencies, exaggerations, or shifts in rhetoric that may reflect changing colonial priorities.

**Analytical Approach**

The research employs source criticism and triangulation to validate and interpret the historical evidence, including cross-referencing VOC records with Batavia resolutions to identify differences between local practice and central policy, comparing accounts from different VOC officials to reveal patterns of colonial strategy and the influence of local alliances, analyzing the language and rhetoric used in the documents to uncover underlying assumptions about indigenous societies and the legitimacy of colonial actions, and contextualizing the documents within broader regional and global developments, such as Dutch–Portuguese rivalry and the political economy of the sandalwood trade.

**Limitations**

While VOC archives provide rich documentation, they represent a colonial perspective and often marginalize indigenous voices. To address this limitation, the study reads the documents critically, looking for evidence of indigenous agency through the recorded actions, negotiations, and resistance of Rotean rulers. The research also integrates secondary literature to provide contextual understanding and to balance the colonial narrative.

**Discussion**

**1. Dutch–Rote Interaction: Treaties, Political Manipulation, and Alliances**

The interaction between the VOC and the kingdoms of Rote Island demonstrates that Dutch colonialism was not merely a process of direct conquest, but rather a relationship constructed through negotiation, political

 

manipulation, and strategic alliance-building. Initially, the VOC lacked sufficient military strength to fully control the region, so its approach relied on exploiting local conflicts for colonial advantage. In this context, the treaties imposed by the VOC functioned as instruments of indirect rule, restricting trade, imposing tribute, and positioning the Dutch as the arbiter in inter-kingdom disputes.

However, these treaties did not necessarily create stability. Alliances with certain Rote rulers were often temporary and instrumental, with local leaders using the VOC to strengthen their position against internal rivals. Conversely, the VOC exploited inter-kingdom rivalries by designating some parties as allies and others as "rebels," thus using local conflicts as justification for intervention. This pattern reveals a symbiotic relationship: the VOC gained legitimacy and political access, while local rulers obtained military support or advantages in their internal struggles. Therefore, colonial authority in Rote is better understood as the result of reciprocal negotiation and manipulation rather than unilateral domination.

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Moreover, the VOC's involvement in local politics illustrates how colonial power depended on the capacity to manage and reconfigure local hierarchies. By selectively supporting certain kingdoms, the VOC reshaped the political landscape of Rote, consolidating a network of loyalist rulers while weakening potential centers of resistance. This process of selective patronage not only served Dutch interests but also intensified existing divisions within the island. Consequently, the VOC's political strategy was not simply a means to control territory, but also a mechanism for transforming local governance structures in ways that ensured long-term colonial influence.

**2. Violence and Military Expeditions: Delegated Power and VOC Limitations**

The VOC's involvement in Rote's internal conflicts frequently resulted in intense violence, especially when diplomacy and treaties failed to ensure compliance. Military expeditions conducted in the mid-to-late seventeenth century show that the VOC acted not only as a mediator but also as an actor that employed military force to assert dominance. However, the violence was not solely a product of decisions made in Batavia; it also stemmed from the delegation of violence to indigenous allies. Timorese troops and local allies participating in the expeditions often acted beyond VOC control, leading to brutal actions such as the mass killings of 1681.

The 1681 event represents an extreme example of how colonial authority in peripheral areas could lose control over military actions carried out in its name. Although Batavia officially condemned the killing of civilians and emphasized "Dutch customs" regarding the treatment of non-combatants, field practices showed otherwise. The violence reflected not only colonial aggression but also the VOC's structural weakness in supervising local allies and managing conflict dynamics. Ultimately, violence became not only a tool of conquest but also a consequence of the VOC's dependence on local alliances and its limited administrative capacity.

Overall, the interaction between the VOC and the kingdoms of Rote demonstrates that Dutch colonialism in peripheral regions developed through a combination of strategic alliances, coercive treaties, and delegated violence. The VOC's expansion of influence was not determined solely by military power but also by its ability to exploit local conflicts and enforce compliance through political pressure. The Rote case shows that colonial authority in peripheral areas was fragile, as it depended on local actors with their own agendas who often used the VOC as an instrument in internal rivalries.

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Furthermore, the violent episodes in Rote had long-term implications for local political structures and social relations. The use of punitive expeditions and forced tributes not only weakened resistant kingdoms but also reshaped the balance of power among local elites, creating new hierarchies aligned with Dutch interests. This process contributed to the consolidation of a colonial order in which compliance was maintained through fear, coercion, and the disruption of traditional governance systems. As a result, the Rote case highlights how colonial violence in peripheral regions was not merely episodic, but part of a broader strategy of control that transformed local societies and entrenched colonial authority over time.

## 3. Dutch Colonial Strategy and the Significance of Rote Island

The VOC's strategy in Rote reveals that colonial expansion in the eastern Indonesian archipelago was driven not only by economic motives but also by strategic geopolitical concerns. Unlike the sandalwood-rich regions of Timor, Rote did not possess abundant valuable commodities, which indicates that the island's significance lay primarily in its strategic position. As a neighboring island to Timor, Rote functioned as a buffer zone and a potential base for monitoring Portuguese activities and controlling maritime routes. Consequently, the VOC's interest in Rote should be understood as part of a broader imperial strategy aimed at consolidating Dutch influence in the region and limiting rival European powers, particularly the Portuguese.

This strategic rationale explains why the VOC maintained a persistent presence and engaged in repeated interventions on Rote despite limited economic returns. The establishment of treaties, the manipulation of local rivalries, and the military expeditions can be seen as efforts to secure the island's political alignment with Dutch interests. Therefore, the Rote case challenges the assumption that colonial expansion was primarily driven by trade and resource extraction; instead, it highlights how strategic security and imperial rivalry shaped colonial policies in peripheral maritime regions.

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Moreover, the VOC's approach in Rote underscores how colonial power often depended on securing political control over strategically located territories rather than maximizing immediate economic profits. The persistent interventions in Rote demonstrate that the VOC was willing to invest military and diplomatic resources to prevent the island from becoming a Portuguese foothold or a base for anti-Dutch resistance. This approach also reveals a broader pattern in Dutch colonial policy: the use of peripheral islands as geopolitical leverage points

 

within a regional imperial system. In this sense, Rote can be seen as a microcosm of Dutch expansion, where control over space and political allegiance mattered as much as, if not more than, direct economic extraction.

**4. Implications for Understanding Colonial Power in Peripheral Areas**

The Rote case contributes to a more nuanced understanding of colonial power formation in peripheral regions by demonstrating that authority was neither monolithic nor absolute. The VOC's control was contingent upon the cooperation of local rulers and the capacity to manage complex social dynamics. The continuous negotiation and reconfiguration of alliances show that colonial rule was an ongoing process rather than a fixed achievement. Moreover, the delegation of violence to indigenous allies underscores how colonial power was often mediated through local actors who possessed their own agendas, thereby producing outcomes that could deviate significantly from official colonial policy.

In this sense, the Rote case illustrates the limits of colonial governance and the fragility of imperial authority in areas that were geographically and politically peripheral. The VOC's reliance on local intermediaries and its inability to fully regulate their actions reveal a structural weakness that shaped the nature of colonial domination. Consequently, the history of Rote underscores that colonialism in peripheral zones was characterized by negotiation, coercion, and episodic violence, rather than by straightforward conquest and administrative control.
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Furthermore, the Rote case highlights the ways in which colonial authority produced lasting social and political transformations at the local level. The use of punitive expeditions and coercive treaties disrupted traditional power balances, reshaped alliances, and intensified rivalries among kingdoms. These interventions not only enforced Dutch dominance but also altered indigenous political structures by empowering certain rulers while weakening others. As a result, colonial governance in Rote cannot be understood solely through the lens of external domination; it must also be analyzed as a process of internal restructuring, where local actors actively shaped and responded to colonial rule. This perspective suggests that peripheral colonial regions were sites of contested authority, where power was continuously negotiated and renegotiated, producing outcomes that reflected both colonial ambitions and indigenous agency.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Dutch colonial expansion on Rote Island in the seventeenth century was not a straightforward process of territorial conquest, but a complex and negotiated formation of authority shaped by local politics, strategic considerations, and episodic violence. Rote's strategic position at the maritime frontier between Dutch and Portuguese spheres made the island a crucial buffer zone, even though it lacked significant export commodities. Consequently, the VOC's presence on Rote was driven by geopolitical concerns and the need to control regional rivalries rather than by direct economic exploitation alone.

The relationship between the VOC and Rote's indigenous polities was characterized by reciprocal manipulation and conditional cooperation. Treaties and alliances functioned as instruments of indirect rule, allowing the VOC to expand influence with limited resources. However, these agreements often intensified internal rivalries and drew the Dutch deeper into local conflicts. The VOC's reliance on local allies and intermediaries revealed the fragility of colonial governance in peripheral regions, as control depended on the ability to manage local dynamics rather than on centralized administrative power.

The military expeditions and the violent campaign of 1681 further illustrate the structural limitations of Dutch authority. The delegation of violence to indigenous allies produced outcomes that sometimes contradicted official Batavian policies, revealing a gap between colonial ideals and field realities. Such episodes of violence not only enforced Dutch dominance but also reshaped local political structures, reinforcing new hierarchies

 

aligned with colonial interests.

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