Jocelyn Linnekin’s analysis of the making of feather cloaks and helmets in the Hawaiian Islands was a fascinating study (Linnekin 1988, 1990:47-50). While conducting archival research in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I came across some information relevant to the topic of who made the cloaks. Some of Linnekin’s hypotheses relevant to this topic are as follows:

1. Feathers were given as tribute and were reserved for chiefly and religious uses (1988:268).
2. Collection of materials and their manufacture into cloaks involved a series of tasks, and both commoners and women may have participated in them (1988:271-74).
3. Initial bird-catching or feather-gathering was probably conducted by commoners (maka‘āinana) of each community land (ahupua‘a) as part of their tribute to chiefs, rather than exclusively by a special class of chiefly retainers (bird-catchers) (1988:271, 1990:50).
7. These cloaks and helmets were probably made in chiefly households by skilled female retainers (1990:54).
8. Capes (cloaks) and helmets were probably not sacred and kapu until the finished products became identified with certain wearers. Linnekin draws on the example of Kamehameha’s admonition to Vancouver that the cloak he was giving Vancouver should not be put over any person’s shoulders as it had only been worn by Kamehameha (1988:274-75).

These points on collection and manufacture were largely hypotheses, because no, or only a few, specific cases of feather collection and cloak/helmet manufacturing had been found in the historical and oral historical records at the time of her research. The information I present here sheds new light on some of her hypotheses.

One set of information that I found came from the Kingdom of Hawai‘i’s Boundary Commission records for Hawai‘i Island (Boundary Commission Books
n.d.) and relates to who collected the feathers. The Boundary Commission testimonies were primarily recorded in the early 1870s to document the borders of *ahupua'a* (community land units). Chiefs or wealthy foreigners were fixing these borders, often to clarify estate holdings and sometimes in preparing to sell the land. Those testifying usually were elderly commoners. Some had been born around the turn of the century—1800—referring to the time of their birth in their testimony by reference to a specific event, e.g., at the time of the building of Pu‘ukohola Heiau (1791), in the year of Kamehameha’s *peleleu* fleet (1802-1803), in the year of the building of Kiholo fishpond (c.1812). Thus, as children they lived in times before the abolition of the *kapu* system (1819), and their fathers or grandfathers had taught them the *ahupua'a* borders.

In their testimonies the commoners made many references to bird-catching carried out by their parents and other commoners of their *ahupua'a*. They also sometimes mentioned cases when the low chiefs (*konohiki*) who oversaw the *ahupua'a* matters for an overlord chief punished those from other lands who strayed into their *ahupua'a* while hunting birds.

- 1873 testimony of Waimani on Honokane *ahupua'a*’s borders. “[My father was] a bird catcher and cultivator, was a kamaaina [long time resident] of the land, and I used to go into the mountains with him” (BCB, n.d., B:119-120).
- 1873 testimony of Kaikuana on Honokaia *ahupua'a*’s borders: “The different lands had different Konohiki, and if we went onto a land we did not belong on, the Konohiki of that land would take our birds away” (BCB n.d., A:95).
- 1873 testimony of Kenoi on Kapāpala *ahupua'a*’s borders. “In olden times when it was kapu to catch birds on any land but the one you lived on, and if you did so the birds were taken away from you”. (BCB n.d., A: 436-438).

Thus, one of Linnekin’s hypotheses is substantiated. Bird-catching and feather gathering were frequently done by commoners in their *ahupua'a*. These were people who were also farmers and fishermen, and not full-time specialist bird-catchers.

I have found no information in the Boundary Commission records on the participation of women in feather collection. In the late 1800s, Emerson (the son of a missionary) talked with bird collectors. He stated that sometimes a family would go with a man engaged in bird-catching, his wife gathering *mămaki* fibers and making *kapa* (Emerson 1894:105-6). This fits with those Boundary Commission records in which it is stated that trips were made into the forest for multiple purposes. For example, “I used to go into the woods bird catching and after mamaki and olona” (1873 testimony of Kalakalohe from Wai‘ōhinu *ahupua’a* [BCB n.d., A:403]). Emerson (1894:106) further suggests that the wife might “perhaps... aid in plucking and sorting the feathers”. This seems a reasonable hypothesis on women’s participation in feather collection, but I have seen no information in the Boundary Commission records on this point.

From my readings, it would appear that the collection of feathers by commoners within their *ahupua'a* was the primary source of feathers. Whether there were specialist bird-catchers attached to the high chiefs’ or ruler’s retinue seems unclear, although it is possible. Linnekin (1988:271) notes that Malo (1951:20,37,82) and Kamakau (1961:38-40) refer to a class of bird-catcher specialists, but my reading
of Malo is that he is not clearly referring to specialists or a class of workers. Rather he simply may be discussing people who went collecting feathers and the gods that these people worshipped. He could well be referring to commoners, and not full-time specialists. The Kamakau reference is to a story regarding Keawenui-a-‘Umi (ruler of the Hawai‘i Kingdom A.D.1620-1640). Two birds were delaying the building of a canoe, and the ruler “hired” bird-catchers. When they failed to catch the birds, the ruler called for other bird-catchers and offered them honours if they would kill the birds. It is unclear if these were full-time specialists attached to a chiefly retinue or simply more skilled commoner catchers. Emerson (1894:102) wrote that kings had men in their service who were bird-catchers (*kia-mamu*), but I am not aware of any firsthand observations of such men.

In the vast Mähele records, I found another bit of information related to who manufactured the feather cloaks. The Mähele records document steps in the privatisation of the Kingdom’s lands. They include the claims for land (Native Register n.d.) and follow-up verifications through evidence provided in testimonies (Native Testimony n.d.), typically testimonies from commoners and low chiefs in the years 1848 and 1849. A relevant reference on the issues discussed herein comes from a testimony relating to a claim for land in Waipiʻo ahupuaʻa on Hawai‘i Island. Waipiʻo was one of the most fertile lands on that island, with a large floodplain in the lower valley, covered in irrigated kalo fields and supporting a large population. In the oral histories of the islands, Waipiʻo was one of the famed ruling centres of the Hawai‘i Kingdom dating back to the A.D.1500s (Cordy 1994, 2000). Kalani‘ōpuʻu, the ruler when Cook was in the Islands (1778 and 1779), periodically resided here (e.g., Fornander 1880:201), as did Kamehameha early in his reign, before his conquest of the Maui Kingdom in 1795 (Fornander 1880:323-24, Kamakau 1961:151-52).

This testimony is for land in ‘ili, land subdivisions within the community land (ahupuaʻa) of Waipiʻo.

I have seen in the ili land at Maikaika of Waipio ahupuaʻa, Uma’s ili land which has been from his grandparents to his parents and now he has it where he is living today. They received this land for their work under Kamehameha I. They were feather cape (ahuula) makers, therefore this land and its entire properties are for them, except for the servants’ place. Pakekee [another ‘ili] was acquired by him for the same reason…. I have heard about the loss of certain ili land at Ulupala. Mrs. Hoapili had given this interest during the time of Kamehameha II as compensation for the making of the feather capes (October 17, 1848 testimony of Kaulele on Uma’s [Ima’s] claim for land—Land Commission Award 10,918. Native Testimony n.d., 4:188-89).

This testimony supplies several points relevant to cloak making:

1. The ruler and high chiefs apparently had feather capes made for them by specialists—“[t]hey were feather cape *(ahuula)* makers...”. [Kamehameha I was the ruler of the unified Hawai‘i Kingdom from 1792-1819. Mrs Hoapili was a very high-ranking chief. Hoapili was a high chief, the son of Kame‘eiamoku,
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one of Kamehameha’s four key advisors (the older half-brother of Ke‘eaumoku). Hoapili, himself, was a key advisor to Kamehameha I, II, and III, a war leader, and Governor of Maui. The Mrs. Hoapili in this testimony could refer to either of two of his wives—Keōpuölani or Kaheiheimalie. Both were extremely high ranking women and former wives of Kamehameha I. Keōpuölani died in 1823 and Hoapili married Kaheiheimalie soon after.

2. In return for their products and skills, these “feather cape makers” were given land, perhaps with tenants (the servants noted in the testimony). This clearly raised their social rank.

3. Whether these specialists were attached as retinue or made cloaks on order is not clear. [Kamakau (1961:177) noted that Kamehameha “had experts in the binding of feathers for the making of feather capes, cloaks, kahili, feather helmets, and feather leis”—implying that they were attached to him in some fashion.]

4. In this case, it appears that families were the specialists, including people of both genders—the “grandparents” and “parents”. Consider also: “They were feather cape makers”. In the Māhele records there is often reference to land received from parents or grandparents, and sometimes there is more specific reference to the mother’s or father’s line. However, the use of “they” of this particular testimony suggests men and women were makers of cloaks (a husband-wife team or an extended family). This is an additional twist to Linnekin’s hypothesis. If correct, in some cases, small groups of men and women together may have made the finished cloaks for the high chiefs and rulers. How, or if, they divided the labour in finishing the cloaks is unstated.

5. Given the nature and wording of the testimony, claim and award, this family appears to have been commoners or, at best, low chiefs.

Thus, it would appear that commoners (primarily men) collected the bulk of the feathers, which were eventually passed to high chiefs and the ruler as tribute—either annually or on demand. In at least one case, these feathers came into the hands of specialists (apparently a family, including female and male participants) who made cloaks for the ruler and a high chiefess and who in turn received land for their services. The family of specialists described here would appear at best to be low-ranking chiefs, but quite possibly commoners. Whether they were attached to the high chief’s or ruler’s retinue or whether they were unattached and made cloaks on demand is not clear. Again, these are just bits of relevant information. More information may well be found in the archival records that can further evaluate the hypotheses proposed by Linnekin.

NOTE

1. In the 1820s-1840s, pressure had been building from multiple sources to alter the feudal land holding system of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i—to privatise holdings and enable their alienation. Initiating causes of privatisation were complex, as were the following changes (e.g., Sahlins 1992:130-37). The ruler and high chiefs agreed on a division of the Kingdom’s community lands
(ahupua’a and important ‘ili) among themselves, which was formalised in 1848 as the “Great Māhele”. Commoners were allowed to claim their lands (albeit often less than they actually used). To do so, claims were made, followed by testimonies, and the formal award and deed. Generally, the entire process (legislative acts, negotiations for ahupua’a, hearings of the Land Commission, official land deeds, etc.) is now referred to as the Māhele, covering a period roughly from 1846 to 1855. The documents from this era, although focusing on changing the system, provide a vast amount of information on the traditional system. Sahlins (1992), Chinen (1958) and numerous other sources provide details on these land changes. Sahlins (1992) also gives an excellent summary of the earlier “feudal” landholding system.

REFERENCES

Native Register, n.d. (ca. 1848-1849). Native Register of Kuleana Claims Recorded by the Board of Commissioners to Quiet Land Titles in the Hawaiian Islands. Manuscript (translation), on file. Honolulu: Archives of the State of Hawai‘i.