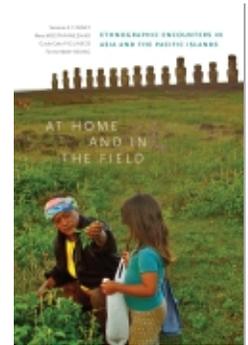




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At Home and in the Field

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Embattled Stories of Occupied Hawai'i

TY P. KĀWIKĀ TENGAN

ON MARCH 11, 2010, I was a part of a panel titled “Occupied Hawai'i: Issues of Nationhood and Colonialism” held at the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies. It was an evening talk at the center's open-air auditorium that blends Hawaiian architectural designs, anticolonial artwork, and modernist building materials. Both the panel and the center were products of the Hawaiian sovereignty and decolonization movements that had dramatically reshaped political, cultural, and academic discourse in Hawai'i since the 1970s. Whereas the transnational tourism industry sells an image of happy natives and white sandy beaches, cultural nationalist discourse foregrounds Kānaka 'Ōiwi (Indigenous Hawaiian) resistance to the illegal occupation of the Hawaiian Kingdom (Trask 1999; Sai 2008). Indeed, the title of the larger symposium of which our panel was a part was “The Place of Hawai'i in American Studies,” which was really more a question than a statement. Most of the audience was well aware of the contested status of Hawai'i as a U.S. state. As the organizers wanted to reach a broader audience, they also arranged for 'ŌLELO, the local cable-access station, to record the event.

For my part, I spoke of my early research on Native Hawaiian soldiering and U.S. Empire. My previous research had examined the rearticulation of Hawaiian masculinity in the Hale Mua, a Native Hawaiian men's group (Tengan 2008). I argued that assertions of Hawaiian male warriorhood reflected the gendered dimensions of settler colonialism and Indigenous decolonization. As a Kānaka 'Ōiwi anthropologist who was both a member and scholar of the Hale Mua, my kuleana (rights and

responsibilities) led me to strive for an ethnographic research and writing practice that would serve the Lāhui Hawai‘i (Hawaiian Nation) (Tengan 2005). In my new project, however, I was conducting a different kind of “homework,” since I did not serve in the U.S. military like the Hawaiian men I was now interviewing. How would their notions of “service” and “nation” differ from mine? Did they perceive any contradictions in taking up the same arms that were used to overthrow our Queen in 1893?

With a capacity crowd of 150 students, faculty, and community members of all ages and genders, a lively question-and-answer period followed our panel. At its conclusion, a late-middle-aged Hawaiian man approached the microphone and stated, “Tengan, I goin’ ask you about the military.” After a long pause, he asked, “In the war right now, the stupid war in Iraq—another Vietnam, right—who’s watching our boys in the combat zone? Who’s watching over them, making sure they got the right weapon, and the weapon work?” He described how he, as a “D-minus” graduate of the Wai‘anae High School on Leeward O‘ahu, was arrested for vagrancy and given the choice of either going to jail or going to war. He entered the Marines and went to Vietnam. There he found himself on the front lines with other “minorities” and with malfunctioning rifles. Years later, he entered college to obtain his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Hawaiian language. On the latter degree, he reflected on the dual meaning of the term: “What is that word ‘master’—‘white man’? Plantation name?” He bemoaned his “indoctrination in the American system” that led him to be willing to “die for that [American] flag,” which he later discovered “was da flag that occupied my [Hawaiian] country.”

Significantly, he pointed his critique at us and charged, “You guys lied to us from the time we were in kindergarten. . . . Start teaching truth, yeah.” He went on to call us all draft dodgers who went to college to escape the horrors of war, including the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that he now suffers. Finally he returned to his original question, “So who’s takin’ care of da Hawaiians over dea in Iraq? You guys makin’ sure da guys, you guys—are you doing your research so dat somebody can go ovah deah and make sure dat their weapon work?” You could hear a pin drop as no one dared move. I slowly reached for the microphone in front of me and responded, “Uncle, I want to acknowledge everything you said here. You asked me why I’m doing my research. It’s so that we don’t have any more guns put into our young Hawaiians’ hands.”

I spoke briefly with Kānehailua after the panel to introduce myself and gauge his interest in further talking story. Though we had an engaging discussion, we did not have that follow-up until seven months later. In

October 2010, I was sitting in my office preparing for my introductory cultural anthropology class at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. We were reading Karen Ito's *Lady Friends* (1999), and that day we were covering her chapter that discussed the four emotional complexes she argues are central to Hawaiian definitions of self and other: the cultural ideal of aloha (generosity, love, sympathy); its failing as exhibited in lili (retention, jealousy, stinginess); an internally directed failing manifest in shame-guilt; and an externally directed failing exhibited in hurt-anger (Ito 1999, 81). Just then, as if to electronically manifest an example of all four, I received an e-mail from Kānehailua that read:

Aloha Kāwika,

I'd like to apologize for my off the wall comments I made at the panel discussion in March of this year at Center for Hawaiian Studies. It was not directed at you or any of the members of the panel but I was indirectly talking to anybody in the audience who represented the present colonizers. In that talk, I was trying to tell of my bad and shocking experience in the U.S. military and how I feel about our people who like me are ignorantly becoming victims to the American military propaganda. I know that . . . some of our people who are presently in the U.S. military enlisted with no idea of what they were getting into. I think if they are knowledgeable of their place in this present system, they would probably take another route in life, like mea Hawai'i [Hawaiian things], instead of making a sacrifice to the wrong government. Thank you for your comment after my unpolished talk and my lack of composure. Please understand that my intention was to support what the panel was saying especially the subject that you covered. Forgive and kala mai ia'u. No'u ka hewa. Na'u Na Charles Kānehailua.

We had not spoken since I went up to him after the panel to introduce myself and talk story more. His e-mail to me was the first I had heard from him since, and as soon as I was done reading it, my phone rang. When I answered, the voice said, "Kāwika, this is Charles Kānehailua." He then started to share what he was feeling—a kaumaha (heaviness, burden) after seeing himself for the first time on the program that was aired on the 'OLELO cable channel just the other day. He felt shame and anger at himself and needed to apologize to me, to the panel, and to everyone. I told him that an apology was not needed for anything. I emphasized that I knew he was not

really talking to us, but rather to the “system” and the state that put him in harm’s way and in the situation that he had found himself.

I also acknowledged that his voice was the one that people in Nānākuli and Wai‘anae, predominantly working-class and Native Hawaiian, would listen to—not mine. For that reason, he should not want to change what he said or be sorry for it. Kānehailua shared with me that, in fact, one of his cousins had come up to him a few days after that program was aired and said, “Eh, Chucky, I seen you on TV last night!” His cousin went on to say that he was so moved that he broke down and cried. He said he did not know what that panel was about before, but he wanted to watch it now.

Kānehailua said he wanted to learn from me and wanted my help in preparing him to speak in public. He said he had a hard time with the words, and with the PTSD. He explained that one of the main reasons he came back to school to earn his BA and now pursue his MA in Hawaiian language was so that he could tell his stories as a Hawaiian and as a Vietnam veteran. After the war, he worked at the post office before coming back to school with his daughter who was also pursuing an MA in Hawaiian language. In fact he had two daughters who were pursuing higher education, both graduates of the private college-preparatory Kamehameha Schools for Native Hawaiians. He and his brother had an opportunity to go to Kamehameha in the 1960s, and he regretted his decision not to attend. At the time, the school implemented a military education for the boys. He recalled that when he got the letter of admission, he turned it down, telling his mother that “they wear uniforms and they give you demerits.” She said, “Demerits, what is that?” He replied, “I don’t know, but it don’t sound good! I no like demerits!” He now thought that had he gone, perhaps he might have been “officer material.”

When Kānehailua finally went off to boot camp in San Diego in 1968, he was part of an all-Hawai‘i platoon of recruits. He recalled that he was an excellent marksman, shooting “high expert” the entire week. On qualification day though, a “big hand” came out of the sky in the form of a gust of wind and “slapped” a mix of dust and bugs into his eyes, messing up his shot. He said it was a good thing that happened; otherwise, he would have made it “personal” if he went to war as a sniper.

Kānehailua spent ten months in Vietnam and was hit three times in combat. Yet even deeper than those wounds were the injuries he suffered at the hands of his fellow Americans. In one story he recalled suffering discrimination when visiting a base camp for an engineer unit. He and his fellow infantrymen (most of whom were also minorities) were forced to eat

out of their helmets, because they were denied plates when they came out of the jungle dirty and stinking. Later that same base was bombed while his unit was out in the field. Payback—he thought. He laughed and said how crazy it seems that he could find that funny, but that was the survivor in him—that was how he had to operate in survival mode.

Yet one of the greatest challenges he faced in the jungle was a spiritual and cultural one. While in Vietnam, he said there was a Native American scout in his unit who made them stop at one point because he thought something was going to happen. He started “dancing” like “powwow,” and so Kānehailua jumped in behind him. He turned around and said, “Charlie, what are you doing?” “I saw you doing the powwow, and ever since I was a little boy watching cowboys and Indians I wanted to do powwow,” he replied. His companion said, “I’m Indian, this is my religion. What are you?” “I’m Catholic,” Charlie replied. “I thought you were Hawaiian,” was the response. Kānehailua said that this was the worst thing his friend could have said; it was worse than a bullet, and it went right through his heart. When he thought about it later, he said he wanted to kill him. The scout then said, “That’s all right, I forgive you. They did something to you guys. But I’m Indian and I know my religion.” That memory still stung when he recalled it over the phone.

Kānehailua said that today he is active in his church, but since they do not recognize Hawaiians or their situation of colonization, it is a struggle for him. He is always looking somewhere for the answer—in church, in school, in the language, and in the culture—to who he is and what his way forward is. He represents many Hawaiian men who ended up in the military and are looking to find their way. That is why he appreciated my work and my book on Hawaiian men (Tengan 2008). He said that when he came back, he was asking, where are the men? God told him, “You da man.” He said he was not ready, but that was God’s plan. He struggles with school but persists. Now he is being asked to give motivational talks to the students at Nānākuli where he is from. He says he tries to discourage boys from going into the military, but knows that a lot do, so he just tries to prepare them. But he agrees with my political and intellectual project, and he would like to share more of his experiences and get others like him who might want to talk to do so. He even mentioned that he just convinced a Tengan that he served with (who like me is Hawaiian-Okinawan from Maui, though I do not know if we are related) to come home from Guam and get help for his PTSD and claim the veteran’s benefits that are due to him for his disability.

We spoke for nearly an hour before hanging up. I sat in my office overwhelmed by a complex of emotions that ranged from sadness and anger to joy and sympathy. In light of the fact that I was reading about those very emotions in Ito (1999) and preparing to lecture on them in class, I could not see his e-mail and call at that time as a “coincidence.” I decided that I needed to show the video of the panel discussion and his response in my anthropology class and talk about the exchange that I had just had. I called him back and asked for his permission to do so, and I also invited him to come to my ethnic studies class on Hawai‘i and the Pacific in a couple of days when, as fate would also have it, I was planning to talk about my research on Native Hawaiian veterans. He allowed me to use his video in class and agreed to come up to visit my students. He said that it was good to get people to know his story. In fact, that was one of the more moving statements he made in our earlier conversation. He wanted to go back so he could tell his story. He said it with tears, and explained how he had been writing these short stories on his own. His family and Hawaiian language teachers like No‘eau Warner had all encouraged him to continue his higher education, which he did. We also got to speaking *ma ka ‘ōlelo makuahine* (in our mother tongue), and we made connections through our shared membership in the Hawaiian language community. At the end of this second conversation, he gave me permission to use the film in my class and agreed to come to my ethnic studies class later that week.

Since then we have continued to talk story and work together to find ways of telling his *mo‘olelo* (story). The perfect opportunity for collaboration came in 2011 with the visit to Hawai‘i of StoryCorps, a national non-profit oral-history project that allows regular people to sit down and record interviews to be archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Kānehailua and I recorded some of his stories, which now have the potential of reaching an audience even broader than the ‘ŌLELO program. He has also continued to visit my classes to share his stories, which he sometimes struggles tremendously with as the memories of pain and anguish threaten to overtake him. In these battles, humor is usually his most effective weapon for disarming his demons.

This brief synopsis of our relationship points to the fraught political and ethical terrain of doing ethnographic research with at least one Native Hawaiian veteran. For him, the process of coming to consciousness and awareness of his indigenous history—one characterized by dispossession and betrayal—is at odds with a U.S. military ideology of self-sacrifice for country and meritorious advancement through the ranks. And just as clear

distinctions separate the enlisted men and women from the officers, so too do class and educational differences set apart professors and scholars from military personnel. Yet none are completely separated by these histories and social relations. On that count, shared stories—those that are produced in dialogue and for the purpose of not only conveying information but also nurturing relationships and creating mutual understandings—play a particularly important role in both enacting and transforming indigenous and anthropological (and indigenous anthropological) identities.