In September 2012 I interviewed Kanaka ‘Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) community leaders Thomas Ka‘auwai Kaulukukui, Jr. and William Kahalepuna Richards, Jr. on their participation as members of a community consultant group for a special exhibit *E Kū Ana Ka Paia* (The Walls Shall Stand) held in 2010 at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu. This exhibit brought together the last three remaining carved wooden temple images of the deity Kū, who is most frequently (and reductively) referred to as the god of war. In actuality, Kū is a deity of male generative force and productivity, and including statecraft, governance, farming, fishing, and healing; even more broadly, Kū is seen as the masculine component of society that complements Hina, the feminine. Kaulukukui and Richards are both Vietnam veterans (Army paratrooper and Marine, respectively) and ‘ōlohe (instructors and masters) of the Hawaiian martial art of lua. The edited sections below represent just a small component of their longer conversations that connected their experiences in the military to their understandings of Kū, Indigenous warriorhood, spirituality, and masculinity.

*Interview with Thomas Ka‘auwai Kaulukukui, Jr. on 24 September 2012 at the offices of the trustees of the Queen Lili‘uokalani Trust (QLT) in downtown Honolulu. Born in 1945, he is a graduate of Kamehameha Schools (1963), Michigan State University (BS, 1967), and the William Richardson School of Law at the University of Hawai‘i (JD, 1977). He was drafted into the Army in 1968 and served in Vietnam (1969 to 1970) as a platoon sergeant in 173rd Airborne*
Brigade. He entered private practice in 1978 and was appointed a trial judge in 1988. In 1993 he relinquished his judgeship in order to serve the Hawaiian people on numerous boards and commissions, including his present position as chair of the QLT that serves orphan and destitute Hawaiian children.

Tengan: For you personally, what was the significance of the Kū exhibit?

Kaulukukui: I thought it was important to have those symbols of Kū returned, partly because I am interested in bringing what I think is more of a needed balance of the Kū [masculine] side of our history and our culture into what seems to be a current view of culture, which is in some ways dominated by the artistic and Hina [feminine] side.

Tengan: One of the issues that I recall from those community advisory group meetings was some of the concern about waking the Kū images up and animating them in some ways. Do you recall any of those discussions and your thoughts on that?

Kaulukukui: In my mind, I’m not really worried about that. From the little I knew about the power of, or the aspects of Kū, there a lot of positive things about Kū which maybe we should awaken. Or, they should awaken us—that’s the other way to put it. Maybe they would awaken in us some knowledge and interest in the aspects of Kū that we need in our own lives. I remember writing to somebody in an email, “And if the only aspect of Kū that is awakened is Kū the destroyer and Kū the god of war, I’ve seen that aspect before and I do not fear it.”

Tengan: What is Kū? Who is he? What’s he a symbol of in your mind?

Kaulukukui: Kū in terms of being the male energy or the masculine energy represents mainly responsibility to me. It’s kuleana [responsibility]. That has been my training through my own parents and especially through my father. That responsibility is a number of concentric rings starting with self. The first is a responsibility for moral living, if you want to call it that. In terms of ethics, it’s morality and having a good set of values. It is also a responsibility for physical health and strength. Because the male, just by virtue of physical build, has had the responsibility of protection, building, and carrying the heavy physical loads and all of those things which are important for a male role in society. So part
of the kuleana, then, in the centre is to take care of your own physical being, and then whatever service you need to give to your family and your community. Then as the rings get broader, then the ambit of responsibility gets broader: family, community, people, nation, etc.

Now, what I think is important about that is that the foundations are spiritual. That if one has a belief that this kuleana comes down, not just because your elders or your father or somebody else told you that you have it, but that it is an inherent part of the DNA that nature put in you, then that responsibility stems from things which are much broader than are human beings. It comes from a foundation that’s spiritual.

Tengan: That’s great, because what I’m hearing in a lot of ways when you’re talking about that sense of the spiritual is also about the mana [spiritual power and authority], right? Could you say a little bit about how you see mana?

Kaulukukui: Yes. In the simplest sense, I see mana as spiritual power but I think that spirit is expressed in a lot of ways. That spiritual power is expressed in our DNA, for example. It’s expressed in nature. Mana to me is the source of spiritual power. Mana for me is competency that comes from practising the things we need to practise. Mana is reflected in our reputation, in our authority. So I think mana is not a concept that’s outside of this; mana is a concept that permeates all of this.

Tengan: If you don’t mind going back to some of the earlier comments about your experience in the war, how does one access and express that mana of Kū in that context?

Kaulukukui: A man realizes when he goes to war and faces battle that whatever he has to do in battle, the spirit he has to call up in order to do his job as a soldier, is inherent in him. That is a huge realization. As a matter of fact it’s a frightening realization. Because you can do things in battle and be awarded medals for it. But if you did it the day after you got out of the Army and came home, you’d be in jail for murder. So you have this tremendous conflict between the Judeo-Christian ethic and the realization when you get into battle that it’s in your DNA.
And so that’s a very sobering realization: that any man who has to go to battle is going to find out that there are aspects of you—you can call them Kū aspects if you want to—that you didn't know you really had is actually in your DNA. And that’s frightening because at some point you’re going to be out of war. If you’re going to come back to civilized society, and you have to spend the rest of your life not awakening that Kū. So that’s what I’m talking about when I say I seen the face of Kū, I’ve seen it in me. Having had that personal experience I’m not really concerned that somebody who has the power is going to invoke a face of Kū that is going to be unfamiliar to me. And, therefore, many of our warriors, especially the young ones that come back from battle are in tremendous conflict. Because they have a sleeping Kū within them. The war god sleeps within them. And they’re going to spend the rest of their life trying to make sure he doesn’t wake up.

Tengan: Are there ways that you’ve been able to help some of these individuals to not wake that up or to manage it?

Kaulukukui: Yes, I’ve worked with veterans before. I think the most important thing is to recognize that rather than fight with that part of your nature, to recognize that it is part of your nature. First things first, you have to recognize who you are. Then, secondly, you have to recognize what is appropriate conduct in a civilized society and what was appropriate in war. Then you have to deal with the experience itself and try to translate the experience of battle into something that is positive, has made you stronger, so that you can move forward to carry your community responsibilities in the peacetime effort. Therefore, take those things which can be seen as a negative experience and look at the positive aspects for it that make you stronger and better to live a better life to carry your kuleana here. Then the other thing you have to do is to unburden yourself. You have to find a way to put down the burdens that you carry from battle so that you can move on to something else and do better. Then, lastly, you probably need to have some training and techniques; anger management, you know, “What do I do when you know when I hear the lion rattling the cage down there in the pit of my stomach?”

So it’s a matter mainly of resolving these conflicts within yourself. The main thing I think is to find a way so that that battle
experience can be cleansed first of all, put in its proper perspective, and used as a positive thing. That’s why I have advocated, and am still trying to figure out how to do it, the cleansing ceremony as most Native people did, to help put aside that aspect of your life and to move on. I think that as long as we don’t do that, we are going to continue to have problems with post-traumatic stress, etc. And I think that ceremony has to be done not by psychiatrists, but by warriors.

It’s my feeling that we have in our DNA as a people, a special ability in the field of warriorhood. That’s very interesting because I’ve spoken to a lot of Hawaiians who’ve been in the military and most of them were the top trainees. Billy Richards, who you talked to, he was one. So was I. And we have nothing in common other than that we are Hawaiian, or part-Hawaiian, and come from Hawai’i.

Tengan: What you said about Hawaiians excelling in the military is something I’ve heard over and over again.

Kaulukukui: I think there are a lot of aspects to it. I think it’s in the DNA first of all. Secondly, I think it has to do with our upbringing. We are island people, we are isolated, we tend to be self-sufficient and in our DNA is the DNA of the risk-takers. There’s a whole bunch of DNA of people who are not risk-takers: they’re still in the Marquesas; they’re still in Tahiti; they’re still in Fiji. When the canoe left, our ancestors were the risk-takers. They came here and they made a life here. So in our DNA are the risk-takers.

Also, I think what motivates us is because we’re a small part of the nation, and insignificant geographically in terms of size, we have always felt that we need to do our part. So we rise up and we do our part.

Maybe it’s a tribal thing. Maybe we are more tribal than some people on different parts of the country because we are small. So when you get into the Marines or the Army, you have a tribe. A tribe with it’s own code, and we tend to be loyal and true and brave because we understand what it’s like to be part of a tribe.
Tengan: Another thing I’ve heard too is the ways in which military provides a kind of structure that Hawaiians really get, Hawaiian men in particular.

Kaulukukui: Yes. Some of them don’t have that training, and we find, for instance in our lua [Hawaiian martial art] seminars, when they get structure, they love it. They love the clarity. You know, many of them, because their home life may not have the structure, love the clarity. It’s very interesting to me because some of the fathers or the people that we deal with, they have not had that kind of structure. Some of them are really rough individuals. But when you impose the structure or expose them to it, they love it. You know they’re not babies—some of them are older. They get it and they say, “This feels right.”

Tengan: Can you say more on the lua training?

Kaulukukui: I think for me, and for most who have had military training, the lua training is an affirmation of the fact that warriorhood, which we experience in the American military, is part of our DNA. In the law, there is this thing called relation doctrine, whereas something happens here but its effect relates back to something that happened before. So we have this experience in the American military and then we have this warriorhood experience. We understood it’s something that we can do as a male human being. Then you go to lua training, and you realize, “Ah, it’s a Hawaiian warrior thing.” So your realization today that you are a Hawaiian warrior because it’s part of your Hawaiian DNA, not just your male DNA as a matter of nature, relates back to the experience you have in the military because now you understand that you were always a Hawaiian warrior. My realization today is not that I am a Hawaiian warrior; the most powerful aspect of that training is that I have always been a Hawaiian warrior—my whole life. That my people are warriors. You know how powerful that is, that realization? That difference between realizing today that you are a Hawaiian warrior, and realizing that you have, for generations, been a Hawaiian warrior. Tremendously powerful.

So those of us veterans who go through the lua training, one of the realizations that we reach is, “You know why we’re so good warriors in the American military and the Marines, in the
paratroopers? Because I’m Hawaiian, and Hawaiians are warriors. That’s why—I get it!” Right? That’s a powerful realization. And that affects your whole life. Because now it’s not a matter of, “I graduated today from the lua seminar, in October of 1993, and now I’m warrior.” It’s the realization someplace—whether you go through the ceremony or not—that that’s who my people are; that’s who I am. It’s in my DNA, and therefore, I have kuleana, I have ikaika [strength], I have power that comes with it, and responsibility. The two things you got out of that is tremendous responsibility for leadership to express yourself in the right way and enormous mana, which is where the ability to express it comes from. And that’s why what we have found that it is life transforming. For me, for most of us, it transforms our lives. It’s not like we didn’t have leadership abilities before, or experiences before, it just transformed the way we look at ourselves, and the world. Enormously powerful.

Interview with William Kahalepuna Richards, Jr. on 21 September 2012 at the Honolulu offices of Partners in Development Foundation (PIDF), a non-profit organization that serves the Native Hawaiian community through social, environmental, and educational programs; he is director of communications there. A graduate of Kailua High School (1966), he entered the Marines in 1967 and following completion of basic and infantry combat training he was sent to the Republic of Vietnam where he was assigned to Kilo Company 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division. After Vietnam, he stayed in California for about a year before returning to Hawai‘i to eventually become part of the original crew of the Hōkūle‘a voyaging canoe that helped to spark a revival in traditional voyaging across the Pacific and a renewal of older Oceanic relationships and identities. He has maintained his involvement in the voyaging family since then and has served as board member or director for numerous organizations that benefit Native Hawaiians, including the ‘Aha Kāne Native Hawaiian Men’s Foundation.

Tengan: One of the things I was struck by in the previous research I did on the Hale Mua [Native Hawaiian men’s organization] was how many of the men were also in the military, and it got me interested in the connection with that formal warriorhood, and the kind that was emerging in Nā Koa [warrior organizations], the Pā Lua [lua schools], and the Hale Mua [men’s house].
Richards: It’s funny you use that word [warrior]; that’s a term that Tommy [Kaulukukui] and I talk about. For the vets, people coming back from combat, we call them returning warriors and for those who are learning about warrihood, we call them emerging warriors. Tommy and I, when we discuss things, our feeling is that whatever that warriorness is, it’s innate in all Hawaiians. That’s one of the things I always try to tell people. Like, our organization [PIDF], our values are the same ones we see on the wall [pointing to posters with these values], “pono” [goodness; morality], “aloha” [love; respect]. But to me, it’s more than that. It’s striving to be the best. But because we are a social service organization, we have a lot of Hina [feminine] values, yeah? But I think Kū [masculine] values are important too. We discuss it, Tommy and I, we talk about it, how back in our day, to do things Hawaiian, you either going dance hula, you play music—you can paddle, or you can join the service. And for the most part, Hawaiians—not just Hawaiians, locals—they do well in the military. I went with four Hawaiians and one Nez Perce Indian who was living here, and we all excelled in boot camp. The drill instructors, they thought we were crazy! I remember one time we did a confidence course, like an obstacle course, and we climbed this tower three stories high. And I remember the drill instructor saying, “You Hawaiians better get down here, like, now!” And we were supposed to do this slide-for-life thing, and he said “now” so we all jumped [laughter]. And when we jumped, his eyes got really big and he’s like, “No!” We got in, and all of us had taken some form of martial arts, so we broke into a roll, came up to attention, “Mission accomplished, aye, aye, sir!” And he was like, “Fucking Hawaiians” [laughter]. But it seems that Hawaiians and local people do really well in the service.

Tengan: I’ve heard that over and over again. Why do you think that is?

Richards: I think it’s innate, it’s just innate. You know?

Tengan: So, what particular qualities are innate?

Richards: For us, the things, like, when we do the obstacle course, it was fun. You know, if you look at your fellow recruits, it was like, it was hard for them, they saw it completely different. I mean, you’re climbing under barbed wire, getting shot at, live fire, it was fun! It
was like, yeah, no big deal. Even, we had this thing, after you go to boot camp, from boot camp, you go to ITR, Infantry Training Regiment, you go to BITS, Basically Infantry Training School, that’s where you learn to use all the different weapons. And one of the things in BITS is, you get captured, they put you in a POW camp. So, the whole platoon gets captured. So we go to POW, me and two other Hawaiians, we get in there, they give us dry fish and rice. We never escaped; we just stayed! [laughter]. After potatoes and ham, and things like that, you know. Wow, rice and dry fish! We was grinding! And pretty soon, kind of like time out, and the guy says, “You guys are supposed to escape!” It was just fun, you know [laughter]. “Ok, ok, we’ll bag [leave].” But I think it’s just a different kind of outlook on how it went. The others that I saw it in who not Hawaiians were American Indians, some of the Puerto Ricans; course you had your Southern boys, white Southerners, you know, they’d chew tobacco and do their stuff.

I don’t want to make too lightly of this, because boot camp, combat training, the military, and war, is serious business. But I’d say we were able to adapt fairly well…

For the most part, the guys in my unit and the Hawaiians like that, they were well respected anywhere; they could hold their own. And most of us, we grew up in martial arts. Judo was something everybody took. When I was a kid, it was judo; around the ’60s karate came in. When I was in high school, I started taking aikido. So when we got to boot camp, they give you like ten hours of hand-to-hand combat [training]. But our guys already were ma’a [accustomed] to it. In fact, our drill instructors would ask us to demonstrate. Which is different; again, I think the term “innate,” it’s just in there; it’s just in there, waiting to come out. And I think sometimes that’s the problem we have with kane, is that there’s a warrior in there fighting to come out but doesn’t know what to do.

So it manifests itself in too many negative ways. The only warrior we had when I was in high school was a Primo3 warrior. He emerges after a few beers.

So, joining Pāku‘ialua [the first modern lua school] back when I did in ’93 was good for me. There were a lot of things that
were taught to us that started to make sense. Especially after travelling so much with Hōkūle'a and going to different island groups, where they challenge you, would be 300 Maoris or one Rarotongan. There was always this, there was a level, these steps to, aloha, you know—I’m not gonna aloha you, until I figure out what your intent is.

Tengan: I never heard it put that way, where there’s steps to aloha.

Richards: When I went through my pani [graduation] with Pāku‘ialua, that’s one of the things I mentioned. As we travelled around and I saw that, I always felt like there was something missing with us. And now I understand what was missing, that we too had our own steps that needed to take place. And intent is important, you know. People’s intentions, especially if they come visiting. Cause we’re filled with aloha, we aloha so much—take my land, take my woman [laughing], take it all away. And it’s kinda like, no matter where we went, everyplace else it wasn’t that way. There’s a point at which, yes [aloha is extended], but there’s a lot of stuff happened prior to that, just to determinate intent. So it filled a gap for me, lua did. It made me understand.

I think that going to Vietnam, it was being feeling comfortable knowing that Kanaloa [Hawaiian god of the ocean] said OK, and Kū said OK, you know, on the beach that night; the threes that showed up when they needed to.4 Graduating boot camp and BITS and Meritorious Mast with high honors, and then the threes show up and then meeting Marvin Monarco the Jicarilla Apache, and making it back without a scratch, these kinds of things.

Tengan: What did you think about yourself in relation to this other Apache Marine?

Richards: It’s on that [DVD],5 the story is about us. Monarco played a big part, and not only in my learning. Like I said, the Six [company commander] thought that, and he [Monarco] told me, “They think that if you’re Native you can read their footprints,” and he laughed. And he taught me as much as he could, but at the same time, he said—and we go back to innate—“It’s in you,” you know, “it’s in there.” And a lot of it was, you just figured it out.
And for some reason, not “some” reason, but, I don’t think I’m suffering from any kind of form of PTSD. I don’t know that, but I’m not a psychologist, so I can’t tell you this stuff, yeah. I know when I was at the reunion, I was asked by a good friend of mine who was from Arkansas, he was in 81s, an FO, forward observer, with the 81-mm mortars, he tells me, “I gotta go to this, they’re having a lecture on PTSD. You gotta come, you gotta come.” So he drags me in. And I was listening, and the lady that was doing the presentation started talking about symptoms. Some obvious symptoms and not so obvious symptoms. And she was talking, and I went “hmmm” [laughter]. “Well, maybe.” But I don’t think I have it as bad as a lot of people. You know, I see some of my friends that are in pretty bad shape. There’s one Samoan, he’s from Hawai‘i, he’s never come home since coming back from Nam. I told him, “Brah, you should come home; you should go in the ocean and come home, just go in the ocean, you’ll be fine.”

Tengan: Is that what you did when you came back?

Richards: Yeah, well, OK. I come back, I’m training troops for combat, and after that I get sent to Marine barracks, San Diego. So, I was there, I became an E5; I was a sergeant under 2, sergeant and (only) seventeen months in the Corps. I got a small place in Mission Beach, right off the beach, an apartment. I started taking flying lessons, in my extra time. I’m doing this, I’m still in the Corps, and my cousin calls. My cousin’s from Keaukaha. He had just gotten out of the Navy, where he served on a guided missile destroyer that was part of a carrier battle group. He got out of the Navy and he went home. But he wasn’t ready to be home. He realized he wasn’t ready to be home, so he moved to Inglewood California, in the L.A. area, where my uncle was living; my mom’s brother, Uncle Clarence. After a while he calls me up, he goes, “You got room down there?” [I say,] “Ah, come!” So he came down to San Diego, to Mission Beach and he moves in with me. And I think it was the first week he go [says], “You surfing?” I go, “No.” “You’re not surfing? How come you’re not surfing?” I say, “I dunno.” And I hadn’t made that transition yet back from Kū [who he called on during war] to Kanaloa [who he had grown up with on the ocean]. He says, “We go.” So we went up the street, Mission Boulevard, went to the Dewey Weber
Surf Shop, and he bought two boards. One for him and one for me. And we paddled out, and that’s where, I remember on the first wave, that’s where everything, was kinda like the hā [breath] [exhales and says “haaa”]. I think that’s one of the reasons why I’m OK. Is that my cousin came, put me back in the ocean, we connected with Kanaloa, and we surfed. We just surfed. I had my form of cleansing; my cleansing took place there. I have him to thank for it. When I think about PTSD and that decompression period, I think I have him to thank. There’s that point out there when you go, “OK, Kū—pau [My time with you has come to an end]. Thank you for being with me for as long as you have. I’m going back to Kanaloa.”

Afterword

In reflecting on the thoughts of Kaulukukui and Richards, I was struck by the notion that warriorhood is an “inherent” or “innate” quality that is “just in there” or “part of the DNA.” The possibilities and limitations of this idea for Kanaka ‘ōiwi and other Indigenous men and women deserves further comment. Kim Tallbear, associate professor of anthropology and Native American studies at the University of Texas at Austin and author of Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), notes that “indigenous people—when we invoke blood or DNA concepts—in talking about qualities or desires that we find in part constitutive of who we are, do not always mean literally that biology determines these qualities in a straightforward deterministic way.” Rather, she asserts that most Natives understand that “who we are as peoples is comprised of cultural and political (read sovereignty) factors, plus we are physical bodies descended from the bodies of our ancestors.” The problem of genetically linking Indigenous warriorhood and U.S. soldiering is that it potentially ignores the “political economic conditions…[that] shape our high enlistment” and “den[ies] how profoundly U.S. colonization disrupted our ancestors’ life ways and the degree to which it continues to oppressively structure our lives” (ibid.). One should also examine the ways that militarization reconfigures traditional notions of the family, as Jennifer Nez Denetdale has done in Navajo country.

With the foregoing caveats in mind, I would argue for a critical reading of the claims of inherent/innate warriorhood as assertions of Indigenous genealogical continuity and persistence in the face of U.S. settler colonialism (see
also Tallbear on “genetic memory” talk in the introduction to *Native American DNA*. In the present–day context of Native resurgence and struggles over cultural and political sovereignty, Indigenous service in the U.S. military can be seen as a contradictory thing. Hawai‘i is home to the United States Pacific Command that has taken on an even greater significance following the Obama administration’s move to “rebalance” to the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, it is precisely the islands’ military strategic value that led to the illegal overthrow and annexation and sustains a U.S. settler occupation of Hawai‘i. Perhaps ironically, it is based on his experiences in the U.S. Army and his analysis of the international law of war that Dr. David Keanu Sai and his colleagues have articulated new strategies for de-occupation based on the core claim of state continuity—e.g., the Hawaiian Kingdom was never legally extinguished and so remains. Similarly, I would argue that the interviews of Kaulukukui and Richards suggest that military experience potentially allows Native men and women to assert Indigenous genealogical (seen as both spiritual and political) continuity through their performance of warriorhood as soldiering. Clearly this is not an unproblematic articulation, as Tallbear and Denetdale remind us. However, it behoves scholars of Indigenous men and masculinities (as well as others) to pay critical attention to the words and experiences of the Indigenous veterans, and what their battles and traumas suggest for Native societies that are wrestling with the place of the military in their lands and waters. It might, as Kaulukukui suggests, “transform the way we look at ourselves, and the world.” Similarly, the transition from war to peace in an ocean passage as described by Richards could help all of us ponder what it is we are “going back to” in our efforts to reconnect with land, water, culture, ancestors, and nation. As the past is literally “the time in front” (ka wā ma mua) in Hawaiian thought, projects of critical re-membering are also ones of finding new ways forward—i mua.

Endnotes

1 The glosses for these values comes from the “About” section of the PIDF website at http://www.pidf.org/about/overview.
2 In Hawai‘i Creole English, also referred to as “pidgin,” the phrase “We was grinding!” is like saying “We chowed down!”
3 Referring to the locally brewed Primo Beer.
4 Earlier in the interview, Richards explained that as a young man who grew up surfing and living next to the ocean, he had taken on the Hawaiian deity of Kanaloa
as his god. When he went to war, he made an explicit choice to take on Kū. While in Vietnam, signs that would appear in groups of three confirmed that Kū was watching over him.

5 Richards gave me a copy of a DVD entitled *Native American Veterans—Storytelling for Healing* (Administration for Native Americans, 2009) that he was a featured interviewee on.

6 Personal communication, 22 April 2015.


8 See http://www.hawaiiankingdom.org.