

The Future Is Koa

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We are living in a time of huluhia. As of August 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 800,000 people and disrupted economies and lives globally. Concurrently, the US Indo-Pacific Command has requested an additional \$20 billion to enhance military bases and capabilities in the region. Many of our islands in the Pacific face military threats: a proposed operational missile launch facility and radar sites on Kauaʻi and Oʻahu, a new Marine Corps littoral regiment at Mōkapu, the destruction of native forest and CHamoru archaeological sites in Litekyan (Ritidian) in Guåhan (Guam), the expansion of US Naval bases in the Philippines, the construction of a coral reef-destroying base in Henoko, Okinawa, leaking fuel tanks in Red Hill over Oʻahu’s main aquifer, and the intensification of live fire training on Oʻahu and Hawaiʻi island. Despite outbreaks of COVID-19 within the military, the Navy plans to continue with its biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in Hawaiʻi, which poses a risk to military personnel and local communities. These conditions demand a radical reorientation towards a genuine security that prioritizes social and environmental needs.

At this time of huluhia, we argue that koa as a land/ocean-based practice of courage and warriorhood will help us to stand strong in this embattled world that our Islands and Islanders are struggling through. Koa (*Acacia koa*) is the largest native hardwood tree, used especially for canoes. Koa seeds can remain dormant in the soil for many years before a disturbance, such as the overturning of soil when invasive plants are cleared, cracks their outer layers and begins their process of germinating, sprouting, and growing into the majestic trees that provide protection and nutrients needed for a healthy forest (Kuwada; Keir). But koa also means “courage,” to be “brave,” and “warrior,” even “soldier,” and “military.”

Environmental desolation caused by the military has a long history in Hawaiʻi. The military has bombed, burned, and desecrated hundreds of sites, including Kahoʻolawe, Mākua, Pōhakuloa, Lihuʻe, and Waikāne, transforming these wahi pana (storied places) into forbidden zones contaminated with unexploded munitions and toxic chemicals. By rendering the land hazardous, the military holds the future hostage—severing indigenous relations to land and foreclosing on alternative uses. Yet, like koa seeds which require scarification to germinate, military environmental impacts have also awakened koa aloha ʻāina to stand in the gap.

The many meanings of koa help to reveal possibilities of transformation in the story of our friend and veteran Uncle Joe Estores. Born in 1933, Uncle Joe spent the majority of his fifty-five years of federal service in the Army and various government agencies outside of Hawai'i, including eighteen months as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. Before he went to war, he set up the gunnery targets at Mākua Valley. When he returned to Hawai'i in 2006, his shock at the military's environmental impacts on Pu'uloa where he grew up led him to advocate for demilitarization. He now attends cultural accesses with the Mālama Mākua organization, where he asks the valley for forgiveness for the role he played in the land's desecration, and relates stories of his personal transformation.

On one access that we both attended, Mālama Mākua leader Sparky Rodrigues, also a Vietnam Veteran, asked Uncle Joe how he overcame the conflict between his American patriotism and his Hawaiian cultural beliefs. Uncle Joe responded, "I took that American flag off my shoulder, and I put the Hawaiian flag there. I took the American heart that was inside of me, and I put the Hawaiian heart there. Different allegiance—allegiance to the land, rather than to war." As activists and scholars committed to aloha 'āina futures, we were moved by the pain and healing expressed in Uncle Joe's testimony. It helped us to see new possibilities for the future of Mākua and the Lāhui.

This notion of koa emerging from damage done to the land and our bodies in order to heal and stabilize offers an example for how to fearlessly face the current crises as koa aloha 'āina—warriors dedicated to the land/nation. On a larger scale, groups like the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana (PKO) and Mālama Mākua have transformed the collective trauma of military destruction of 'āina into a space for more koa aloha 'āina to sprout. From 1976 to 1990, the PKO organized to stop the bombing of Kaho'olawe, and in the process sparked an 'Ōiwi cultural and political resurgence. The severe ecological and cultural degradation of Kaho'olawe called forward the (re)emergence of 'Ōiwi ceremonies, language, history, and ea. Many returning 'Ōiwi veterans from the Vietnam War became koa aloha 'āina with the PKO. Struggling to heal Kaho'olawe helped these koa to heal their traumas of war and find alternative life-sustaining futures. Many went on to become community leaders dedicated to restoring land, growing food for their communities, and educating future generations.

Arundhati Roy reminds us that a moment of crisis forces us "to break with the past and imagine [our] world anew. . . . It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next." This invocation of crisis-as-portal brings to mind the 'Ōiwi concept of kīpuka—a change of form (puka, hole), and especially an oasis of forest that persists after the landscape has been devoured by Pele's huluhia and regenerates life. We see this regeneration in the global rising of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples to protect their lands and communities. From July 2019 to March 2020, thousands of Kānaka 'Ōiwi and supporters maintained an occupation at Pu'uhonua o Pu'uhuluhulu to protect Mauna a Wākea (Mauna Kea) from the construction of a

Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). The Stop RIMPAC Coalition is working to end RIMPAC exercises. And Black Lives Matter protests continue to rock hundreds of cities around the world, demanding an end to racist violence, and a defunding of the police and the military.

In 1992, a ceremony was held on Kaho‘olawe to dedicate a stone platform for reinterring iwi kupuna (ancestral bones), marking the transition from military to ‘Ōiwi use. Parley Kanaka‘ole named the structure “Kahualele.” “Kahua” can mean a foundation, seed, fruit, egg, or word. “Lele” means to leap or fly. He wanted this event of replanting to fly and take root elsewhere.

We offer some thoughts about regenerative futures for Hawai‘i, in hopes that they too might lele to take root in fertile soil:

- Support abolitionist calls to defund the police and military, redirecting those funds to human and environmental needs. Jobs created in this way will boost economic recovery and provide crucial services for our communities and the ‘āina. This complements various local post-pandemic recovery initiatives, such as ‘Āina Aloha Futures and *Building Bridges, Not Walking on Backs: A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for COVID-19*.
- Close and convert military bases to other productive uses, such as affordable housing and facilities for education, research, technological innovation, social services, community organizations, and especially ‘Ōiwi serving programs. Building on the experiences of Kaho‘olawe and other military land restoration projects, Hawai‘i firms and workers can become leaders in the growing field of environmental restoration of former military sites.
- Fund the tuition and living expenses of displaced workers so they may learn essential skills for the new economy. This investment in workers could be modeled on the GI Bill for returning veterans of World War II. These educational programs should develop capacities for creating socially just and ecologically sustainable futures. Veterans and formerly incarcerated persons could work on ‘āina restoration projects as part of their reentry programs.
- Make Hawai‘i into a peace center based on understandings of *genuine security* as articulated by the International Women’s Network Against Militarism. An independent, neutral, and demilitarized Hawai‘i could be an international meeting place.

We must discard the “old normal” which led to this catastrophe, and boldly move into that kipuka of change—mindful of the risks, and attentive to opportunities for more sustainable futures. The saying “E ola koa” (Live like a koa tree) is a wish for a long and sustaining life, one that calls us to courageously confront and overcome the multiple challenges ahead.

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Works Cited

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