

filename Kaipo in Sue Aki interviews Polynesia folder

Sue Aki dissertation in progress Anthro. Univ. Buffalo Feb 1993

interview with 28 year old male living in Hilo, Hawaii

Born in Oahu, the eldest of 7 children (4 boys and 3 girls) But after age 11 when his parents divorced he was raised with his mother and her parents on island of Hawaii. He is half Filipino, 1/4 Portuguese, 1/8 Navajo, 1/8 Japanese. He identifies with his Navajo Indian ancestry, because that is closest to Hawaiian culture. He is a Hawaiian Studies graduate with his BA from U. Hawaii Hilo.

Religion: he was born Catholic, but in high school was converted by Jehovah's Witness and became active in that for awhile, but he did not like it and became inactive. He is now inactive in religion.

He was married for a short while, but had no children. Later he divorced and is now single.

MOLOKAI AND MAHU: Molokai [the most traditional island] is the capital of mahu. On Molokai they're number one. If you're a mahu from Molokai, boy you don't fool around with the mahus from Molokai, because they're like real mahus you know. And they're lovely.... Molokai mahus are the best. They have a way of cutting all that machoness [in young Hawaiian males]. They just cut them up and then the boys start laughing.... They're so fun, a lot of them can sing and dance. They're good stroytellers you know. At least boys would accept them if they're one to one.

#### MAHU AND HULA

Since I was a child I had a background in hula for years and years, and so because it's an art it would attract a lot of mahus and homosexuals. One thing [they have] in common is they're very sensitive. They're very sensitive to the environment, and to culture because they spend a lot of time with their grandparents. They've heard a lot of stories and that was instilled in them so that they all pulled towards art. I was exposed to mahus early and they constitute some of my best friends. They're very loyal and they're trustworthy, you know, because they have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm talking of mahus that everybody knows that they're mahus. They have nothing to be ashamed of, and they can stand their ground. They make very loyal friends.

.... Mahus spent a lot of time with their grandparents, and their grandparents put a mold in them. Because the grandparents are domestic the children kind of pick up on it, so they might become overtly feminine. Their ways might tend to pull more on the feminine side. They spend time with their grandparents and from them comes the wisdom. So a lot of the mahus I know don't think they're special, but they know the history of the family. They know the gossip of the family, they know the secrets of the family. They know a lot of lore of the area. That's why I say they have a special power. If you talk seriously with one, you cannot help but become a friend to that person. They're beautiful, because they step time with their grandparents and they kind of emit that same kind of oldness about them. So they're special to me. And with the Indian people they were considered a dual sex, more special because they're not men and they're not women. They're stronger, and you know a lot of them become storytellers, singers and shamans.

.... Especially in our family storytelling is important and it's something that whenever there's a story everybody knows, they all heard the same story, but they'll ask me to tell the story. Maybe because I listened to my grandparents. I know how to tell stories because I've spent time with my grandparents.

.... Local mahus, the ones that I know, spend time with their grandparents maybe sometimes they're the only ones there. Grandparents make them feel comfortable being a mahu.... Grandparents are valuable especially, here in Hawaii. They're very valuable. We don't just toss them in the [old folk's] care home like they do on the mainland.

.... In the old days there were a lot of hula mahu teachers. To teach hula you had to be talented. But nowadays anybody can be a hula teacher, but back then all the lore and the history and the chanting had to be mastered. That's special.... To be a hula teacher in the old sense you were chosen, and you were chosen for quality they could see in you. That, in other words, is mahu. That's maybe like the Indians, they realize that there was a balance. They weren't overly male and they weren't overly female. They were balanced.

In my eyes I see them as balanced, maybe because I experience both sides although I've never been a transvestite. But I feel that I'm very balanced. I feel in the way of my ancestors I'm not overly male and I'm not overly female. I'm balanced. And now my family feels it. Of course they don't know [about my sexuality]. We don't talk about what we do under the blanket.

Q: Do you see a difference in reactions towards them in the different ethnic groups?

Oh yes. My father's Portuguese... [and] he'd refuse even to have me dance hula for fear that I may become mahu. He said only

mahu dance hula.... But the Filipinos still had room for them, they were not outcast like with the Portuguese.... My father's brother, because his hair was longer to his shoulder, he was kicked out of the house.

[His mother and her brothers, ethnic Filipino-Navajo-Japanese born in Hawaii, who were hula dancers, took him secretly to learn hula.] To my mother's family I was like a little Japanese doll in a cage on display, always well taken care of.... My mother's mother always had a mahu boy around. He wasn't dressed like a girl but he was a mahu pretty loud. My uncles used to tease him, but my grandmother said don't tease him. My grandmother just accepted him and he really pulled to my grandmother. He had a place to come visit us and he was welcomed. I think he liked the attention or he wouldn't have kept coming back. He always had a place at the table. My father's family would not permit that into the house... My mother's father would never say 'Oh I don't want that boy in the house.' He took him in and enjoyed him. What he was, was what he was. Only the Portuguese got problems over that.

The Hawaiian mahus I know, their grandparents accepted them. Their parents took a little time, because they were more exposed to the western culture about 'what was right and what was wrong.' The grandparents feel that a child is heading to become a mahu and they just accept it, whereas a parent would try to mold the child, and when it just doesn't fit the mold they get all upset. In Hawaiian families, people that I know [who are mahu] always have no problem with the grandmother and the grandfather. With his own parents it might take a little bit more time, but they eventually accept it.

My cousins used to tease me because I was always with my grandparents. My grandmother is part Navajo, and she knew that I was a sensitive child, not sensitive emotionally but I had a special gift from her father who was a Navajo medicine man. She said that my Navajo great grandfather never spoke much of his homeland but he did say that there was room for mahus. He didn't discourage it, he just looked beyond that and he linked up with a mahu child. I was born just three months after he died, so my mother's family believe that his soul went directly into me. Maybe that's why my grandmother took such good care of me and, you know, I was a little soft but you know that didn't matter to my Mom. To my father I think it did, and that bothered me cause I always wanted his attention. But he always pulled to my younger brother who was very rugged and was a hunter. Whereas I was into song and music and combing my grandmother's hair. It was only two years ago

when I decided well my father has to take me [as I am] and then I stopped blaming myself.

.... We had a boy in high school who was mahu and his brother was mahu too, but they could always come over to our house. My mother had female butchie friends come over to the house. My father would not talk to them, to the butchies.

.... My mother never told me 'You're not supposed to go and have these kinds of feelings, you're not supposed to go and mess with boys' and stuff like that.

RELIGION: I was born Catholic. Being a Catholic is just more ritualistic, I mean something you did out of habit. You go in and pray, you put on your rosary and every year you march around your church or something with this and that. Nobody paid attention to all the things being said. I don't know if things like homosexuality came up in the church. But Jehovah's Witnesses are very strong on all aspects [of morality]. They were the first to make me aware of that word homosexuality was wrong and that was something God detested, and when you die you'd be resurrected. They really made me scared of a lot of things I was thinking about. Even to pick up a crechet needle to crochet [made me think] well maybe fine, I'm going to become a homosexual. So I never do that. I always pulled toward the more domestic things but I just was afraid. Everything I was doing, should something hit me, a thought or something, or an urge, I thought, oh wow, god knows everything you're thinking. Yeah, religion plays a big part. It can either help you or it can push you into a dark hole and you're afraid. And you'd end up further back in the closet. Sometimes Christian religion pushes you way back in the closet. You're going to kill yourself, or you're going to stand up with a very dark outlook on everything.

.... In high school I had a mahu friend, but when I became Jehovah Witness I just stayed away from everything that I thought might make me up to being a homosexual.

.... In Molokai a few years ago the mahus organized a mahu beauty pageant to support a hula halau, but some white fundamentalists on the island started yelling and tried to stop it. Christianity is one thing, but being a white person has something about having this imperialistic thing about wanting to go and change everything and offer 'this is what's good for you.'....

## YOUNG MALE HAWAIIAN HOMOPHOBIA TODAY

.... Young Hawaiian local men today get defensive about homosexuality because today it's so much peer pressure coming through that you have to be macho, macho, macho. I think that's an item from the Western world of this macho thing. In the old days the men had their jobs and the females had their jobs, but no such thing as MACHO, MACHO, MACHO that was encouraged. You get to the point with it where you lose yourself. You should never lose contact with yourself. And sometimes in the overtly macho ones, they lose contact with themselves. So they do [homophobic] things because that's what is expected of them. You know the local boys, the bruddas, they have that. The more traditional Hawaiians, raised in the isolated valleys, are more in contact with themselves..... [If these young machos could] live in a remote area they could have the old ways of their grandparents. If they're in tune with themselves it's not a threat having a mahu friend. I can walk with a mahu friend, though I pray to god that my [homophobic Portuguese] father don't drive by, but I'm not afraid of having mahu friends.... I'm not macho because I've been with my grandparents and I'm more like my grandfather than my father.

## MAHU IDENTITY AS QUEEN

Q: Why don't some Hawaiian mahus want to be called 'mahu' but instead prefer to be called 'queen'?

In past decades many Hawaiians did not want to be identified as a Hawaiian. They tried everything else, but Hawaiian. Because with Hawaii comes culture and natives, and they did not want to identify with that. They were put down so much for it that they did not want any Hawaiian label on them. Maybe that's why some mahus want to be called queens instead, because a mahu implied that they were Hawaiians and they don't want to be looked upon as Hawaiians.

## CHILDHOOD SEXUAL EXPERIMENTATION

My mother had me when she was 16, and my grandmother kept having kids when she was in her 30s. So I had uncles who were my age. I had two uncles younger than me. When we were in intermediate school, you know at the time when their bodies were developing, so I guess they were inquisitive and you know....

When we lived at our grandmother's house, our uncles taught us kids how to do all these things. One uncle would have his favorite [kid] and everybody would have to pair up when we went into the mountains. You were on his back, and he was responsible for you.

well the uncle that I was hooked up with, we got along real well. The chemistry went well together, so we always paired up whenever we went out. I was always with that uncle. I was very young and I remember um, it was like a game. I never got that it was mahu or homosexual, it was just a game and from the time I was young you know it was something that goes on. And when you get older you feel, oh well... It happened to some others in the family too. We don't look back at it and say 'oh my, you know you need [psychological] attention because you abused the child.' It was never an abuse, because if you never wanted to do it, they never said you better do it or else I'm going to tell your parents. Like they do on Geraldo [television show]. You know it was a game and on top of that you got special attention, so a lot of boys experiment.

Some in my generation when we were growing up, when it was our turn to take care of children the same thing happened. It goes on again, but it's not like you force anybody. It's a game, and you're showing special attention to this child. You had that kind of attention you were shown. When I became a Jehovah Witness I said to myself 'Oh my, all this that happened was wrong.' But after I left religion I knew that's just the way the family went, and we accept it. It's part of our field of experience. At the end you look back and you wouldn't be the same should these things have not had happened. So you know these things helped mold me in certain ways. I can cope because that's how somebody must have introduced it to them and they must have introduced it to us and we introduced it to the next, you know, but it's never forced....

When we were young my uncle and I were in a bunk bed and we were playing with each other under the blanket, we were grabbing each other's penis like that, he's much older than me.

.... Because local families are big extended families, they probably have some kind of [cousins or uncles] playing under the blanket, because that's probably what happens mostly in a big family. There's the concept that maybe they did something that bonded them because you know that uncle of mine, we never talk about it, but of all my uncles I'm closest to him because of that bonding. And there was a cousin younger than me, we had that same bonding. I'm more like his older brother, or his father even. At times he's like my child. I'll do anything for him. I'll outrightly spoil him.... I was spoiled by this one uncle, so the word 'aikane' was a concept I could click onto, because me and my uncle went to the mountain and we never came back without touching each other [sexually].