

# Nā Mea Kaua

## THE ART OF WAR



Master weapons crafter Umi Kai helps keep Hawaiian warrior culture alive by revealing beauty in the tools of death

By Sterling Kini Wong

Master Hawaiian weapons crafter Umi Kai holds up a weapon called leiomanō iki, an eight-inch wood instrument shaped like a small paddle and lined with seven razor-sharp tiger-shark teeth. The weapon's smooth finish and rich wood grain make it an art piece worthy of display in a gallery, but the beauty of the leiomanō belies its deadly function.

Kai, who is one of just a few Hawaiian weapons crafters remaining of a once vibrant warrior culture, explains that the leiomanō (lei of shark's teeth) was used in battle to sever an opponent's arteries. "You'd want to hit across the neck, under the arm, behind the leg or across the belly in order to disable your opponent," he says.

In traditional Hawaiian society, in which the two paths to achieve power were genealogy and war, the relationship between a warrior and his weapon was such that Hawaiians would name their instruments out of respect. "Weapons were likened to a father or brother," says Kai. "The warrior depended upon it; if it didn't perform for him that was his life."

In contemporary society, the role of Hawaiian weapons has diminished to almost a nostalgic art form, relegated to museums and galleries. However, Kai is among a select few who are trying to keep the Hawaiian warrior culture alive, blurring the distinction between artisan and practitioner. "The whole idea behind practicing an art is not to have it put in a glass case, on the wall or in a vault," Kai says, "but to have them out where people can look at them and handle them if they wish, so that the culture can come back to life."

A member of the lua (Hawaiian martial arts) school Pā Ku'i-a-Lua, Kai has focused on creating weapons and poi pounders for the last 20 years. He honed his craft working alongside Hawaiian culture expert Kahauanu Lake, master woodcrafter Wright Bowman Sr. and many lua experts such as Richard Paglinawan, Mitchell Eli and Jerry Walker.

Kai says that the art of crafting Hawaiian weapons has changed markedly since ancient days. While ancient Hawaiian weapons were very simple

in design but very effective in execution, he explains, modern weapons have more decoration, such as notching and knobs at the end of the handles. Moreover, he says, his comprehensive arsenal of weapons, which include daggers, slings, spears, clubs and strangling cords, would have been rare in ancient times, when warriors usually possessed just one favorite weapon.

The decline of native plants and the introduction of electric tools have also had a pronounced effect. Hard woods such as kauila and uhiuhi once favored by weapon makers have become so scarce that practitioners generally use softer woods, such as koa, as a substitute. Instead of using the fibers of the olonā shrub for cordage, contemporary practitioners use a close relative in hemp. Tiger-shark teeth, prized for their sharpness, durability and the connotation of the shark's man-eating characteristics, are bought from Mexico for \$5-\$8 apiece, depending on the season. And while ancient Hawaiians used rock adzes, coral, the skin of



sharks and certain fish and stones to work the wood, contemporary practitioners use band saws and electric sanders.

At a recent workshop at UH Mānoa's art department, Kai taught more than 20 students how to make a leiomanō iki and a niho oki, an L-shaped utility knife with a single shark's tooth as a blade. Maile Andrade, an assistant art professor at UH,



(Above) Umi Kai uses the jaw of a tiger shark to explain that the predator's durable front teeth are preferred for weapons. (Left) Kai watches a student drilling a hole in a shark's tooth, which will be used to thread cordage. Electric tools have had a significant impact on the crafting of weapons.

Photos: Sterling Kini Wong

said that she brought Kai to do a weapon demonstration because she thought it was important to balance the Western art forms prevalent at the university with a traditional Hawaiian art. Andrade said that her students will use the niho oki in the Hawaiian fiber class she teaches.

"This shows that our art is just as valid as Western art," Andrade said. "I consider him to be of a higher caliber than other artisans like painters, because his art form has a function and he practices it." ■

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Legislature would need to occur before formal federal recognition is granted, but these legislatures would need to approve the later-negotiated transfers of land, resources and governmental authority. The language introducing Section 7(c)(4)(A) — which says that the Secretary of Interior's certification is to be made "[w]ithin the context of the future negotiations" for the transfer of land, resources and governmental responsibility — simply reinforces the understanding that such negotiations should begin upon certification. The words "future negotiations" make it clear that the negotiations are to take place *after* the certification.

• *Do Native Hawaiians relinquish, abandon or "settle" any of their claims in the Akaka Bill?* No. Those advocating independence assert that the Akaka Bill will undercut their efforts. But Section 8(c)(1) of the revised Akaka Bill explicitly states that it does not involve the settlement or relinquishment of any claims: "Nothing in this Act serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States."

In its revised "findings" in Section 2(13), the bill now reaffirms that "the Native Hawaiian people never directly relinquished to the United States their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people over their national lands, either through the Kingdom of

Hawai'i or through a plebiscite or referendum."

Working to implement the procedures that would be established under the Akaka Bill would not involve "acquiescing" to the illegal overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i in 1893. It is a historical fact that the kingdom was overthrown illegally in 1893 and that lands were taken without the consent of or compensation to Native Hawaiians. The Akaka Bill would begin the process of providing some long-overdue compensation.

After the Native Hawaiian governing entity is established and is granted formal federal recognition, those favoring independence are still free to promote their cause. But

even if Hawai'i were to become independent at some time in the future, the Native Hawaiian people would be a numerical minority in the islands, and they would still need something like the Akaka Bill to protect their unique claims to their land and resources.

The Akaka Bill may not have everything one might have hoped for, but it is a good solid bill designed to protect existing programs and to begin the process of addressing and resolving the long-festering claims of the Native Hawaiian people. If Congress passes this Bill, it will open a new era for Native Hawaiians and lead to a better and more prosperous Hawai'i for everyone. ■