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## The Falling Teardrops of Kalaupapa

**Pacific Memories and Visions**

January 28, 2012 - Ray Tsuchiyama

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*"Kalaupapa used to be a devil's island, a gateway to hell, worse than a prison. Today it is a gateway to heaven. There is spirituality to the place. All the sufferings of those whose blood has touched the land – the effect is so powerful even the rain cannot wash it away."*

Quote from the late Bernard Punikai'a, multi-talented composer and Hansen's disease activist

Last week I had a very moving experience of listening to a duo – Stephen English and Dennis Kamakahi – sing songs from their new joint effort CD album entitled "Waimaka Helelei" (Falling Teardrop).

Last summer the two Hawai'i composers met, and as if in a chance encounter guided by Fate, they became aware of their personal, separate linkages to Kalaupapa and the isolated victims of Hansen's disease. Dennis heard Stephen's composition "Na Pua O Kalaupapa", and this song was the trigger for more songs, and eventually led to the album's release.

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As anybody who has a tiny knowledge of Hawaiian history knows, the Kalaupapa settlement is in an isolated area of north Molokai, and under a decree by King Kamehameha V in the mid-19th century, the rugged peninsula became the site where Hansen's disease patients were forcibly taken to live out their lives in their own community (and could never return to the "outside" world, a kind of banning).

The village is at the base of the highest sea cliffs in the world, dropping about 3,315 feet into the Pacific Ocean, a natural barrier to prevent escape – it is no wonder that King Kamehameha V chose this site. The laws regarding the isolation of Hansen Disease patients were not changed by the Hawai'i legislature until the late 1960s, coinciding with the American civil rights struggle, Hawai'i ethnic and nationalist movements (Kokua Hawai'i), preservation of Hawaiian communities and lifestyles (Kalama Valley), the Hawaiian language, music and cultural renaissance (Dennis Kamakahi's career would flourish with Eddie Kamae and the iconic group the Sons of Hawai'i that would transform Hawaiian music within Hawai'i, and led its now growing global influence).

Included in the duo's CD album were two songs by Hansen's disease activist Bernard Punikai'a, who was a close friend of Dennis and Stephen. After being diagnosed with Hansen's disease when he was six years old, Bernard Punaikai'a was moved to Kalaupapa when he was eleven and cried for many years for his mother. Later, when the laws regarding Hansen's disease patients and isolation changed, he came to live on Oahu (imagine the Honolulu city lights, highways, shopping malls, Waikiki Beach -- to an individual raised in Kalaupapa). In a fantastic transformation, he became a multi-talented figure, writing songs, a political leader, a focal point of fighting for the dignity of human life, what we would now define as "Human Rights".

He would pass away in 2009, when he was 78 years old with a wide range of admirers, friends, supporters, including Governor Neil Abercrombie and his wife.\*

It is amazing (and disconcerting to any U.S. citizen living in a

democratic society) to look back to the enlightened year 1978 when the State government tried to evict the residents of Hale Mohalu, a residential treatment facility for Hansen's disease patients in Pearl City (in central Oahu) and move them to Le'ahi Hospital. Led by leaders Bernard Punikai'a and Clarence Naia\*\* (there were now multi-layers: Hawaiian rights, sustainable communities, majority-minority relations, as well as a support group of citizens without Hansen's disease), the residents would endure a slow-moving siege; the State shut off electricity and water to Hale Mohalu, and in the cruelest act, even tried to withhold patient medication. The struggle lasted for five stressful years, when the State moved the last 18 residents and supporters. The State later bull-dozed Hale Mohalu. So the Kalaupapa story did not end on the Molokai peninsula; there was another turbulent early 21st century phase in the State capital, the powerful city of Honolulu where King Kamehameha V presided over his Royal government in the 1860s.

Interestingly, during this five-year struggle period a younger Stephen Inglis with his parents spent many weekends at Hale Mohalu. He was to recall his days at Hale Mohalu later when he visited Kalaupapa in his 30s – a full circle and closure regarding his childhood and adult experiences with Hansen's Disease patients, their isolation, discrimination, and their fight for human dignity.

The title song "Waimaka Helelei" (Falling Teardrop) lyrics and melody was written by Dennis Kamakahi. The sad song is about the "hardships of Kalaupapa and the afflicted who had to face a lifetime of segregation from family and loved ones". Dennis' voice is full of compassion, evoking the horrible separation of children from parents, mothers and fathers from their families.

The other fascinating song is "Eia a'e O Damiana Ka Makua O Kakou" (Here is Damien, Our Father) – written in joyous appreciation and love for the famous Father Damien at Kalaupapa. The lyrics and melody (it was first sung by a 14-year old lead tenor) were composed by the Kalawao settlement band around 1880 (the village was a microcosm of the "outside" society, including an excellent brass band, taught by the German

bandmaster Henri Berger). Although the Hawaiian words were written down, the melody was lost – until Bernard Punikai'a re-created the melody in 2000, and then the duo recorded the tribute to the beloved Damiana in the album last year.

“Waimaka Helelei” is a moving collection of songs, a re-affirmation of humanity, a lesson to us now and future generations to never forget this terrible treatment of a segregated group for a long century ironically in a beautiful place: the sense of loss. The duo has created an uplifting musical album, to faith, redemption, life.

Thank you, Stephen English and Dennis Kamakahi.

*\*As Father Damien was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 2009 (Father Damien Day is celebrated in Hawai'i on April 15), perhaps a few decades from now there will be a "Bernard Punikai'a Day", when all children in Hawaii schools learn about the treatment of people with Hansen's disease in Hawaiian history, and how they fought for human dignity. On the morning of the Day, they shall repeat three times: "We are all Bernard Punikai'a. Bernard Punikai'a is all of us."*

*\*\*Clarence Naia was born in Kalaupapa; his parents had Hansen's disease. Since he did not have Hansen's disease as a baby, he was taken from his parents and raised by his grandmother on Maui. Later in adulthood he was diagnosed with Hansen's disease and he lived at Kalaupapa and later at Hale Mohalu, until his group's ouster. When he passed away in 2006, according to his final wishes his body was buried in his birthplace -- Kalaupapa.*

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