



2021-2022
Tony
Quagliano
Poetry Award
Winner

Lee A.
Tonouchi

Imagined 1903 Okinawan Help Wanted Ad

Coming Soon Jinrui Kan*

Wanted

Performance artists for interactive captivity exhibit.

Okinawan Females with primitive tattoos needed.

Excessive facial and body hair preferred.

Must like working with people in close confinement.

Competitive wages.

We will match any pay (if) given to
Korean, Ainu, or Taiwanese aborigine entertainers.

Meals will be provided.

Must be able to catch food that is thrown.

Looking for job security?

Why not live, work, play. . . in a cage!

*I first read about the Jinrui Kan from scholar Wesley Uyenten. In his essay "Okinawans on Mainland Japan: Discrimination, *Imeeji*, and Identity," published in *Reflections on the Okinawan Experience: Essays commemorating 100 years of Okinawan immigration*, Uyenten tells, "We can link the image of Okinawa being exotic and different to the idea that Okinawans were 'inferior.' One of the most deplorable examples of this was the *Jinrui kan* (native people exhibition) at the Fifth Osaka Industrial Exposition in 1903. For this exhibition, exhibition organizers put Ainu, Taiwanese aborigine, Korean, and Okinawan women on display for Japanese to gawk at their 'primitiveness'" (49).

How You Can Tell One Okinawan House

I jokingly call 'em da Okinawan flag
cuz seem like every older Okinawan
living in Hawai'i
get that same pokey pokey plant in their front yard.
Da one with da pineapple texture
cylindrical trunk
and da leaves that fan out
like one angry porcupine.

Small kid time
when me and my cousins used to play tag
at my Kaimuki Grandma's house,
she used to warn us,
"No go by da pokey pokey plant.
Abunai, da plant
poison."

So I always wondered
how come dey wen plant that for den?
Every oddah plant wuz safe
like da orchids or anthuriums
you raised so no need buy flower
for go grave.
Or wuz someting we could all eat
like mangos, avocados, tangerines,
or Okinawan sweet potatoes.

Wuz just THAT plant
that wuz weird.

Flash forward
to when I go to Hawai'i's Plantation Village
in Waipahu
for my daughter's field trip.
Dey stay showing us all da different
houses based on da ethnicities
like da Portuguese house and da Chinese house.
Das when I laugh when I see da next one
cuz I already know
it's da Okinawan house
without having have to even go inside.

Teachers ask if I can tell from da architecture.
I say, "No, get da Okinawan flag das why!"

Curious, I see da pokey pokey plant
get one plaque.
I always wondered what da ting wuz called.

Cuz my grandma called 'em da pokey pokey plant,
but I figure that no can be da official name.

I learn it's called da Sago Palm or Sotetsu,
one plant that grows wild on top hillsides
and stay native to Okinawa.

An'den it says da seeds and stalks wuz eaten
during times of famine.

I thought wuz poison, but. I tink to myself.

So later on I do more research
and I find out IT IS!
SUPER POISON in fact,
especially if eaten raw.
But with proper preparation
it's possible for cut 'em,
wash 'em, and dry 'em
for leech out all da toxins.
But if not done right
da ting can cause
internal bleeding, liver damage
and even
death.

Das means so sad wuz,
that in Okinawa
aftah da war,
everyting wuz all destroyed
so da Okinawan people wuz so hungry
dey had no choice,
but for eat
da plant dey knew
for be extremely
deadly.

So I guess
aftah Okinawans moved to Hawai'i,
aftah dey got out of da plantations,
after dey got middle class jobs,
aftah dey bought their own houses,
it made sense to me now, why dey would plant that.

On one hand it says, we must nevah forget da hardship
our people had for endure.

On da oddah hand it also signifies, Eh we made it.
Dis house that we worked hard for buy
is one Okinawan house
and DIS is our flag.

Okinawans and Salt

I.

My Aunty Jane
loves for make
and eat
Okinawan food,
watch Okinawan programs,
and read all kine books about
Okinawa.
She even travelled all around
da world,
but da one
place she nevah went wuz
Okinawa
even though
she 100% Okinawan.
And I could nevah
figgah out why.

II.

She told me,
"Aftah you go funeral
when you come home
you supposed to throw
da salt
by da door
before
you go inside
da house.
Das Okinawan style.
Das how
you keep all
da evil spirits away."

"You no do dat?"
she scolded.

"If you no more salt
den aftah da funeral
before you go home
make shua

you stop
at da store."

"Why? For buy salt," I asked.

"No,
so da ghost follow you to da store
and not to your house."

III.

When my faddah died
my Aunty Jane came
our house
and threw salt
all around
da outside.
Around da whole house.
And not just
by da front door.

I felt like asking
if dat wuz for in case da ghost
decide for come through da windows,
or if da ghost realizes
aye, he can just walk through da wall
cuz he's one freakin ghost?

I wuz getting kinda upset
seeing my Aunty pour
so much salt
all around
our house
without even asking
me
if wuz okay.

Cuz what if I nevah like keep
my dad's ghost away.

Cuz what if I wuzn't ready
for let go.

IV.

We wuz going
our daughter's
preschool orientation
and I nevah tink nahting
until my wife
brought 'em up,
da fack dat da school we chose
stay right by
Pearl Harbor
wea couple thousand
American soldiers died
during WWII,
couple thousand
potential
ghosts.

"What you tink your Aunty Jane
going make us do?" she asked.
"We gotta make our daughter
start carrying around salt?"

Joking around I wen go tell,
"Well, da school stay
twenty feet from da water
and das all salt water.
Das good enough, no?"

And das when it hit me,
in Okinawa
in da Battle of Okinawa
one hundred thousand
Okinawan civilians
wen lose their lives
before wuz their time
for go.

And so
now I geff 'em.
Must be
my Aunty Jane's love
for Okinawa
jus no can beat out
her fear
of ghosts.

McGarrett Would Go

When Steve McGarrett
went Afghanistan
and defeated
da Taliban
das when I thought
Hawaii Five-0
wen go
jump da shark.

But den
had one noddah one
wea McGarrett
had one building
blown up on top him
and somehow
he managed for survive,
escape,
and
save Danno too.

So den it's not
really so hard for believe
da recent episode wea
McGarrett saves
Hawai'i from
total nuclear annihilation.

Cuz in da show
da bad guys had for smuggle
one nuclear warhead
into our state.
But in real life
we just
let
all da nuclear weapons
come and go
through Pearl Harbor
and Local people,
ah we dunno what going on,
cuz nobody really asking,
but not like dey
would tell us
anyway.

Da only way
I know
is cuz one time
I wuz at one party
and my friend's friend's cousin
came straight from
his submarine,
so for make da conversation
I wen go ask him,
"I dunno if you allowed
for disclose such informations,
but I just curious,
does your vessel have
how shall we say 'em,
nuclear
capabilities?"

And all casual
he wuz all like, "Oh hell yeah!"
Like to him it wuz
da coolest ting in da world.

Das nice for know
I tinkin
da fuck dat get
one nuclear bomb
about two miles from
my house.

Hawai'i's Most Dangerous Job

Hawai'i get all kine jobs
das abunai.

We get da regular
dangerous kine
like
Policeman
Fireman
Lifeguard.

But everyplace get dat kine.

What most people dunno
da scariest job in Hawai'i
stay
Landscaping Technician.

So sad li'dat.
I read 'em in da papah
two braddahs
wen get hurt
jus
from cutting grass.

See, these two guys
wuz jus regular
civilian contractors
trimming da weeds
at da
Makua Military Reservation
when all of a sudden their
weed whacker
wen go bang
some unexploded ordinance.

Talk about
False crack, medi-vac
li'dat.

When asked for comment
on top dis tragedy
da Army spokesman
had dis for say,

"the person closer had more injury,
and the (other person) was a little bit farther away
and his injuries were less. . .
but they were both severe."¹

I dunno, but sometimes when you say stuff
das jus so obvious
it jus comes out sounding
kinda dumb
and little bit insensitive too.

Like in da follow up article dat said,
"pending the completion of an investigation. . .
The Army said
it has stopped
all grass-cutting. . ." ²

Fo' really?

¹Cole, William. "2 Hurt in Makua Valley Explosion." *Honolulu Star Advertiser*. 7 April 2015: B1, B3. Print.

² Cole, William. "Man in Ordinance Blast Still in Hospital." *Honolulu Star Advertiser*. 10 April 2015: A23. Print.

Da Normalization of War

One flier for da
Kaneohe Bay Air Show
at MCBH
says going get
da Navy Blue Angels,
da U.S. Navy's premier
flight demonstration team

along with
rides for da keiki!

On da bottom
it even
invites
schools
for schedule one visit.

In my mind
I imagine

what future

shows might include

Osprey Petting Zoo?

Throw da Grenade at da Milk Jugs?

Bumper Tanks?

And Dance Dance Wartime Revolution
where if you step one top
one landmine
your time is up.

Okinawan Proverb

Okinawa means “rope in the open sea.”

When my Great Grandparents came Hawai'i
all dey knew wuz Uchinaguchi.

Some Okinawan trickled down to
my Grandparents
and even less
to my parents.
Hardly anyting
wuz passed
down
to
me.

All the Ryukyu islands put toggedah
is said for resemble one long rope in da ocean.

In my research of old
Okinawan proverbs
I come across one
dat sez

*Nmarijima nu kutuba wasshii nee
kuni n wasshiin.*

If you forget your native tongue,
das means your forget your native country.

If all da people maintain their grip on da rope
den da connection between those people going stay strong.

Aftah reading dat I come gung ho
for visit da homeland
I nevah knew,
but when I talk story
wit my Uncle Mac
who goes Okinawa planny
he sez each trip
he sees less and less
old people
and he hears
less and less

Uchinaguchi.
He sez Okinawan
no mo' any cachet;
most young people
jus no see
any use
in learning 'em.

Once everyone le-la goes da rope
da rope falls into da ocean and becomes lost at sea.

Uchinaaguchi Paradox

College time I wanted for learn Uchinaaguchi.

So I asked my Maui Grandma if she
could teach me da Okinawan language.
She said she used to talk ‘em all da time
back when she worked plantation
and lived with her in-laws,
my great-grandparents who came direck
from Okinawa.

She can talk fluent Uchinaaguchi she said
but she can only make ‘em come out
if
da oddah person talks
fluent Uchinaaguchi back
to her.

Small kine dilemmas, no?

I can only learn Uchinaaguchi
if I spoke fluent Uchinaaguchi,
but if I spoke fluent Uchinaaguchi
I wouldn’t need for learn.

As why hod.

Hajichi: Tattoos and Diamonds is Forevah

I cannot tell
if her hands shaking
cuz she nervous
dat going hurt
or if it's cuz
of da forbiddenness
of her ack,
dat she's here despite
her fiance's wishes.

Like us,
her fiance's one Local
Okinawan too
but he's not down
wit da whole idea.
He said getting da tops
of her hands
tattooed is barbaric,
and he equated da practice
to branding
and treating women
like possessions.
Ironically,
he suggested he
could create one design
for her
instead.

I come involved
when she calls me up
and asks me if I
know anyting
about hajichi.
I tell her I no tink
it's about da husband
doing 'em to da wife
saying you belong to me,
and I share wit her
da Okinawan myth
my grandma toll me,
da one about da princess

who marked her hands
so dat her pirate capture,
whose personal preference
wuz for hands
sans anykine markings,
would find her repulsive
and set her free.

I tell her
to me, da story's
about how da princess
uses her ingenuity
for defeat one more mighty-er
enemy.

Togeddah we
do sa'more research,
wea we learn right around da turn
of da twentieth century
da Japan government
using military force
invaded
and took control
of independent Okinawa.
As time went on, our ancestors
loss control ova
their government,
their lands,
their culture.

An'den da Japan government
banned
da shaman women of da villages,
who did da hajichi tattoos,
from practicing their artform,
in order for allow for one more
homogeneous culture
and easier assimilation
of Okinawans into Japan.

Some Okinawans believed
dat da hajichi ban
wuz one excuse
for round up and imprison
da Okinawan women elders
and break up
their power.

Yet,
despite da fuck
dat their culture wuz one crime
many Okinawan women
still continued for get
their hajichi,
as their act
of
resistance.

As my friend passes da photo
of her great grandma's hajichi
to da tattoo artist.
I tell her she lucky she get
dat photo.
I ask her
one more time if she sure.
If she sure, she sure.
Cuz what if her husband-to-be
calls off da wedding?
I remind her dat both
tattoos and diamonds
is forevah.

She looks at da back
of her hand
as she reminds me
dat even in Okinawa
hardly get any women
wit hajichi anymore.
So even though her fiance
might not like how it looks,
it doesn't matter
what he thinks,
because to her
it's
beautiful,
it's very beautiful.

I note da steadiness,
in her hand,
as she extends her arm
and flips her wrist
so dat da top of her hand
faces outward.

I note da steadiness
in her voice
when she declares,
“If he
don’t like it,
he
can talk
to da hand.”

Palms Face Up

I ask my Grandma hakum
in every family picture
Obaban stay sitting down
with her hands on her lap
wit her palms face up.

Grandma sez
when Obaban came Hawai'i
she wuz shame
cuz none of da oddah women
had dat kine
Okinawan tattoos
on da backs of their hands.
Das why whenevah she went out
no mattah how hot,
she always
wore gloves.

Obaban even toll Grandma
dat when she she ma-ke time
make shua her hands
get da glove on
when she stay in da casket.
Grandma sez
she made her promise.

I ask Grandma
if Obaban wen stay in Okinawa
den would she have been
not shame?

Obaban wuz probably
embarassed
before she came wuz,
Grandma tells.
Because back in Okinawa
everyting Okinawa
wuz coming shame.

Grandma tells me
she heard stories
dat in da schools ova dea
if dey caught you speaking
Uchinaguchi
you had for wear
da hogen fuda sign
around your neck
as your punishment
marking da fack
da way you spoke
wuz inferior.

I still no get it.
How can? I ask.
How can be shame Okinawa
when you
IN
Okinawa?

“When Japan took over
Okinawa
dey teach
Okinawa way
not da right way.
Dey teach,
you gotta be like
da mainland.”

“Like da ‘mainland,’”
I repeat.
And das when
all of a sudden
I can relate li’dat,
you know da kine.