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Hawaiians revive Makahiki in Makua Valley

By William Cole

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Members of the Hawaiian community yesterday and today celebrated a return to the old ways in Makua Valley with an overnight stay and offerings for the close of the Makahiki season — a tradition not seen for generations in the Wai'anae Coast valley.

"This is probably the first time in about 180 years that this Makahiki ceremony has been celebrated in Makua," said Wai'anae resident William Aila Jr., who has relatives who lived and are buried in the valley.

The disappearance of the kapu system first put an end to the celebration, Aila said. That was followed by the military takeover of the valley at the outbreak of World War II for target practice.

But the October settlement of a lawsuit with the Army allowing training to resume after a three-year absence also has meant greater community involvement in the valley, and the community is looking ahead at more to come.

The guarantee of community access two days a month and the opportunity for two overnight stays each year came out of the agreement, said Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund attorney David Henkin.

The settlement also calls for the 25th Infantry Division (Light) to submit for approval to the Department of the Army a plan to remove unexploded ordnance within 1,000 meters of Farrington Highway and within a year, identify "high-priority" areas for ordnance clearance with the intent of increasing access to cultural sites.

"This was unprecedented, to say the least, for the Army to open the gates of Makua to the community on a regular basis, and open the gates of Makua for overnight access," Henkin said.

"So it's really a major step forward in re-establishing cultural access to the valley."

Earthjustice represented the community group Malama Makua in its lawsuit seeking a comprehensive analysis of an environmental impact statement regarding more than a half century of military bombardment in Makua, which means "parent" in Hawaiian. Many consider the valley to be sacred.

The Army suspended training in the valley in 1998 following a series of fires. Company-size, combined-arms exercises re-commenced in October with the settlement — under which the Army agreed to complete an environmental impact statement within three years.

As part of the process, the Army will engage in a "scoping" period to determine public concerns and shape the inquiry it will undertake in Makua.

The Army yesterday said dates for public scoping meetings have not yet been set. First, a "Notice of Intent" for the impact study must be published in the Federal Register, officials said. That notice still is in the hands of Department of the Army staff.



Makua Valley is where Hawaiians strive to retain their traditional rites while the Army uses the land for live-fire training.

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Since returning to training at Makua, the Army already has discovered and destroyed a number of World War II-era munitions, including one 100-pound bomb; ten 81mm mortars; one 2.75 mm rocket; two 20 mm TPT rounds; and one 75 mm round.

An 81 mm unexploded mortar recently fired also was destroyed, and two other 81 mm rounds are scheduled to be detonated, the Army said.

The Army said it has two equally important obligations: ensuring soldiers are ready for battle by conducting realistic training, and conducting that training in a way that protects the environment.

"The Army continues to respect and honor the Hawaiian community's desire to conduct private cultural activities in Makua Military Reservation," it said in a statement.

The Makahiki in Makua opened in mid-December with the first overnight stay. About 100 community members took part, and about half that number stayed overnight, Aila said. About the same number are participating in the closing celebration that began with preparations Thursday night.

The ancient Makahiki season began with the temporary retiring of Ku, the god of war, and reign of Lono, god of peace, over the Islands.

Yesterday saw the preparation of ho'okupu, or offerings, to be placed on bamboo or rock altars in Makua Valley and the two valleys flanking it, Kahana Haiki, and Koiahi, Aila said.

The offerings include fresh water, bark, kukui, pig, 'aweoweo (a red fish), taro, breadfruit, sweet potato and banana — each having an attribute and connection to Lono.

"This is part of everyday life, the changing of the season, and also the changing of the mindset of Hawaiian people to one of peace — wars were stopped at this time of year," Aila said. "It (the celebration) is very important because it brings back into focus the role of sharing, and that it's important to treat the land well. And more importantly, we get to live the culture."

The Army, meanwhile, has conducted 10 combined arms live-fire exercises.

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