

Scorpion Soup

(From my unpublished autobiography *Growing up Kanaka*)

Setting: Ahualoa, Hamakua, Hawaii during the early 1940s.

As children, we Big Island *kanakas* (local islanders) vied to determine who could eat the weirdest thing. We regularly ate raw shellfish, raw fish, chewed on raw crab legs and munched on almost everything that grew in our environment. However, that was our normal diet. We also used those to turn the visiting haole (non-islanders) stomachs. It was a delight to watch them pucker up or retch.

Oh yes, we did delight in tormenting haoles. It was a defensive reaction. Haoles always looked down on us because we spoke Pidgin. We were ignorant in their eyes. Brainless backwoods slobs, somewhat less than human. In response, we took our revenge. We did things like introducing them to the kanaka "soap plant". The leaves of the weed would work up a lather in water when rubbed on your flesh. Harmless, you say. Devious, from our point of view. About ten minutes after you lathered, your skin began to itch, and itch, and itch. Poison oak and ivy are mild by comparison. We watched them suffer for a while then offered the kanaka cure. The iodized salt from a tide pool adequately cleansed their flesh. We never let them suffer long. It wasn't the kanaka style.

Another sadistic ploy was to take them for a walk at night with flashlights, admonishing them to "shine the light just in front of your feet and slowly move along so as not to step on the kiawe thorns". After a few minutes, we would have them turn and train the light behind them. Al-right! Following along the path was a host of vermin. Roaches, scorpions, centipedes and so forth, all following the light. The haoles shrieked and stood petrified with their feet illuminated and covered with bugs. When we decided to rescue them, we had them move the light, along with its parade of vermin. However, the best thing my sister Mabel and I came up with was "scorpion soup".

We were entertaining some relatives from the Mainland who had two particularly obnoxious brats about our ages, one male and one female. Away from their parents, they had the audacity to call us stupid slobs and our house a filthy pigsty. So, we devised a unique revenge. Although I executed the scam, it was my sister Mabel's idea. We cut up a piece of dried candied ginger to look somewhat like a scorpion. I palmed the ginger and took them hunting a kanaka "delicacy". Out of earshot of the adults, I picked the bark off a log and caught a scorpion. If you distract it, you can snatch it up by its tail. Now, with the scorpion held between my thumb and index finger, and the ginger couched in the palm of the same hand, I announced that scorpions were *ono* (delicious). To illustrate, I raised hand above my open mouth and dropped in the ginger while concealing the scorpion behind my palm. The effect was to give them the impression I place

the insect in my mouth. As I rolled the ginger on my tongue, I covertly dropped the scorpion off to one side. I even plucked a bit of ginger from my mouth, stating that you had to nip off the stinger before you ate the raw bug. Both haole brats were appalled. Mabel then insisted that scorpions were delicious but preferred them cooked, saying that it was more civilized. She led the brats into the kitchen, to the pot of my mother's Portuguese soup boiling on the stove, and extracted a piece of cabbage resembling the cooked body of a scorpion. She then swallowed the pseudo-bug.

Shortly thereafter, we sat down to lunch. My mother proudly ladled everyone healthy portions of her soup to the utter horror of the haole brats. Both of them attempted to refuse but their parents glared at the overt insult to the cook. When their father commanded: "Eat!", the boy took a shaky spoonful and stuffed it into his mouth but the girl erupted in tears. She squealed, "They put horrid things in their food", and fled our living room. The boy followed her moments later, apparently to go outside and retch. Their mother apologized profusely and their father assured mine that he was going to tan their hides.

When our exchanged smirks caught my mother's eye, she ushered us out to the back door and insisted we had done something, a claim we innocently denied. Unconvinced, she sent us out back and had our father follow to question and punish us. Alone, Mabel and I confessed immediately, explaining the scam. My father could hardly contain himself. Being kanaka like us, he laughed uproariously.