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DEPARTMENT

Living Ulana

Kumulāʻau Sing and Haunani Balino-Sing carry on the ancient (and difficult) Hawaiian art of ulanaʻie

Story by Lesa Griffith. Photos by Dana Edmunds.

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When Bishop Museum director Sir Peter H. Buck wrote *Arts and Crafts of Hawaii* in 1957, he noted that Hawaiian basketry, or ulana ʻie, was far superior to similar weaving found anywhere else in Polynesia.

It had been so long since Hawaiians had practiced weaving with the rootlets of the ʻieʻie vine, Buck wrote, that "its technical details are no longer known to the oldest Hawaiians" More than sixty years later, a couple from Wahiawā, Oʻahu, have made it their life's work to revive this lost art and pass the knowledge on to students in the hope of keeping this ancient method of weaving alive.

It started twenty-four years ago with a class project. Harold Lloyd Kumulāʻau Sing, a cultural specialist with Kamehameha Schools, asked his ninth grade students to

practice, such as stringing a lei or playing slack key guitar. Wanting to learn something new along with his students, Kumulāʻau chose ulana ʻie because it was so rare at the time; like many other traditional arts, it had declined following Western contact with Hawaiʻi. Kumulāʻau knew of only one person teaching ʻie weaving: Patrick Horimoto, a Japanese American who had single-handedly brought ulana ʻie out of museum cases and restored it as a living art.

A voracious researcher, Horimoto haunted Bishop Museum, examining its examples of baskets and fish traps. He pored over Buck's book, which documents materials, designs and techniques of Hawaiian basketry. He traveled the Pacific, studying the weaving of other cultures and then put all his findings to work: Two mahiole (traditional helmets) he wove are in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. In 2006 he participated in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as part of the program *Carrying Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions*.

Haunani Balino-Sing and Kumulāʻau Sing at Wahiawā Botanical Garden. She holds a kiʻi (image) of the deity Lono, woven from rattan, while he holds two kiʻi of the god Kū woven from the indigenous ʻieʻie vine, also known as wild pandanus.

Horimoto's work inspired Kumulāʻau, and, like Horimoto, he studied any resource he could find in a pre-YouTube world. When his ninth-graders completed their project, he kept going, graduating from loosely woven hīnālea traps (once used to catch wrasses) to finely woven, watertight baskets. He set his sights on eventually weaving a mahiole. By 1999 he was doing ulana ʻie demonstrations at the Hawaiian culture hub, Nā Mea Hawaiʻi, in Kakaʻako. At one of these sessions, when he was presenting a mahiole he'd made, he met a student of Horimoto's, Raymond Nakama.

Kumulāʻau describes Nakama, who died in 2011, as another non-Hawaiian, like Horimoto, who possessed a wealth of cultural knowledge. Nakama worked in wood, bone and stone, along with ʻieʻie. "Raymond took me under his wing, fine-tuned the weaving that I do today and now teach," says Kumulāʻau. "So the lineage goes from Patrick to Raymond to me—and to all the people that we've taught." But the lineage goes further back than that, says Kumulāʻau. "Patrick learned from books and going to Bishop Museum and examining artifacts—you could say that the kūpuna [ancestors] were guiding him," he says.

The lineage, says Kumulāʻau, reaches far beyond even those who actively practice the craft: "Everybody has a lineage of basketry, because all cultures have basketry. We all have an innate skill—we're born with that DNA. That's what we try to do: to help people find that within themselves."

Ulana lauhala—weaving with the leaves of the hala tree—is thriving, thanks to a renaissance that started in the 1990s. Classes are filled with people wanting to make a prized pāpale (hat) that can cost $600 in a store. Hala trees grow everywhere, and these days you don't have to go through the laborious process of gathering and processing the leaves—they're available, ready to weave, online.

The Sings are among the few practitioners in the Islands who weave with ʻieʻie. They've made it their life's work to revive the lost art of

ʻIeʻie, also called the wild pandanus vine, is another

major Hawaiian Islands, but not easily. It likes wet forests on ridges and slopes with lots of canopy, starting at an elevation of almost a thousand feet. It climbs trees and erupts in long green leaves framing a flaming orange flower cluster. In ancient Hawai‘i, ‘ie‘ie leaves and seeds were used for medicine, while its aerial rootlets (called ‘ie) were a crucial material in making all manner of essential objects.

and share their knowledge with students.

Weavers would twine ‘ie in ways more complex than simple over-and-under weaving. They made fish traps of varying sizes and shapes, tailored for the species they were after. Dainty hīna‘i (basket) ‘o‘opu were used to catch gobies and freshwater shrimp from streams, while the largest trap, the cone-shaped ‘ie kala, would be baited with the unicornfish's preferred seaweed. Basketry first developed as a way to protect the valuable gourds that stored poi, then evolved into stand-alone containers for every household use, some woven so finely you can't see daylight between the warps and wefts. Hīna‘i poe-poe (round baskets) held valuables like kapa (bark cloth). Squat hīna‘i ho‘omoe ‘ia were covered containers for storing fish. Ulana ‘ie lies beneath the gold and red feathers of mahiole. ‘Ie‘ie was also crafted into sacred objects like ki‘i akua, sculptural images of Hawaiian gods. Objects woven from ‘ie were used in "all aspects of daily life," says Marques Marzan, an acclaimed fiber artist and the Wayne Pitluck & Judith Pyle Curator for Cultural Resilience at Bishop Museum. "Even Captain James Cook recognized the expertise in the basketry he saw, writing that they were

superior to some European basketry being produced at the time."

Kumulāʻau knows the ʻieʻie plant intimately. There's a patch along Pali Highway, he says, but you need permission to harvest it from the watershed area. It grows in Hālawa valley, too, but because the area lacks a protective canopy, the vine is stunted. "You don't see the vine climbing tall trees—that's what you really need, the aerial rootlet that hangs off the vine." Kumulāʻau clips the rootlets within reach and uses a sickle-shaped tool to cut those higher up. He settles for anything longer than three feet, but there is an ʻieʻie dream scenario: "Sometimes the rootlets are so tall and high up in the trees, they're the length of a telephone pole," says Kumulāʻau. "You grab the vine and do a quick jerk and the whole rootlet comes down." The longer the piece, the more consistent the weave, he says.

Haunani Balino-Sing with ʻieʻie harvested a decade ago from her family's land on Hawaiʻi Island. Gathering the vine is grueling. "You're going through brush, under trees, over trees and other things that fall down in the forest," says Kumulāʻau.

He's come across that scenario a couple of times, and only on Hawaiʻi Island, his preferred ʻieʻie hunting ground. The harvesting can be grueling: muddy trails, relentless mosquitoes, hidden holes in lava fields. On top of that, rapid ʻōhiʻa death—a disease that attacks endemic ʻōhiʻa trees—has made ʻieʻie harvesting risky. "ʻIeʻie thrives alongside the ʻōhiʻa, and we don't want to pick up ROD from one forest and bring it back to our island," says Kumulāʻau. That's why he hasn't gone on a foray in ten years—not long before the fungus that causes ROD started killing off ʻōhiʻa forests on Hawaiʻi Island.

When ʻieʻie is ready for weaving, it's smooth and the color of vanilla. Kumulāʻau soaks the rootlets, which brings out a film that must be scraped off. Then he slices the pieces lengthwise. Kumulāʻau explains that depending on how thick the rootlet is, he can get two rounded half pieces. If it's thick enough, he can also get a flat piece called a splint, used to create the kū, or "warp"—the ribs of a basket or trap—around which the half rounds are woven. "There's prep work before you can even actually weave," says Kumulāʻau. "That in itself is a lot of knowledge to be gained."

Kumulāʻau and his spouse, Haunani Balino-Sing, still have a stash of ʻieʻie left over from their last outing on Hawaiʻi Island, which they use for select projects: When I interviewed them last July, a small stack of pale ʻieʻie spears sat on their garage floor, waiting to be made into a funerary basket for a friend whose daughter had passed away.

Kumulāʻau and Haunani have the calm demeanor and measured tone of good teachers, because they're both educators. As Kumulāʻau's hobby evolved into a calling, Haunani, who taught elementary school, got more involved. But it wasn't until about ten years ago that she took it up seriously, thanks to the Hawaiʻi State Foundation on Culture and the Arts' Folk & Traditional Arts Culture Grants program. These grants are awarded to cultural experts passing their knowledge to the next generations, and one of them allowed Haunani to stop teaching and become an apprentice. The couple began holding workshops, taking

them beyond Oʻahu to the Bailey House Museum and Hui Noʻeau Visual Arts Center, both on Maui.

Hawaiʻi is home to a number of weaving conferences, but most focus on lauhala. The Kauluhiwaolele Maui Fiber Arts Conference, which launched in 2018, covers arts that use all kinds of native plant material. Kumulāʻau and Haunani were invited to teach ulana ʻie over five days of intense instruction. Between the workshops and the conference, the Sings connected with about twenty people on Maui willing to commit to ulana ʻie. It's a demanding art: The stiff rootlets are hard on the hands (Kumulāʻau has had surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome on both wrists). The Sings teach these diehards in the traditional one-on-one way, packing two years of study into one. The main criterion for students was a desire to pursue the art seriously. But there is also an intangible quality the Sings look for. "We look at who that person is. We look at their heart, their naʻau [gut], to see if they're a good person. Because we know that by planting these seeds in our students, at some point these people are going to give back to the practice and the community."

The Sings have been teaching groups of students since 2018. Beginners start with small baskets and flask covers made of the more abundant rattan vine, and graduate upon completion of an ʻieʻie based kiʻi ʻakua - the head and shoulders of a Hawaiian god.

For their part, the students are assuming that mantle of responsibility. Elama Farm of Wailuku, Maui, says he joined because as someone with a nakoa (warrior) heritage, he wanted to make a mahiole and "perpetuate the art form."

really need a love for it. Your hands and fingers get cramped, you get crossed eyes, your neck gets sore. At the same time it's very meditative, and the end product is the reward. You're reviving something that was done hundreds of years ago, bringing it back to life."

Because ʻieʻie is so difficult to come by, Kumulāʻau and Haunani have their students work with an abundant if poorer substitute, rattan. After all, you wouldn't use Carrara marble for your first stab at sculpture. But once the students graduate to ʻieʻie, they have a deeper appreciation for it. Compared with rattan, ʻieʻie has an almost satiny texture, says Kumulāʻau. "To me, when you work with it, you don't even pay attention [to the material] anymore because of how it feels in your hand, because you just like how it looks. Knowing that you're using the real, indigenous material after months of rattan—there's no comparison."

Beginners start with small baskets and flask covers, then move on to shrimp and ʻoʻopu traps and war helmets. The capstone is a grimacing kiʻi akua—the head and shoulders of a Hawaiian god. One weekend a month, the Sings would fly to Maui to work with their students. By the time the first cohort made their kiʻi akua, which were displayed in the exhibition *Nā Akua Ākea: The Vast and Numerous Deities* at the Bailey House Museum, they were down to nine members. The show closed in December 2019, and pandemic restrictions hit three months later, temporarily stopping interisland travel. Kumulāʻau says ulana ʻie doesn't translate well on Zoom—he

paused teaching, though they kept in touch with their students.

“We both decided to take this on as a kuleana,” a responsibility, says Haunani. “As we started teaching, we realized it’s not only meditative and helpful for us but also for our students. There is some sort of healing that happens when they are creating. As they weave, we feel their elders come through, and they start to create. That is what we look forward to: when they finally click in that zone where they can take off on their own.”

“As we started teaching, we realized it’s not only meditative and helpful for us but also for our students,” says Haunani. “There is some sort of healing that happens when they are

The first cohort of weavers included one of Maui's most famous sons, Keali'i Reichel. It turns out the singer and cultural practitioner learned ulana 'ie in the mid-'80s—it was one of the first Hawaiian arts in which he immersed himself. But the difficulty of securing 'ie'ie led him to put the activity aside. "When Kumulā'au and Haunani announced a new weaving cohort, I jumped at the chance to reconnect to this art form," says Reichel. "While the ultimate goal of the class was to create a ki'i akua, each small project we had to complete along the way contributed to 'downloading' all the various skill sets required to finish the ki'i akua. Therein lies the brilliance of how the Sings teach. Their methodical approach has helped me in the other disciplines that I'm currently involved in."

In January, the Sings started a cohort of fifteen students in Hilo and are planning a second cohort for Kona in 2023. They invited their Maui students to assist with the weekend sessions, "So they get to practice teaching in the way we want them to teach. We give them enough latitude that they can add their own techniques or philosophy," says Kumulā'au. "That's how we grow."

The Sings say their connection with their students is as important as the knowledge they're passing on. "We're building relationships, not just for this short period of time but for the rest of our lives," says Kumulā'au. "At some point they won't be students anymore. They'll be colleagues, peers in the art form. One thing we tell our students is that we'll

different places on the path. We already have some Maui students who are teaching others. That's what we want to see."

The Sings envision working with communities on the Mainland and beyond to ensure that in the future, someone doesn't have to start from scratch again, as Horimoto did more than forty years ago. "Hopefully, we can touch a lot of people who will help us in sharing the practice," says Kumulāʻau. "We can't do it by ourselves." **HH**

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