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Weaving Past, Present, and Future

How the Nā Akua Ākea exhibit celebrates and inspires a lāhui

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When I step foot in the “Nā Akua Ākea, the Vast and Numerous Deities” exhibit at Hale Hō’ike’ike, a powerful rush of mana both ancient and modern envelops me. The 11 ki’i look back at me while I stare in awe of these beautiful pieces of craftsmanship. This is the climactic point of a year’s work with a cohort

I first met the Sings at the [Kauluhiwaolele Weaving Conference](#) held at Ka'anapali Beach Hotel. I embedded into their group of about 20 haumana and wove basketry with them for four days. The act of weaving is meditative, and the Sing's approach is refined, making it a joy to learn from them. Everyday we would start with an oli of [E Hō Mai](#) followed by E Ulu. Kumu Lloyd Harold Kumulā'au Sing Jr. explains the process.

"One of the questions I have been asked is, 'How do we integrate language into the discipline and the work that we do?'" says Kumulā'au. "Not everyone is Hawaiian language speaker, including Hawaiians. Some people do know, some people know bits and pieces, some people can speak fluently. But doing this oli, learning this oli – this chant is something all of you can do. This kind of work is all part of our people. Everyone who is Indigenous or comes from Indigenous people all have that shared belief that we are just passing through time; we are just stewards of the land. We are here to malama, perpetuate, take care, and share with the next generation."



“This practice, this art is not for Hawaiians only,” says Kumulā‘au. “This is for all of us. I just want to share that every person that learns this art, whether you are Kanaka Hawai‘i or you are Kanaka-wherever you are from, our kupuna are smiling. Our ancestors are smiling and very proud and happy. That all of you guys have taken on the kuleana the responsibility the willingness to do this kind of work that we do. Whether it’s hala, or ‘ie ‘ie, or any type of work of our kupuna. They are very happy because what they did, that we practice and perpetuate today, is not going to die. It’s going to holomua (progress) because of all of you.”

While my experience was only four days, their cohort was a yearlong teaching commitment funded by a grant.

“We went into different kinds of baskets, then fish traps, and then into other techniques,” explains Haunani. “Our students had homework and challenges throughout the year to utilize what they learned and create their own pieces too. You will see the fans on the wall at the exhibition, and the other baskets. Then for the last challenge, we decided to have them make ki‘i because after the year of work and all the techniques that they have learned, they should be able to have the ‘ike (knowledge) to make the ki‘i. On top of that, they had to learn how to do the work with shell, wood and teeth, and the sewing. Some had hair. So each person had different things they learned through the process of making their own ki‘i.”

The Sings also teach a few tricks that they learned on their own weaving journey to enhance their students’ success.

“We came up with this idea for a different grant but that didn’t work out,” says Kumulā‘au. “So we decided to use the support of a Hawai‘i State Foundation on Cultural and the Arts grant to do what we could and compact a two-year experience into one year. We are so fortunate that we have haumana like our cohort. Our Maui students did pretty much everything that we would have taught over the course of two years in one year. We made it very intensive, challenging, and at the same time we wanted to circumvent their

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“Even using our techniques it still required a lot of hours of weaving to complete it,” says Kumulā‘au. “From the time we started the ki‘i we told our students that when they are done, finished dying it, the eyes and the teeth are all lashed in – it’s going to be one beautiful piece. They are going to have a personal relationship with that image because they have spent so much time with that image, so much energy, so much mana. You can’t help but have an attachment to it. Even when the ki‘i came to exhibit, the haumana was having separation anxiety sharing that kind of feeling. They just became so pili (connected) to having that ki‘i around. It looks very human like, it has human characteristics.”

There were the ki‘i akua, the deities, images of Hawaiian gods of old. Then there were also ki‘i kupuna, ancestral images. Traditionally with ki‘i kupuna, human hair from ‘ohana would be used. For the ki‘i in Nā Akua Ākea the same is true.

“The ones that have hair, the lauoho (hair) ki‘i, there is actual hair, and from their ‘ohana too,” says Haunani. “It is a personal thing for all of them. Even for our haumana that are not Hawaiian. We have some haumana who are not Hawaiian. They have an aloha for our culture. They have a connection to our culture. And they made a ki‘i and they have expressed what it means to make something that traditionally was a Hawaiian religious and spiritual object. Everyone has their own story and it is up to them whether they want to share it or not.”

According to Kumu Sing, there is a genealogical connection to weaving that we all have, and we can tap into that.

“We are not the kind of teachers that try to micromanage a lot,” says Haunani. “First of all we try to create a safe space. Because when the space is safe and everybody feels comfortable then creation can start. Then imagination can start. It is a better vibe. There is better energy and then everybody is open to learning. So when that happens, it becomes easy for everybody to create and get into their weaving. We try to teach just the basics and kind of let you guys figure things out along the way. The figuring out is



Making plenty ki'i at once was a powerful thing for the lahui (people/nation/race) and community. The Sings had made their own ki'i before but this was the first time for a group.

“These are pieces that haven’t been created in centuries. There is not much known of them. We thought a lot about it too. If we were to create this group and not just two, it’s not just he and I... To have a whole bunch created at one time would really make a statement. It would really bring awareness to our people and our community. This did exist at one time, and this is how it was used before, and this is how we are using it today. Everybody has their own understanding. It’s bringing this awareness to the community that these things do exist. Doing this project we had a lot of these first-time aha moments. It’s been a growing year for us, the kumu, and the haumana.”

“In the Hawaiian community, when you think of the lahui as a whole, in many disciplines in our culture things are becoming activated,” says Kumulā‘au. “There is a resurgence of interest in wanting to find the place in our culture that you fit, that you resonate, and that you contribute. We have navigation, we have hula, we have music, we have kapa makers, we have hala weavers, and then of course now we have this art. The ‘ie ‘ie weavers. So everybody is doing what they can because at this time there are so many things that are going on in the world and so much is affecting here in Hawai‘i. We can get into the politics of it, but it is kind of ironic and yet serendipitous that these ki‘i were complete and came into exhibition in August and the mauna movement took place. For the ki‘i to be out there for people to celebrate that, it affected a lot of people that were there at the exhibition. It was moving for people there. Then we were asked if we would be willing to share the exhibition beyond the Bailey House. To have it go to other places. So we went to the mauna and we took them to the Unity March in Lahaina.”

In this way the ki‘i are finding their own crucial role in the Hawai‘i of today.

“We are in a different time now. What we use those images for in old ancient Hawai‘i we don’t use in that way now,” says Haunani. “Every individual that created their piece is to find within themselves why they are creating this and for what reason. We leave it at that. That is how our kupuna created their ki‘i back then, they had an intention of what they were creating and they knew how they wanted it to look like and what kind of materials they wanted to see. In this time, today, we are using the same concept but in modern time. It is pretty interesting.”



Basketry by Edward Lum

“Ed is one of our students that was able to come teach at Kauluhiwaolele,” says Haunani. “Last year at this weaving conference, he came, it was his first time weaving. We were talking about the cohort. After the conference was over you get added to our Facebook group for our students. Ed started making baskets and posting, he was doing everything our students were doing in the cohort. So we brought him in. He is actually so fast that he finished his ki’i before everyone else did. Then he wanted to help teach.”

At the exhibition, there is a \$3 booklet on Nā Akua Ākea that you can pick up at the Hale Hō’ike’ike gift shop. It is a wonderful addition to the scope of the work, and the backstory to the cohort and artists involved.

“What we are really teaching is that now that the ki’i are in existence, they have a kuleana,” says Kumulā’au. “They have a responsibility to be used. It’s not something to just keep in the house and nobody gets to see it. It is something to be celebrated and shared with our lahui, and to inspire and promote Maui arts. We are trying to bring our Native cultural arts to a level that is worth keeping and passing on.”

The Sings have obtained another grant and will continue the work with this cohort, and they will make an appearance at the Hui No’eau in December for students interested in diving into this art.

“We are just contributing in our own small way it’s just this art,” says Kumulā’au. “There are many movers and shakers making things happen on many different fronts in our Hawaiian culture now. People are doing mauna rituals every day. Learning mele lahui, hula lahui, these dances and songs that we can all do together. It is interesting that at this point in history that is where we are at with the arts. We want to contribute by setting a good example for the next generation. Our own learning curve was different than what we are trying to show to our students because we want this art to continue and thrive. Why now? Because we want to share with our people that we are proud by sharing this art. Not everyone can do what we do, and we can’t do what others do.”