



# HE WING TO TRADITION

With a little help from Aotearoa,  
Hawai'i carvers learn the [nearly]  
lost art of making ki'i

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## Hewing to Tradition

“**K**au ka mo’o i Hawai’i nei? Does the dragon live here anymore?” It’s mid-morning at Hanakēhau Learning Farm near Pearl City, O’ahu. A light breeze rustles the trees, and the sound of cars speeding past on the adjacent freeway whirs steadily in the background. Sam Ka’ai sits under the shade of a giant tarp, taking a break to explain why these eight ki’i (statue) carvers are here. One of Hawai’i’s most venerated storytellers, Ka’ai mixes Hawaiian, pidgin and English.

“Kau ka mo’o i Hawai’i nei?” he riddles again. Is the mo’o—which translates as both an outsized, supernatural “dragon” and a family’s genealogical line—here in Hawai’i? He answers his own question: “Where the ‘Ōlelo, ‘Ōlelo, ‘Ōlelo, ka mo’olelo. What is mo’olelo? It’s history. You said it, you said it, you said it, so the dragon walked forward.”

Born eighty years ago in Hāna, Maui, Ka’ai learned woodworking from his uncles, who carved canoes. He carved the two ki’i for the stern of *Hōkūle’ā*, the voyaging canoe that was a crucial element of the



“Hawaiian Renaissance” of the late 1970s, and spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar working with the New Zealand Māori and South Pacific Arts Council. Andre Perez, the organizer of this carving workshop,

describes Ka’ai as “the father of doing Hawaiian things when it wasn’t popular.”

“Ka mo’o! How is this mo’o? His head is before the dawn. He sniffs out a reality. He dreams a dream but he has not uttered



When Andre Perez (above left) first set out to study Hawaiian ki’i (statues), he found that sources of information were scarce. A chance meeting with master Māori carver Lyonel Grant (above right) convinced Perez that he needed to do more than just study the history—he needed to relearn the craft himself. Now, along with respected kupuna (elder) Sam Ka’ai (above center), Perez and Grant are fostering a new generation of Hawaiian carvers. The tools of their trade (at top) are a mix of the modern and traditional.

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it. When he does, the prayer begins,” Ka’ai whispers. “When the small stars disappear, that’s where the thought pattern starts. In the dark is where your dream starts. In that time you formulate the utterance. Then E ala e!” His voice rises as he quotes a phrase often used to greet the dawn. “You utter the utterance. Then you finish the prayer by doing what you have uttered.”

Every star, Ka’ai believes, is a campfire of someone’s ancestor. “The Milky Way moves like this, like the shark swimming, the dragon walking. All the ancestors are waiting for you,” says the bearded kupuna (elder), his eyes shining.

**Ki’i were the talismans** of Hawaiian religion, traditionally carved by specialized woodworkers who were distinct members of the kahunas (priest) class: kahunas kālāi ki’i. These sacred sculptures connected the people to their gods and their ancestors. The modern carvers resurrecting this practice are walking the path of their forebears—bringing awareness to the dragon in the darkness of space—and forging a new path ahead. “In other words, we’re in the basics. We’re retrieving a lifestyle,” says Ka’ai. “These faces haven’t been seen for a while. They should be met as friends and not aliens. Try remember, when you’re alien to these ki’i, then you’re alien to the Hawaiian race.”

Hawaiian ki’i are distinguished by some common attributes: faces with protruding jaws, open mouths and defiant expressions; elaborate headdresses; a wrestler stance with knees thrust forward. Large sculptures were standard features in Hawaiian heiau (temples), which were usually dedicated to one of the four major gods, Kū, Kāne, Kanaloa or Lono. These temple images—up to fifteen feet tall—stood by entrances and atop fences. Some marked sacred spaces within the heiau, and the altar in front of the heiau’s oracle tower typically faced a semicircle of ki’i.

Images that were carved at the tops of wooden poles to be used both in and away from heiau rituals were called akua kā’ai. These portable ki’i were cloaked in sashes of kapa (bark cloth) and carried into battle. Households, too, had smaller, personal ki’i for home worship. Many of these figures represented a family’s ‘aumakua, deified ancestors who were guardian spirits.

“These ki’i are images of our akua (gods),” says Perez, whose personal mission is to reclaim and reestablish a tradition that has been widely—and painfully—misappropriated under the guise of “tiki



Since 2016, Ka’ai, Grant and Perez have mentored a cohort of eight carvers through a series of intensive workshops held on Hawai’i Island, O’ahu and Kaua’i. At top, Keahi Tajon (left) and Tom Mehau bring forth an image of the god Kāne from a one-hundred-pound log of milo wood. Above middle, Keanu Roldan (left photo), Perez and Grant (right photo) are pictured with their carvings at the O’ahu workshop. At bottom, Imai Winchester (left) and Roldan work together on a ki’i.



While pre-contact kāhuna kālai ki'i (master ki'i carvers) would have relied on implements made primarily of wood and stone, today's tools include ancient and contemporary materials. At an adze-making workshop on Hawai'i Island, participants learned not only how to fashion their own wooden handles but also how to forge iron blades. At top, Ka'ai guides Tajon and Roldan through the process.

culture.” “When you reach a level of consciousness, of understanding the great loss that Hawaiians have experienced, whether it's land, governance, political control, language or cultural practices, then it becomes really offensive to see a tiki as a doorstep for a surf shop. Or tikis in bars. Or the 'Big Kahuna Water Park.'”

While pursuing his master's degree in Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i's Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, Perez found there was a dearth of knowledge regarding ki'i carving traditions. The practice was largely lost after King Kamehameha II abolished the

kapu system—the rigorous religious code of conduct that upheld social and political order—and ordered all heiau and ki'i to be destroyed in 1819. This sudden dismissal of the Hawaiian religion created a spiritual void that Christian missionaries quickly filled when they arrived the following year. Fewer than 170 ki'i from that era survive, now housed in museums and private collections around the world.

“The institutionalized knowledge that had been preserved and passed down from generation to generation of kāhuna kālai ki'i came to an abrupt end in 1819, because the kāhuna carvers were no longer needed,”

Perez says. “So we had this big vacuum of carving knowledge: Like, how did they carve a ki'i, what was the process?” Perez decided to focus his research on rediscovering the art of kālai ki'i. To construct a method for doing so, he looked to the Māori in Aotearoa, who have a thriving carving tradition, which is anchored by unbroken genealogical lines of craftsmen who are taught at formal training institutes.

In 2014, Perez' professor called to let him know that Lyonel Grant, one of the most accomplished carvers in Aotearoa, was attending a function in Kona and would be on O'ahu for a layover. Grant graduated with honors from the New Zealand Māori Arts and Crafts Institute at Te Puia and has completed three traditional meeting houses—each filled with elaborate carvings, symbolism and history, the ultimate expression of a carver's training.

“The opportunity to interview Lyonel was mind-blowing. *Huge*,” Perez recalls. They met at a coffee shop near the airport, and Perez told Grant about his desire to reconstruct traditional carving practices. Grant's response was, “If you're going to be theoretically studying something, isn't the optimum to actually practice it?”

“So Lyonel throws a curveball at me in this forty-five-minute conversation between flights,” Perez continues. “He says, ‘Hey bro, why don't you get a bunch of guys together and let's train them. I'd love to make a contribution to Hawaiian people.’ And my jaw just dropped.” With that, the first seed for Hui Kālai Ki'i O Kūpā'ike'e—the first formalized, modern Hawaiian carving school, invoking the versatility of the god Kūpā'ike'e, or Kū of the Swivel Adze—was planted.

*Tok, tok, tok, tok. Pak, pak, pak. Tok, tok, tok, tok. Pak, pak, pak.* Under a tarp in central O'ahu, the measured knocking of mallets against chisels echoes in a syncopated beat. Three groups of apprentices are bent over early iterations of faceted ki'i forms, which are lying prone atop sawhorses. Ka'ai, Grant and Perez float from station to station, making occasional corrective cuts. Piles of wood chips cover the ground, growing with each mallet blow.

“When you reach Lyonel's stage, he just takes off the rubbish. That's the part he doesn't want there. But these people are just beginning. So he does bold cuts and they're doing little cuts,” Ka'ai says, explaining that every notch is a line that brings definition to the form.

Keahi Tajon and Tom Mehau are among the first Kūpā'ike'e cohort. Together they are working on replicating a ki'i at the Bishop Museum that is said to be an image of Kāne. The pale log they're carving is a piece of donated milo that weighs about one hundred pounds. With cautious yet deliberate cuts, the teeth inside of the figure's mouth—aply tinted red by the crimson flesh of the milo—materialize.

Mehau's wrist is wrapped in a napkin bound by duct tape, the result of an accidental meeting with his chisel when he tripped over the sawhorse. They joke—there is plenty of ribbing and plenty of laughter throughout the day—that his blood is now part of the ki'i, an honor familiar to many a carver who handles sharp instruments for hours on end. What the carvers certainly impart to their work is a deep cultural understanding of their subject—in this case, the stories of Kāne.

“Kāne is depicted in many mo'olelo as the god of wai, or freshwater. This also includes the clouds and sun. Kāne is also an elder to other gods such as Pele,” Tajon says. “To focus in on the Kāne image using what we've been taught—to see the chips fly off, finally revealing the god within—is an amazing process to be a part of.”

In the four years since that first conversation between Perez and Grant, what has followed are three intensive, seven-to-ten-day workshops held at Waipā on Kaua'i in 2016, Keauhou on Hawai'i Island in 2017 and here at Hanakēhau Learning Farm. Besides skill building and technique, students have learned Hawaiian protocols and carving styles, as well as how to make and maintain their own tools. “The goal for us is to ‘retrain’ a new generation of practitioners, so they can go back to their communities and teach,” Perez says. Pointing out the importance of material culture being “alive” and living its function, he explains that the ki'i produced at each gathering will be integrated into hula, fishing, farming, kapa making and other traditional practices.

As the master carver and technical expert, Grant has been instrumental in formulating a curriculum that can be taught step-by-step. “My primary focus is to teach carvers how to find form inside a piece of timber. I want to teach, as best as I can, the language of carving as I see it in the Hawaiian context,” he says, explaining the challenge in isolating the cultural aesthetic. “I'm trying to stay neutral in my conveyance of those skills, in that I don't want to teach Māori carving to Hawaiian

students because it's not appropriate.”

While Aotearoa has countless artifacts in its meeting houses and museums, the attributes of many of the original ki'i of Hawai'i have been obscured or erased by time and weather. Trying to replicate them requires some intuitive guesswork. “When we come along a hundred years later and we're trying to imitate that, we're having to sort of join the dots,” Grant says.

In an effort to keep the group focused and isolated from the distractions of modern life, the Kūpā'ike'e hui camps together for the duration of the workshop, sharing meals and strengthening their brotherhood. It's a stark contrast from the champagne-and-brie gallery circuit in which international artists of Grant's stature typically move, but this is where he wants to be.

“The real important stuff is this fundamental stuff. It's stripped back. It's basic. In a way it's like a monk going in a cave and meditating,” he says. “And the gratitude that someone gives you when you show them something—‘Wow, that's how you do that. I always wanted to know how you do that’—that's worth more than any money. What experience I have had over my career, I want to bring it to bear here. I just see it as cousins helping cousins.”

For now, the protégés work on museum piece replicas for training purposes, learning “textbook” methods of carving. Perez' vision, however, invites evolution. He talks about the four hundred thousand gods that comprise the Hawaiian pantheon, and of *Kumulipo*, the genealogical chant that recounts the creation of all things. “There is spirituality in everything,” he says. “In the *Kumulipo*, humans gave birth to the gods. If we understand that we create our gods and we name them and give them identity, then we can continue to carve new forms because that's our tradition.

“We're not static. We're not stuck in a glass-case culture,” he continues. “Our goal is to create a practice where we're carving new images of Lono, new images of Kū. We're innovating, but it's based on cultural integrity rooted in a clear, definitive understanding of the primary form and style and aesthetic.”

This notion of seeing the dragon walk forward is exciting to Tajon. “Becoming a carver has been crying out to me for a long time,” he says. “I want to learn this so I can share this with other kōnaka (Hawaiians) who need to ‘reKanak’ to their culture. If there's anything I would dedicate the rest of my life to, it would be this, kōlai ki'i.” HH