

GEORGE NA'OPE

Kumu hula (hula master)
Hilo, Hawaii

George Na'ope's full name is George Lanakilakekiahiali'i Na'ope, which means "the protector of things of Hawai'i." As a *kumu hula*, Na'ope has taken this charge quite seriously for nearly six decades. "Uncle George," as he is known throughout the state, is recognized as a leading advocate and preservationist of native Hawaiian culture worldwide.

Na'ope was three when he first studied hula under his great-grandmother. He himself has been a teacher for nearly 60 years, passing down his knowledge of ancient hula, which is hula developed and danced before 1893.

In 1964, Na'ope founded the Merrie Monarch Festival, an annual week-long festival of traditional Hawaiian arts, crafts, and performances featuring a three-day hula competition. The state of Hawaii designated Na'ope a "Living Golden Treasure" in 1960.

Na'ope spoke with the NEA about why he founded the Merrie Monarch Festival and about passing on the tradition to the next generation.

NEA: Why did you feel there was a need for the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival?

GEORGE NA'OPE: I felt the hula was becoming too modern and that we have to preserve it. [David Kalakaua [king of Hawaii 1874–91, aka The Merrie Monarch] brought the hula back to Hawaii and made us realize how important it was for our people. There was nothing here in Hilo, so I decided to honor Kalakaua and have a festival with just hula. I didn't realize that it was going to turn out to be one of the biggest things in our state.

NEA: Can you tell me a little bit about your teaching?

NA'OPE: I've been teaching now for about 58 years. I've taught in Japan, Guam, Australia, Germany, England, North and South America, and also in the Hawaiian Islands. I've mostly been teaching in Japan because they

are very interested in the culture. I've been telling them, though, that while it's wonderful that all these non-Hawaiians are learning Hawaiian culture, they need to remember to learn their own culture as well. When we [Hawaiians] became part of America, most of our people forgot our ancient dances.



George Na'ope watches one of his students perform a traditional Hawaiian dance during the rehearsal for the 2006 NEA National Heritage Fellows concert. Photo by Tom Pich.

NEA: What is the main message that you think that the hula and the chanting is conveying?

NA'OPE: We must remember who we are and that our culture must survive in this modern world. If you love your culture you will teach tradition and the love of the hula. Teach it and share it and not hide it. I tell the young people to learn the culture and learn it well, preserve it so their children and their children's children can continue with our culture and that our culture will live forever.