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**Kumu hula John Ka'imikaua:**  
A concert, a new compact disc and traditions to uphold.

# 'From Deep Within'

## Hula master explores the roots of Hawaii's dance

By Gary C.W. Chun  
Special to The Advertiser

When *kumu hula* John Ka'imikaua takes the stage at Hawaii Theatre tomorrow (see box), he'll be bringing the history of his people with him.

For two decades, the well-known chanter and *kumu* to Halau Hula O Kukunaokala has worked to bring the songs of ancient hula alive. He and his group will perform numbers from their just-released CD, five years in the making — "From Deep Within (Mai Ka Na'au Kuhohonu)."

Ka'imikaua began composing songs in high school.

"I would write and sing to release stress, experience my inner self, remember certain occasions and events in my life and, later, the experiences of the *halau*," he said.

Ka'imikaua's influences were his grandparents — both sets. On his mother's side, Eva and David Malo; on his father's side, Hannah Sylva Freeman and Milton Pikini (who taught him to sing and play the ukulele). Great-grandmother Violet Moepono was also influential.

"All five of them came to live in my family's house when I was young, and their stories of their lives on the Big Island and Molokai introduced me to and sparked my interest in things Hawaiian," he recalled. "In tracing back my family lineage, I learned we were part of a line of ancient *kahuna*, a historical tradition from the Big Island that went through Puna, Keaukaha and Waipio."

But these five weren't the only elders to mold him.

When Ka'imikaua and some friends from Aiea High went to Ke'aiwa Heiau Park before school one day to "commune with nature," he saw a dirt road near the park's entrance.

"At the end was a house with a yard bordered with the *kahuna* ti leaf plants my

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great-grandmother told me about," he said. "My friends dropped me off there and I knocked on the door and an old Hawaiian woman came out. I asked her if I could get some cuttings of the ti leaf plants for my garden. She looked startled at first, but then said, 'Sure,' and helped cut a few stalks for me.

"She then invited me into her house, and in the middle of our conversation, she asked me, 'Are you interested in things of old?'"

She introduced herself: Kawahine-kapu-hele-i-kapo-Kane.

"She was from Moloka'i and said she had knowledge of all of the island's ancient chants, dances and prayers, but that no one in her family wanted to learn them," he said. "She said she was praying for a long time for someone to come to her so that she could impart this knowledge."

She took his request for the cuttings as a sign.

Ka'imikaua became her willing protege. For the next three years, he studied.

Today, he remembers her vividly: 6 foot-5, 92 years old, dark complexion, short white hair, piercing eyes, large hands and feet, "but with a loving countenance."

"When she would *oli*, I couldn't come near to how she could approximate nature sounds by how she used vowels," he remembered. "She would look like a young woman, standing tall and erect, in an old woman's body."

His teacher recited chants, which he translated into English.

"At the end of my junior year in high school, I was going to go to Europe on a month-long tour in a singing group," he said. "I went up to her house and told her I would return as soon as I got back. She sat back in her chair and said, 'Good, you go, and Auntie will go back home,' in the meantime pointing in the

## There's more than one way to interpret origins of hula

John Ka'imikaua is planning to open a branch of his Oahu *halau* on Molokai, a place where he says the hula originated.

Not everyone agrees, said another *kumu*, Vicky Holt Takamine. But, the University of Hawaii Hawaiian culture and hula teacher added, the hula community faces no huge conflict over this point, either.

It is "widely accepted" that Hi'iakaikapoliopole, the sister of the fire goddess Pele, was the first hula dancer, Takamine said. But she said this story holds particular sway on the Big Island, where chants centering on Pele's volcanic aspects dominate hula legends. Other islands hold to their own traditions.

"There are several different legends about the origin of hula," Takamine said. "If you're on the Big Island, hula starts with the Pele tradition, with Hi'iaka being the first dancer."

Ka'imikaua said he doesn't wish to fight over the issue, either.

"It is not my purpose to convince, only to educate and enlighten," he said. "Whether or not they believe me, it is their choice. This is the food I offer on the table, take what you desire. I don't need to defend what I say because if I do, it means I'm defending nothing."

Ka'imikaua's just-released CD details how he reportedly traced the origins of the hula, through the help of his early

teacher. In turn, her roots went back to a woman named La'ila'i.

In the year 900, he said, dances and chants that would become the foundation of hula were being done at Pu'u Nana, in the district of Ka'ana, Molokai. Laka, youngest sister of great-granddaughter Kapo'ulakina'u and the family's most gifted dancer, would take her knowledge to the remaining islands, thus spreading the hula throughout the chain.

His teacher had told him the genealogy would continue "once I opened my own school," he said.

"She said this unbroken lineage was once a great tree that spread its branches throughout the islands and flourished in ancient times and that all that was left was the roots," he said.

"She said knowledge of this lineage gave me the authority to teach. The *kapu* that kept her from imparting this to others would be lifted once a new generation, born in a time after the lands were taken from the Hawaiian people, would no longer need to live under that *kapu*. She said that generation was mine."

His Molokai *halau* will be for men only. Ka'imikaua intends to begin the group in January.

Gary Chun and Advertiser staff writer Vicki Viotti contributed to this report.

direction of Moloka'i."

So on this, the last day of his training, she chanted her genealogy, her lineage on Moloka'i. From her story, he said, he traced the roots of hula to that island, a contention not everyone in the hula world agrees with (see accompanying story).

But she left his life as

mysteriously as she entered it, dying three days after he left.

He never met any other member of her family, never thought of asking for her first or last name. Even through his teachings throughout the Islands, especially Moloka'i, talking with elder residents, he's found no one to claim her as a blood relation.

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## John Ka'imikaua and Halau Hula O Kukunaokala

WHAT: An evening of chant, dance and music