

A LOHA, UNCLE GEORGE

A tribute today on the Big Island will celebrate the influence the Merrie Monarch co-founder had on hula's culture

BY NINA WU / nwu@starbulletin.com

WHEN students reminisce about Uncle George Lanakilakeikiahiali'i Na'ope, they remember a strict hula master but also a colorful personality that brought laughter to their lives.

Though small in stature, Na'ope, one of the founders of the Merrie Monarch Festival, was larger than life and a giant in the hula community.

The Merrie Monarch community is holding a tribute to Na'ope today on the Big Island with halau performances under the direction of kumu Tisalona Kalili, Iwalani Kalima, Etua Lopes and Emery Aceret, and a screening of "This Is Their Life — Uncle George & Auntie Dottie." Cyril Pahinui also will take the stage with the ladies of late kumu hula Rae Fonseca's Halau Kahikilaulani.

Kalima, who began studying with Na'ope as an 8-year-old, says his mission was to teach and share hula throughout the world — from Australia to Sweden, Tahiti, Mexico, Japan and Canada.

His legacy extends beyond Merrie Monarch to spreading the love for hula, which he called the foundation of life and Hawaii.

"He always used to say, 'Hula is aloha, hula is Hawaii,'" said Kalima.



DENNIS ODA / 2006

It's hard to separate Na'ope from his hula family, which included Dorothy "Auntie Dottie" Thompson, who died two weeks ago, followed just a day later by Fonseca's sudden death.

The hula community is still reeling from the losses but is also determined to carry on their legacy and love for hula. Fonseca's men's and women's halau will see through plans to compete at the festival. A celebration of Fonseca's life is scheduled for April 16 in Hilo.

"My aloha goes out to every one of them," said Lopes, who began dancing with Na'ope, along with Fonseca, when both

were in high school. "Uncle George was my hula father, Auntie Dottie was my hula mother and Rae was my hula brother."

After high school, both Lopes and Fonseca moved to Kona to live with Na'ope in 1971.

Lopes remembers the hula master at his peak and marvels at all that he was able to learn.

The students woke up early every morning to learn from Na'ope, who was a strict disciplinarian, teaching morals as well as mele. Hula encompassed not only song and dance, but a way of living.



ROD THOMPSON / 2005

That included knowledge of all the accompanying crafts — making pahu drums, weaving mats and dyeing from seeds.

Today, Lopes' students carry on this tradition of making their own implements.

Na'ope always encouraged his students to learn from other masters. It was his philosophy that you learn from many, not just one.

LOPES SAYS what stands out most in his memory of Uncle George are the bright colors he wore.

"His colors, to me, today represent the multitude of things this man knew," he said. "He had so many facets, we couldn't count them."

Na'ope was born Feb. 25, 1928, in Kalihi but moved to Hilo as a baby to live with the great-grandmother who named him. His name means "the light that would lead the way," or "the protector of things of Hawaii."

Na'ope learned hula at the tender age of 3 from next-door neighbor and friend Mama Fujii, mother of Edith Kanaka'ole.

Na'ope died in October. Some say he was 81; others say he was 82.

"There are so many memories," says kumu hula Debbie Ryder, also a student of Na'ope's since she was in high school.

Ryder's most vivid memory of Uncle George is of his last trip in early October 2008 to the inaugural Ho'okupu Hula No Lana'i festival, an event she launched and plans to hold every year in his honor.

It was Na'ope's first trip to Lanai, and he was joined by family and surrounded by halau from all over the world. Ryder said it was like a big reunion.

"That was my tribute to Uncle," she said. "That was my way of giving."

Kalima, who became Na'ope's caregiver in his last years, remembers someone full of life. Even when he was frail, he was still ready to party.

"He had a full life," she said. "He was very happy with his life."

The one lesson from Na'ope that stands out for Kalima is that hula brings out one's innermost feelings, which are unique to every dance.

"Hula comes from within you, and you bring your feeling out, to project it," she said.

At the tribute, Kalima's halau will perform a special oli dedicated to Na'ope, along with "Lili'u E," the first hula he taught her.

Among Na'ope's many projects, outside the many hula festivals he started around the world, was Humu Mo'olelo, a journal of the hula arts. The first volume, published in 2007, included a first-person narrative by Na'ope, "This Is My Life." Lopes and Fonseca also contributed essays about being his first students.

Only three issues were published; efforts are under way to produce a fourth.

Chelle Shand, publisher of Humu Mo'olelo and a close friend of Na'ope's, recalled receiving the phone call about his passing.

She said a whistling wind blew in across Keaukaha on the Big Island, where she lives, and rain came down, lasting about an hour before giving way to sunshine.

"Later that day, after visiting his body at his home in Hilo, where I held his hand for over an hour, I went for a swim in the ocean, (and) ... a very large turtle swam up to me three times and allowed me to touch its head," she said.

Uncle George's aumakua is the honu, or turtle.

"You are free," Shand said she thought as it swam off.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ETUA LOPES



KEN SAKAMOTO / 1999

TRIBUTE

"The Merrie Monarch Tribute to Uncle George Na'ope" will be held at 6 p.m. at Ah Fook Chinen Civic Auditorium. Doors open at 5:45 p.m.

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TODAY ARTS

EDITOR: Ioleen Oshiro >> joshiro@starbulletin.com >> 529-4774

LOOK >> Tune in to Food Network's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" tomorrow at 4 p.m. for the episode they filmed in Hawaii. Hank's Haute Dogs, Highway Inn and Nico's at Pier 38 are featured in the show hosted by **Guy Fieri**, below. Highway Inn will offer 40 percent off the entire menu to mark the show's premiere.

LISTEN >> "Light of Love," by Music go Music (www.myspace.com/musicgo-music)

DO >> Check out Puerto Rican Day on the Plantation at Wai-pahu Plantation Village, 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday. Free.

Top photo, George Na'ope watched as the Halau Hula Mele Ohana of Tokyo practiced for the 42nd annual presentation of the festival.

Above, a young George Na'ope commands attention.

Inset photo, left, before the start of the 43rd Annual Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition, Gov. Linda Lingle met and posed for a picture with Na'ope and "Auntie Dottie" Dorothy Thompson.

At far left and left, Na'ope takes the stage at the Merrie Monarch Festival with his signature colorful style and grace.



FOOD NETWORK