

Interview Kapuaokalani Ka'au'a

'O Hawai'i ku'u moku.

'O Hilo ku'u moku.

'O Maunakea me Mauna Loa ku'u mau mauna.

'O Ka'ie'ie ku'u kahawai.

'O waiākea ku'u kai.

'O Nauoho ku'u is my ancestor I want to bring into this space.

'O wau 'o Kapua.

Summary

Stacy Kapuaokalani Ka'au'a shares experiences with Hawaiian culture and identity, preservation of cultural practices and language, and personal journeys of exploring spirituality and traditional practices. Kumu Ka'au'a also shares her personal connection to Laka and how it relates to the idea of belonging in Māhū indigenous communities. She talks about her entrance into hula, and as Kumu Hula, and the new programs and partnerships she's developed, and encourages māhū to forge through adversity. She compares the diligence and determination of Hi'iaka as a metaphor for breaking the bondage from those who attempt to extinguish their light and hold them in bondage, "Hi'iaka up", she says.

Interview

Kumu 'Au'a: My name is Stacey Kapuakalani Ka'au'a. Some people call me Kumu 'Au'a, some people call me Stace, in the community.

Kanani: Where did you grow up?

Kumu 'Au'a: I grew up in Kalaoa Mauka, which is in the Hilo Palikū side of Hilo with my grandma. I was raised with my grandma on my father's side and my step grandfather, Born and raised there until I was to graduate from high school.

Kanani: What do you feel your role is now, in the communities you're a part of?

Kumu 'Au'a: My role as a Hawaiian right now, I have two hats, first, my role is a Hawaiian, and then as a māhū, in the community. And so first my kulana is, I'm a Kumu Hula for Unuokeahi, which is a hālau that is now in Kea'au, we were actually in Hilo, but now we reside in Kea'au.

We've been here for 7 years, and I have 60 students here that are either from Hilo side or they reside in Hilo. And then I also have a small contingency that actually comes in from O'ahu, and they learn on Zoom simultaneously with my learners here on the east side. I'm also starting a cohort that's coming out of Kū Ānuenuē, which is a cohort that has to do with culture sustainability, and stewardship to hula for the Māhū and LGBTQI+. That program is called E Ōpū Ali'i. So, I wear two hats now. One to my lāhui, and the one now, that is an offshoot that I'm stewarding for the Māhū community.

Kanani: Ah yes, I've heard of Kū Ānuenuē, and wanted to invite them to this exhibit, so this exhibition can go beyond the walls and into the community, so is this your organization?

Kumu 'Au'a: So I'm partnering with Ala and Krista folks, and Jess folks. It's a new organization. And they're actually doing wonderful for our community right now. So they've been really close friends of mine for many years. We've created this cohort, so that we can integrate culture practice, yeah, into that space, and have people see, "*what does that look like, through hula*". My goal is to actually bring them with us [to participate in the hula for this show] as a way to energize and activate our whole community in Hilo. And we do have some learners, that I believe, are flying in from other islands to participate. Yeah, it's a first time I think that a cohort like this has been done here. And so it's pretty

forward, you know, forward thinking, you know, for Hilo. On O‘ahu it's been done, but for Hilo, it's a whole new thing. Yeah, so we're excited.

Kanani: So they're [Kū Ānuenuē] is a wellness center?

Kumu ‘Au‘a: Yes, a wellness center, and if people need kokua or pathways to help. They are one of the new gateways in Hilo to help the LGBTQI2+ community, māhū community, so yeah, and they're also a safe space. I'm starting a cohort through their program, and so it's gonna be under our hālau, and under Kū Anuenuē, so it's a collab between the two, the two partners.

Kanani: Did you feel you had kuleana, or just any kind of role, for your ohana during your childhood experience, to anyone or any specific group of people?

Kumu ‘Au‘a: We had a very extensive [family], there were 15 people in our family. So 15 people lived in the house. And so I didn't have a big kuleana as per se, Hawaiian cultural practice is concerned. Our family actually moved away from that. There were some nuances of Hawai‘i in there. My grandma’s a mānaleo (native speaker) and all of her hanauna (generation) was mānaleo people, so they're all spoke Hawaiian, at that level. And then it was removed in my dad's hanauna [generation], and then me right, and our generation. So we didn't have much when we're

looking at Hawaiian practice. There was not much intact with my family. Just pretty much the language was still intact.

Kanani: That's common for so many of us.

Yeah, common for that time. We still did small practice, like imu; but la 'au lapa 'au, those pieces have been lost in time .

My family were canoe carvers, and the last canoe carver actually took the practice with him. He refused to teach anybody. So my uncle took it with him. He didn't want to have anybody else continue it. So we were left, pretty much with a void. Everything that I've learned, culturally, actually came in my older years, after I graduated from highschool, from researching and investigating, what does culture look like? First of all, at that time, as a gay person, and attempting to reignite that in my family, that was my goal, actually, that was my secret goal was to reignite cultural balance back into my family. Growing up was, you know we just did pretty much a western life with a nuance and a sprinkle of things that we do Hawai'i. Not as much as how it is now. It's a whole different, different era, you know.

Kanani: Do you know why your uncle chose not to carry forth the canoe carving tradition?

Kumu 'Au'a: I believe that there are no males left in the family and his kids who are male actually passed away before him. So he made the decision to not teach anybody else.

I don't think he was in the mood to teach any of his kids how to carve. And so I'm two generations from him, so it's him and then a generation below him and then me. Ironically, I did pick up the carving abilities to carve. I'm actually a carver now. I'm pahu (drum) carver, and so I believe that innately, I think our kupuna came back into me and now I carve.

So I teach community cohorts every so often, I teach you how to carve, how to carve pahu, how to get back into touch with the wood, and what does that look like as a Hawaiian?

Kanani: How did you get into carving?

Kumu 'Au'a: I actually started my carving journey when I was training to 'ūniki to become a kumu hula. I realized as - well, our kumu required us to create a pahu before we graduated to become teachers, and become part of the guild. I had a connection to wood for a really long time, I just never really put any energy into it. You know, because I was just busy. But when I started to carve my pahu, I was like, Oh, I think I like this, something's coming through me. After I finished my first pahu, I realized that that was one of my goals, to continue carving. I realized

that my hands had a relationship with the wood, you know, and so, yeah, so fast forward, I carved pahu now, you know, for the community, or I teach, I teach hula people. So, my kumu actually opened that pathway.

Kanani: Tell me about your Kumu?

Kumu 'Au'a: My kumu is Taupōuri Tangarō, a very karasmatic man. He's able to galvanize a whole community in a blink of an eye. Very influential in my life. He taught me the majority of all the formal training and the form of hula that I actually use as my foundation, it all came through him and to me. And he's actually married to my cousin, so she was instrumental in - I'm gonna reverse because before I met him, I met my cousin Kekuhi. She was instrumental in requiring me, in her own way, to investigate what culture practice looks like. So I ended up dancing for Hālau O Kekuhi through her, and I ended up becoming a college student because of her. In 1999 I started my first college course, it was a summer program called 'Imi Pono, and it was bridging Native Hawaiian plants and science together. I remember this until today. And I made my first kīhei, which I still have, I still have my first kihe, which is what some of this is actually based on, this pa'u that I'm making for this show, for our show. And so yeah, let's fast forward. I continued on the educational journey and academia journey and I ended up dancing at Hālau O Kekuhi. He (Dr. Tangarō) was actually in

the upper division in Hālau O Kekuhi, when I was a beginner student. I danced there for a number of years and then I left to pursue my educational career and I dabbled in hula a little bit on the side. And then I realized that I needed to have that foundation.

Simultaneously, he was my client, at my salon. Because I'm a hairdresser. I've been a hairdresser for a very long time. It's been like, 27 years I've been a hairdresser. And he actually said, Oh, why don't you? Why don't you investigate coming back to hula? And why don't you finish the hula program at community college? And why don't you come into my 'ūniki cohort to become a kumu? I feel that you would benefit from that. And so I was doing his hair one day and he just said that, and I was like, alright then. So I ended up going in, I ended up going into the program with him, and I finished my Hawaii Community College Hula certificate at the time. Then I continued along with him in the 'ūniki process.

He was instrumental in my academic journey, anything that had to do with academia, Tangarō was the instrument that actually moved that. And he was very adamant about his students having a higher degree. It was very important for him, that his people that he graduated to kumu hula, are very articulate, and they know how to articulate the Hawaiian world, you know, and be able to speak in public and engage in the community at those, those echelons at those levels of language. And

we did you know, many of us graduated, and we became committed to our masters, and we're running our own hālaus, and we're community members. And so yeah, he was, he was the impetus.

Kanani: Did you grow up with any spiritual practices, I know you didn't have that many cultural practices, just because we're in the same generation, and it just was lost during our time.

Kumu 'Au'a: We had something in our family that was some kind of spiritual practice, but not everybody practiced that though. My family, per capita, are Mormons, but in the household there wasn't any spiritual practice, and I knew I was a little different because I was always investigating. I felt really strong pilina to heiau spaces. So I wasn't really Christian. In my body, it was never a thing for me, I was always investigating the other stuff, you know, things that have ancestral moments, right.

Kanani: Spirituality is really hard to pin down because I think for everyone, it's different, especially for children. We don't always have a vocabulary for spirituality.

Kumu 'Au'a: It is, yeah, right. I did have the pilina towards, you know, traditional spaces, like, places where kupuna actually reside. And that really was, yet the impetus, for me to go and discover what does that

look like in hula? And so what I ended up doing was I danced for Uncle Johnny for a whole year. Absolutely didn't like it. It was not working for me. Okay. Amazing, hula, amazing hula, but it just wasn't working for me. It was, I just, I needed to find something else. That was Hālau O Kekuhi.

They were the sole revivers of the kuahu practice. I began to investigate what does traditional practice look like? What does ritual look like though hula? And from there, it spread out, you know, and then I realized that my spiritual na'au and my wailua, you know, and my mauli was full, it just was full just doing that practice. And then I knew, that is where I needed to be, you know?

I've been a traditional Hawaiian practitioner since 2000, I've been practicing traditional spirituality for about 24 years now. So, I guess you call us pagans. The western people call us pagans, but I'm Hawaiian.

Kanani: One more question about hula, I'm wondering, how was the learning process for you? Did you feel that hula transformed you, and if so, what was that like?

Kumu 'Au'a: For me, I first learned hula through the environment. So, we did a lot of stuff outside, and when I started to really realize what hula was, I realized that we were just a byproduct of the environment,

you know, the landscape, right. And so that's when I knew that I was really connected to hula. When I figured that out, beyond the prettiness, right, beyond looking cut, beyond looking at “oh my gosh, she looks so beautiful, it looks so beautiful”, you know, beyond all of that, beyond all of those those personal connections, I realized that it's not even about me, that the movements are about the forest, you know, and those people in the kai (sea), those people and all the holoholona (forest creatures), those people. That's when I realized my connection to hula moved to a very deep space.

My kumu, I'm gonna go back to my kumu, he was really instrumental in my rearing in the hula world, because he was able to bridge the gap, and to make everybody understand that it doesn't matter who you are in the hālau, what matters is that how you're contributing right to the community. And he always made the space safe for me. And I was the only one (māhū wahine) in his cohort at the time. And then I realized that we needed to have more, more of that, you know, and so, thus became the journey for me to figure out, what does that look like? How can I do that? How would I be able to replicate what my kumu did for me to the community? You know, how could I do that?

So for me, and my connection to Laka, I don't see any difference between me as a māhū and Laka, the dualities of Laka, and the fact that, that Laka and the nomenclatures of Laka, that comes under Laka,

which is Kapo and Laka, that duality is no different from māhū. Which brings me back to the spiritual piece. The reason why I continue practicing is because of that, that piece that we as māhū can connect to that. We have a direct, tangible connection to the idea that we have a kulana in the hula world, and we have, we have kuleana to uphold. And so that is that piece between hula and māhū, that I hold very dearly to me. And then I always explain to my [māhū dancers] - I do have a lot of muscle dancers - I always remind them that, don't think that you don't belong in the space, that you belong here because Laka says you belong here. It's really different when you can connect at that level and know spiritually, spiritually, that you belong in a space as a māhū, that takes it to a whole different level, because there's not much places that they can get that, that māhū can get that spiritual acceptance. You know, it's always trying to find the niche, trying to fit them in. *Oh, yeah, you know, we can fit you in here. Yeah. And, um, God loves you. But can you?* Can you connect like that, you know, and we can, in the Hawaiian world, we can connect directly to that. And so, hula and māhū, that's where it adds up.

Kanani: So, you spoke of belonging, and my next question is, what does belonging mean, maybe from a kanaka perspective, and what does that mean to you, personally?

Kumu 'Au'a: I think belonging means that you actually can find that role, you can have that role in the community and you can you can be of service, right, because it's all about, at this point, it's all about how you can serve your community because you can you cannot stand alone. Not even the Ali'i could stand alone, not even the Ali'i could be without their people. You know, it's about service in your community.

Kanani: For you and your journey as māhū and kumu hula, how does that question of belonging live and resonate with you?

Kumu 'Au'a: That I can contribute on a positive level. Give the flavor of what is Hawai'i, and not take away from that, and be part of the solution. When it comes to whatever we do in the community, whether it's political work or spiritual work or cultural work, or the things that need to get done. I can always tell my husband *don't add, you need to enhance me, you need to enhance me, it's not about you. Same with me, I'm here to enhance you.* You know, and so it's the same way when I look at community, I should be there to enhance the community, and not make it bland, or take away from it, or, you know, be a deficit, because that's what you don't want to be, right. And so my personal role in the community is to, to always be there and not a'e, or not step over things that I shouldn't step over, and make sure everything is kosher, and that we all move far for the common goal, right, which is, you know, cultural preservation and health and vitality of our

community, and maui ola (breath of life). And all of that goodness, that good stuff that our community needs.

Kanani: My last question is about adversity, and how we have paths to choose, and I'm wondering, especially as māhū, I feel like there's more of this discourse to move through to believe in yourself. So my question is how can adversity be the pono path?

Kumu 'Au'a: Well, now I'm a māhū, but not always, and not all of my family agreed with me being māhū

I believe forging a path always comes with the release of something. Sometimes it's adversity, sometimes adversity comes in the form of a human. And sometimes you got to release that human so you can forge forth. I've had to release a number of humans in my life that weren't giving me any light, or lifting me up, you know, are showing me a way that I can move to the next level in my life. And so, sometimes you just got to do that, you know, through adversity, we have to.

We look at the ka'au of Hi'iaka a lot in here [in hālau], and there's just many ka'au right, many ka'au, you can look at any story, there's always a huaka'i (journey) and akua (god/goddess), a huaka'i and the kā i ka 'ino (curse), the hihia (entanglement) and the returning of whatever, right? But we look into Hi'iaka, and I always say, you know what,

Hi'iaka, in everything she did, she always accomplished everything, there was not one thing she never accomplished.

All that adversity that happens, you got to figure out a way to get over it. You got to get over it and, and for us in the Māhū community, you gotta, you gotta get over it. You have to, you have to figure it out. Because if not, you're going to be forever stuck in the chains of bondage by the people who are holding you down, you have to really step, you have to, however long it takes, take your time, take your time, but really step, because that is the only way you're gonna push forward and forge through, you know, because if not, that adversity is gonna just chain you down and you'll never want to holomua (move forward). You know, and that is my message to our Māhū communities, the reason why I'm building these programs is to help people, to help them get out of their chains. You know, be it families who don't accept them, you know, people who are just, you know, not being good to them, they're in bad situations. They're not in the correct communities, because they're hanging around with, you know, people that may not be so healthy for them and they're, na'au, you know, yeah, break away from that, get out of that, you know, figure it out, Hi'iaka up, you know, forge through. That's the only way you can actually get success and find success and be successful. You know, I've not come to this point, sitting in this space [hālau], by allowing adversity to hold me down. You have to break away from that.

Kanani: Yes, use that energy [adversity], and transform it, because it's all energy.

Kumu 'Au'a: You have to find solutions. You know, when adversity comes, you have to look for solutions. You have to, you have to, because if you're stuck there, you have to figure it out. I would always say, I would tell my Kumu, you always have to be strategic, you've got to be strategic, it's important to be strategic in your life. You always got to be strategic. That is the only way, you got to strategize everything, I was like that (laughter).

Kanani: (laughter) I'm thinking of hula, I've got to be strategic with my hula.

Kumu 'Au'a: Even when you're learning hulas, you've got to be strategic.

Kanani: You really have to organize your life, right?

Kumu 'Au'a: Yeah, you've got to be strategic when you're learning hula, it's all about strategy. Strategize everything, everything, totally, even owning a cat, you've got to strategize that too, (looks at cat) handful.

(Both laughing)