ANCIENT STEPS

Hālau Nā Kipu‘opu‘u recounts the untold stories of Kamehameha with a hula drama.

Hānau Ke Ali‘i
Backstage at the Kahilu Theatre in Waimea, twenty dancers from Hālau Nā Kīpu’upu’u help each other get dressed. They secure lauhala kā’ei (a sort of cummerbund made of woven hala leaves) around each other’s waists. They drape themselves in kūpe’e ho’o kalakala (cape of dried ti leaves that resemble the wings of a condor). They tie niho ‘īlio kūpe’e (dog-tooth anklets made from — yes — real dog teeth) around each other’s muscular calves.

The dressing room is filled with so many traditional garments and accessories made entirely from materials available in the days of Hawaiian antiquity, it looks as if the hālau has raided the vaults of the Bishop Museum. In fact the dancers and their supporters made all of this regalia themselves. And they are donning it for tonight’s premiere of Hānau Ke Ali‘i, or Born Is the Chief, a four-act original hula drama telling the life story of Kamehameha I.

At the end of act one the audience screams and cheers, but after the final act everyone sits in stunned silence. Five hundred people have just witnessed two hours of stirring chants and pahu (drum) pounding as dancers who look like they stepped out of the ancient past revealed stories about King Kamehameha never before told outside of private circles. Now it’s as if the audience members aren’t sure whether they’ve just seen an incredible performance or witnessed a sacred ceremony. Do they clap and stamp their feet, or do they bow their heads in reverence?

Hānau Ke Ali‘i, which grew out of a community-building project launched on Hawai‘i Island in 2010, might be an artistic milestone in contemporary Hawaiian culture. It combines unpublished stories about Kamehameha gathered from families of Waimea and North Kohala with traditional clothing, ancient storytelling, Hawaiian martial arts, and a type of hula and chanting rarely seen today. The Kahilu Theatre debut last May kicked off a statewide summer tour, which culminate with a performance at Honolulu’s Blaisdell Concert Hall on August 22.

Hālau Nā Kīpu’upu’u, which takes its name from the chilly wind and rain of Waimea as well as the name of a company of Kamehameha’s warriors, is led by Micah Kamohoali‘i, a thirty-something kumu hula (hula teacher) whose shock of long frizzy hair follows him like a dark, windswept cloud. Hānau Ke Ali‘i is the embodiment of his mana‘o (knowledge) and training. He comes from a family of Native Hawaiian speakers, and when he was born his grandmother declared: “This boy is mine. I’m going to teach everything to him.” And then she — along with all the other elders in Kamohoali‘i’s family — did just that. Great grandparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles schooled him in a wide range of subjects from kapa (bark cloth) making to ‘ukulele playing.

Kamohoali‘i excelled at genealogy, and by the time he was ten he could chant the family history of one of his bloodlines all the way back to the first voyagers to Hawai‘i from Tahiti. “It took me about half an hour to chant all the four hundred to five hundred names,” he says, “all the way down to me and how I was born.” All of his early training laid the groundwork for the hula drama Kamohoali‘i is staging today.

To get the untold stories of Kamehameha, Kamohoali‘i and his hālau interviewed residents of Waimea and Kohala, which is populated with Kamehameha descendants (many of them Kamohoali‘i’s relatives). “Most people think that there are no living descendants of Kamehameha,” Kamohoali‘i says. “Well, most of Waimea is Kamehameha kids.” After all, Kamehameha had more than twenty wives, though only three were high-
ranking enough to produce heirs.

Hānau Ke Aliʻi revives an ancient style of hula rarely seen today—animal dances. In the hula tilo (dog dance) the performers claw the air and howl, while in the hula pu’a (pig dance) they grunt and do steps that recall pigs waddling through the forest. Kamohoaliʻi took the family stories about Kamehameha pertaining to animals and paired them with existing animal-related chants and hula. Where there weren’t matches, he wrote and choreographed new chants and hula using ancient steps. Each act opens and closes with an animal dance. The first act is entitled “Hōʻailona,” or omen, and begins with a shark dance telling the story of Kamehameha thrashing about inside the womb of his mother, Kekuʻia‘poʻia, who craved shark eyeballs during her pregnancy. “The kāhuna prophesized that Kamehameha would become voracious like a shark and he would become the killer of chiefs and the king of all kings and would unite the Islands,” says Kamohoaliʻi.

One new story the hālau discovered is of two kāhuna who attempt to put a curse on Kamehameha. Just as they were about to throw some of Kamehameha’s hair and fingernails into a fire as they chanted, an enormous owl appeared, extinguishing the flames with its flapping wings. They relit the fire twice, with the same result. Then the brothers gave up, realizing their nemesis was protected by ‘aumākua, or guardian spirits. So the first act ends with an owl dance, marked with slow, arm-flapping movements, a sort of Hawaiian Swan Lake.

Another act is entitled “Hulihia,” which means to overturn; it recounts Kamehameha’s famous battles to claim title to Hawaiʻi Island. Kamohoaliʻi uses the pig dance, with the animals’ uprooting of hāpu‘u ferns, to symbolize the man who would be king’s overthrow of rival chiefs. To close this act, the hālau turns to a hula inspired by the ‘iwa, the great frigatebird, in which the dancers’ dramatic wings of dried ti leaves rustle with sweeping arm movements. The aggressive ‘iwa, known for snatching fish from other birds, reflects Kamehameha’s land grab from Hawaiʻi Island’s other chiefs.

Hānau Ke Aliʻi evolved out of a project Kamohoaliʻi launched in 2010 to reconnect the forty-odd Hawaiian families of Waipio valley to their homeland through genealogy. Kamohoaliʻi himself has a deep connection to Waipio, where his ancestors were the community genealogists. “I felt like the younger and older generations were kind of forgetting why we love Waipio and were starting to look at it as just a place,” he says. “And it led to them doing drugs and alcohol. It’s where our chiefs, the highest ranking of them all lived—it doesn’t belong with drugs and alcohol.”

So Kamohoaliʻi did what his ancestors did. He explained to the people of Waipi’o how they were interconnected with each other and with the land. Along with identifying bloodlines, Hawaiian genealogical chants also connect people with places, down to details such as the type of rain found in a particular valley or the quality of wind. A key part of the project involved huaka’i, or site visits, to sacred places, where Kamohoaliʻi gave in-depth tutorials on the sites’ cultural significance. “If you read a story in a book, it can be a beautiful story, but if you read that book in the actual setting of the story, it’s more powerful,” he says. After the site visits Kamohoaliʻi met with each family to go over their genealogy. From those experiences came his hālau’s first hula drama, called Mauliathoumua O Waipio’, or The Chiefly Descendants of Waipio.

At the Honoka'a People’s Theatre, representatives from each Hawaiian family in Waipi’o went onstage in traditional dress, chanting about their histories, how they were ‘awa (kava) growers, canoe carvers and heiau (temple) builders, how their families came from sharks, owls and turtles. One hundred people appeared onstage altogether, representing all the Hawaiian families of Waipi’o, and the hālau danced in accompaniment. The two-night run sold out.

High on the results of Mauliathoumua O Waipio’, Kamohoaliʻi decided to repeat the exercise in his hometown of Waimea. The result was the hālau’s second hula drama, Ka Hulilauali’i a Waimea, or The Royal Calabash of Waimea. But there was a big difference between working with Waipi’o’s few dozen families and the hundreds of Hawaiian families of Waimea. “There was no way that we would be able to get them all to participate,” Kamohoaliʻi says. “And what happens if we miss a family, and that family calls us and says, ‘What? My family’s from Waimea — how come you never call me?’” Kamohoaliʻi saw that the project had the potential to be more divisive than uniting. So he reformulated the program.

He would again lead huaka’i to legendary sites, but this time he would add community workshops to handcraft the attire and artifacts the dancers would later use. Participants would put their mana, or spiritual force, into everything they made. “That way we’re dancing with all of Waimea’s mana,” he says.

Hālau Nā Kipuʻupuʻu is the hula hālau behind Hānau Ke Aliʻi. The head of the hālau is kumu hula Micah Kamohoaliʻi, seen here (and on page 90) near his home in Waimea. He and his dancers worked closely with the Waimea community to develop the production, which is deeply rooted in place. “I believe other communities need to learn about what we do, and we need to learn about other communities,” says Kamohoaliʻi. “It’s our goal to let people know you don’t need to chant and dance about another island—you can dance about your backyard. If we can empower communities to have pride in their own stories, what a world it would be.”

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The dancers, seen here at a rehearsal, dress as they might have in Kamehameha’s day. Every part of their costumes — from the colorfully dyed kapa (bark cloth used to make the garments at bottom left) to an elegant skirt (at bottom right) to dog-tooth accessories (right page bottom and top right) — was made by hand using only the raw materials that would have been available to ancient Hawaiians. Hundreds of area residents helped make the costumes in a series of workshops over a two-year period. On page 31, kīpoʻe are ready for stringing into seashell ornamentation at a workshop.
Over a two-year period some three thousand Waimea residents participated in the workshops, creating all sorts of authentic Hawaiian art and artifacts using the same natural fibers the ancient Hawaiians had to work with. These included: five thirty-foot-tall kāhili (feathered standards symbolic of royalty), the likes of which have not been seen since ‘Iolani Palace was built and kāhili were shrunk to fit inside Western-style buildings; forty niho ‘ilio kūpe'e (those dog-tooth anklets); thirty kapa skirts as well as malo (loincloths) and kihei (capes). The workshops allowed the drama to be performed by dancers clothed in nothing but traditional dress.

Kamohoali'i made sure that word about the workshops got out to Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike. “Because this project is not for Native Hawaiians; it’s for the Waimea community,” he says. “It’s for everybody, so if you’re going to be part of this community then be a part of the community. That way we get everybody to learn.”

The site visits started on the easternmost side of Waimea. Kamohoali'i found that most participants had never been to these historically significant places. One especially significant excursion was to lush, forested Mahiki, on the rim of Waipio valley. Known commonly (and ignominiously) as Mud Lane and not easily accessible, it was the site of a battle between the forces of Kamehameha I and Keoua Kūhaʻu‘ula, the ruling chief of Ka‘ū. More than three hundred people attended that huaka‘i, arriving in a caravan of four-wheel-drive trucks. For four hours, the hālau, through storytelling, ancient hula and chants, covered battles, Hi'ilawe falls, the names of the rivers, the families of the area, the practices of those families and especially the area’s relationship to kapa-making.

Kamohoali'i explains that beating kapa sounds like a drum and in ancient times was a way for villages to communicate with each other. “It was used like Morse code,” he says. “Maybe a ranking ali‘i came to town, so kapa makers would change the beating pattern and it would echo to the other village where women would hear it and go, ‘Oh, that means a chief is in town. We need to get things prepared. Get the imu [earth oven] ready!’”

After visiting Mahiki, the group met at the Hawaiian Homesteaders Association community hall for a kapa-making workshop. The three hundred participants, having heard the stories and chants describing kapa in detail, couldn’t wait to start pounding the wauke (mulberry) bark into the kapa the dancers would eventually wear. “I can guarantee you, I have instructed the biggest kapa class ever,” laughs Kamohoali'i. “We were two miles out of Waimea, but you could hear the beating in the middle of town. That’s what you call Hawaiian tradition.” Hulilaulii'i's 2013 run at the Kahiulu Theatre was another sold-out event.

After Hulilaulii'i, Kamohoali'i decided it was time to take the hālau on the road. “I believe other communities need to learn about what we do, and we need to learn about other communities,” he says. “If we can empower communities to have pride in their own stories, what a world it would be.” To create a production with island-wide resonance, Kamohoali'i took the second half of Hulilaulii'i, which focused on Kamehameha, and expanded it. But how to tell Kamehameha's much-told story in a fresh way? Kamohoali'i arrived at the idea for gathering the oral histories of Kamehameha to shed new light on the great king. And so Hānau Ke Ali'i was born.

One morning in April, on the day of the final huaka‘i and community workshop before the premiere of Hānau Ke Ali'i, a broad cross-section of Waimea society gathers at the Waimea Hawaiian Homesteaders Association. There are teenage Hawaiian-language immersion school students, young mothers and their energetic children, weathered farmers, the hālau's resident “jailbird” (Erin O'Donnell, who was among the group arrested for protesting the development of a new telescope on Mauna Kea earlier that month), and well-heeled retirees who have settled among Waimea's rolling green hills. There are Hawaiians, Asians and Caucasians, and more than a few of Kamohoali'i's relatives. The air rings with "Hi auntie!" and "Aloha uncle!"

Kamohoali'i gathers everyone in a circle, asks them to join hands then launches into a series of chants to protect the group on its excursion and grant awareness to find what it seeks. Then people pile into a fleet of four-by-four pickup trucks and set off. Leading the caravan, Kamohoali'i looks at his fuel gauge, which reads near empty, and says, "I wonder if the chant will grant us gas?" The first stop is a parking lot adjacent to the Jacaranda Inn, where a huge pōhaku, or rock, draped with drying lei sits in the brush. Kamohoali'i proceeds to tell the tale of a mo'o, or lizard, named Manaua, who lived in the nearby Kohākōhau spring and was said to sunbathe on this pōhaku.

Families have traditionally left lei and offerings on the rock, and in turn Manaua makes it rain. But sometime in the 1960s or '70s, Kamohoali'i says, Parker Ranch owner Richard Smart put a fence around the rock. Soon
afterward Waimea experienced a drought, and Parker Ranch started to die. One of Kamohoali'i's aunts offered a solution. "Take down the fence and honor the pōhaku, and rain will come back to Waimea," she said. But the fence remained up. Then cattle started dying, and finally the fence came down. "All the families made 'akulikuli leis for days, and they did all the old chants that Waimea town thought had died, and it started to pour," Kamohoali'i says. "Actually that was the year that it flooded. Manaua means the power of the rain."

It's a well-known story around Waimea, but Kamohoali'i adds something more, relating how Manaua was actually an ali'i, a person of royal heritage, not a real lizard. "She was born a little bit different, so she was given the term mo'o — anything that was different could be considered mo'o, like someone with a birth defect," he explains. "So she was a living ali'i, and this is where she sat. It's not just a rock in a bush."

Next the caravan heads out of town to a hillside where cattle graze. The trucks make their way through a gate and up a steep, grassy incline, trying to avoid clusters of rocks. Kamohoali'i pulls right up to the edge of a bluff overlooking Hawai'i Preparatory Academy. Everyone walks down to the hill to a low wall of stones laid out in a square — the remains of Hale 'Ilo, House of the Storm, which Kamohoali'i says is the only known heiau built and run by women. The high-ranking chiefess Ho'opilihae, going against societal rules, had it constructed, possibly in the late 1500s, as a place of healing; women learned la'a lupau (traditional medicine) and practiced midwifery there, he says. Then the hālau performs a hula about the stones at Hale 'Ilo.

Walking back up the hill afterward, dancer Nau'i Murphy, sister of Hōkīle'a navigator Ka'ilulani Murphy and Kamohoali'i's right-hand woman, describes such plein air dancing as performing for the places. "When we get to perform in front of people, that's sort of what we draw upon — that experience of being in that place," she says. "We try to give them some idea of what that place is like, or what that time period would be like, and the energy that would be in those places."

Looking down the slope she just ascended, Murphy adds, "On my kapa that I'll wear in the performance, I made the print of the stones that roll down off this hill. A lot of times when we do these huaka'i to places and we do our research, we incorporate that into whatever pieces we're making."

On this day the pieces being made at the workshop are niho 'ilio kūpe'e — the cascades of dog teeth that are tied to the dancers' legs and make the chatter of enamel on enamel as they move. Kamohoali'i has trained his dancers in the crafting of all the costume elements, and they sit at long cafeteria tables showing the workshop participants how to sort and string the teeth onto lengths of string made from jute. To date the hālau has already used twenty thousand dog teeth, which Kamohoali'i procures from friends throughout the state who have connections to Hawaiian Humane Society.

One of the workshop participants is Brigid Mulloy, a midwife at the North Hawai'i Community Hospital. As she knots teeth onto jute she says: "I came to this early on in my stay in Waimea. It's been an amazing way to get to know the community." At another table, hālau member Jacy Medina works with Dorothy Burns, who is visiting from Dayton, Ohio. Burns was born on O'ahu and attended Kamehameha Schools, but marriage took her to the Mainland. "This is my first time here, and it's so exciting. I've been doing genealogy work and speaking with kūpuna [elders]. Coming to Waimea, where my family is from, and doing this — I feel very connected," she says, her eyes moistening with emotion.

Medina, a bubbly dental hygienist when she's not dancing, finds being part of the hālau inspiring. "In high school, I never really touched base with the Hawaiian side of me," she says. "I was studying, trying to make a future for myself. Now that I'm into the hālau, I have a better understanding of who I am. Dancing just makes me a stronger Hawaiian. When we dance, we dance with our hearts and our souls."

One of the participants on the huaka'i that day was Phyllis Fox, a longtime O'ahu resident who retired with her husband to Waimea in 1993. She's become one of the regulars on the excursions and in the workshops. "When I started going to the presentations I didn't know anyone," she says. "But as you watch them chant and hula, and enjoy these incredible places and Micah's interpretations, it's like becoming part of a family. I have a better understanding of the place we live in. They just make history live."

Fox is in the audience at the Kahului Theatre on the night of Hānau Ke Ali'i's premiere. Just like everyone around her she sits in stunned silence at the end of the final act. "It was as if we just had to stop and pause before coming back to the present," she says later. "Everyone was so wrapped up in the performance. You needed time to step back into the present."  

Hānau Ke Ali'i premiered at the Kahului Theater in Waimea last May, kicking off a multi-island tour that will culminate with a performance at Honolulu's Blaisdell Concert Hall on August 22. At right, on opening night, the hālau performs a hula inspired by the 'iwa bird, a dance called "Iwakloumoku." Kamehameha has also been called "Iwakloumoku," "the 'iwa bird that hooks the Islands together," says Kamohoali'i. Some of the other high spots in Hānau Ke Ali'i include a dog dance, in which the dancers claw the air and howl, and a pig dance with steps reminiscent of wedding swine.