

Lāna'i's Own

On the island of Lāna'i, on a stretch of southern shoreline, there was once a fishing village called Kapiha'ā. Today the ruins of the village are obscured by knee-high grass and an extensive grove of *kiawe* (mesquite) trees; only by getting down into that grove can you really start to see what once was. Then the imagination begins to reassemble the tumbled, umber stones into house foundations and other structures – a three-tiered *heiau* (temple), cleared patches for gardening, an immense fishing shrine heaped with white coral chunks and crowned with an iconic spire of smooth basalt.

It is here, above the shrine in the simmering heat of midmorning, that I sit with the new director of the Lāna'i Culture and Heritage Center, Kepā Maly. We gaze out at the squared-off seastack called Pu'u Pehe ("Sweetheart Rock") and across the porcelain sea to Haleakalā, Mauna Kea, Kaho'olawe. In the middle distance, whales spout.

Kepā tells me that the coral-capped shrine, properly called a *kū'ula i'a*, corresponds to a matching structure atop Pu'u Pehe that is believed to be a *kū'ula manu*, a bird-catcher's shrine. He names each of the valleys that cut into the seacliffs beyond Pu'u Pehe—Kapo'ili'ili,

Kapokōhōlua and others—and interprets the name of each valley as a specific projection of the Hawaiian mythic imagination. He calls them "storied places." For Kepā, the entire island of Lānaʻi is a network of storied places, a constellation of legends and former lives. It is also the place that forged him, that took out of one world and deep into another.

Kepā is an anomaly of the rarest kind in the Islands—in fact, I think as we sit together, there may be no one else quite like him. When he tells me that he sometimes has difficulty with the "new" Hawaiian—that spoken by students from the university—because he speaks in the manner of the old days, that thought is confirmed.

Let me explain. The man telling me this is light-skinned, fair-haired, slim in face and physique. He would be perfectly camouflaged on an Orange County golf course—at least until he opened his mouth. Then an old Hawaiian in a *haole* body would emerge, speaking in the manner of the *kumu*, the teachers, who have guided him: storytelling vivid, diction careful and genuinely *me ka ha`aha`a*, full of humility.

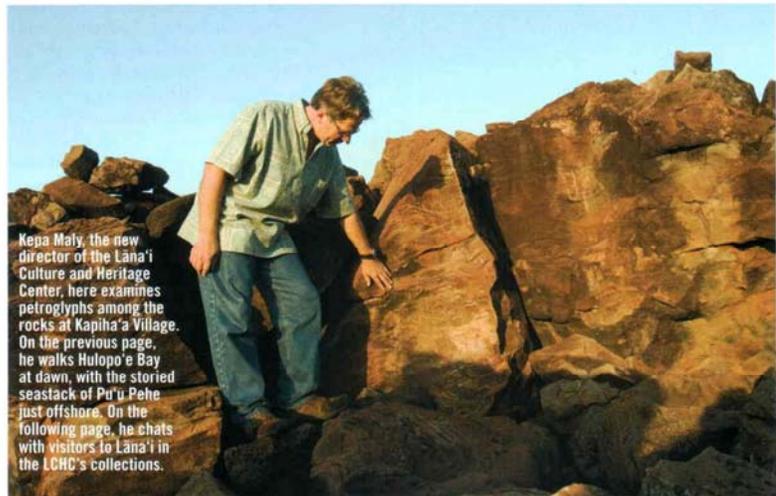
How Kepā became this person—his unique destiny—is a tale with all of the resonance and drama of a great Hawaiian myth. As a youth, Kepā was taken as the *hānai* (foster child) of parents of the grandparent or *tūtū* generation. Already in their mid-70s when Kepā came to them, the Reverend Daniel Kaʻōpuiki Sr. and Hattie Holohua Kaʻēnaokalani-Kaʻōpuiki spoke Hawaiian as their native tongue. "Their *kūpuna* saw the *kapu* overthrown," says Kepā, a way of noting that his *hānai* parents' lives (and thus his own) ran directly back to pre-missionary days. "I was really fortunate," he says.

His own name, "Kepā," was given to him by the Kaʻōpuikis. It means "embrace" or "encircle." "Hawaiians are the great embracers," he tells me. "They embrace freely even in adversity." His transformation was total. "I threw away my English name long ago. That person is dead."

As a kid, Kepā hiked the island, looking for the places the old folks talked about, places of myth and history. "I was the weird one," he says. "I would hear them talk story, and I always wanted to go find what they were talking about." He picked pineapple on the night shift so that he could hike the island in daylight.

When he finished high school, Kepā left Lānaʻi and the home of his *Tūtū* Papa and *Tūtū* Mama, moved to Oʻahu and began inventing a life commensurate with his childhood. He started at Kualoa Regional Park, first as a volunteer until he was hired as a park naturalist. Later he worked for Hawaiʻi Volcanoes National Park as a specialist in cultural interpretation programs, a skill he took to positions at the Grand Canyon and Point Reyes National Seashore. He worked as a curator and exhibit designer for the Kauaʻi Museum.

Throughout, he continued learning from the Hawaiian elders. "Aunty Maiki Lake was my *kumu* to *ʻūniki* me," he says—in other words, he graduated from the *hālau* (school) of one of the most influential *kumu hula* (hula teacher) of the Hawaiian Renaissance. He also speaks with reverence



of Tūtū Ho'ohila Kawelo, a chanter of the old Pele line. Other influences, he says, include Aunty Lokalia Montgomery, who was Aunty Maiki's *kumu*, and Mary Kawena Pukui, a scholar with the Bishop Museum who surpassed all others in her dedication to the preservation of Hawaiian culture. Kepā married Kawena Pukui's *mo'opuna* (grand niece), Onaona, and the two have been partners for over thirty years. In fact, when Kepā left his position at the Kaua'i Museum, he and Onaona moved to the Big Island and created a business, Kumu Pono Associates, offering research into and translation of Hawaiian documents such as royal patent grants, land history records, old Hawaiian language newspaper accounts and other such untapped cultural resources.

Through all of this time, Kepā kept collecting information about his home island of Lāna'i. In Denver, Colorado, for example, at the US Geological Survey office he discovered a written account of a walk across Lāna'i in 1820. He also found a photograph of the now-vanished "pipi chute," or cattle-loading ramp, at Mānele Harbor. In effect, he has spent a lifetime collecting information about Lāna'i, most of it lodged only in his mind and memory. "I was worried. I thought, 'I'm going to die before I get back to Lāna'i and do something with all this information.'"

The solution arose in 2005 when he was asked to put some life into the quiescent Lāna'i Culture & Heritage Center (LCHC), a teeny museum whose doors were usually closed. He helped the center structure itself as a bona fide 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. He helped arrange for the Kaua'i Museum to return numerous Lāna'i artifacts, such as awls, adzes, fishing lures, sling stones, old records and maps. Then, when the time came for LCHC to hire an executive director, he accepted the position. Last September, he came home, with Onaona as his assistant and mission partner. I ask how he felt to return, and he replies instantly: "Ecstatic! I have the opportunity to give back to the people who gave me my life."



The museum, located on the edge of Dole Park in Lāna'i City, is headquarters, but the embrace of Kepā's mission is island-wide and historic in scope. He's alarmed, he says, at the cultural discontinuities that have occurred even within his own lifetime. "We have kids now who have never picked pineapple on Lāna'i," he says, and he laments the fact that the island is no longer a place where all drivers wave as they pass each other. But Kepā's vision of the island goes far deeper into the past than a single lifetime. In his mind, the gods of the forest still live, and his imagination still sees the land as capable of sustaining a population of 6,000—as it did in premodernity—without outside supply lines. "Today," he says by way of contrast, "there are 3,200 people here, and if we miss Barge Day one week, we're in trouble."

I suggest that Lāna'i is small enough to give the feeling that one person can really make a difference. He says, "I hope that I'm humble enough to remember that we all need to be in it together—*kākou*, all of us together. It's what I was taught by the old people. They took me for a reason. Whether it was Tūtū Kawena, Tūtū Kawelo, the Ka'opuikis, whoever it was — I believe that the *kūpuna* had their reasons to talk story and share. Because they don't just teach to anybody. That's what we're always told, right?" He pauses and his face fills with a radiant smile as he thinks of his past and of his future. "Ah," he says. "I love it. It's a way of life. We have the opportunity to help the island retain its place, its spirit." **HH**