

John Keola Lake: Values are based on understanding culture

Sitting in his new hula studio in Kaimukī, Hālau Mele, John Keola Lake sees beyond its four walls to older times and places when he talks about Hawaiian culture.

Born on Maui and raised in Lahaina, Lake, a teacher, kumu hula and great-grandson of a chanter, says "I am what I am because of the riches passed on to me by my kūpuna."

"The old people understood what the land could give us, why we never owned it. We asked of it, and it gave to us and we must remember to give back to it. Our island lifestyle is based on hundreds of generations."

Lake sees today's process of revitalizing the Hawaiian culture as a rediscovery of the riches of the past, tempered with the riches of today. "It's a new Hawai'i, but a new Hawai'i holding onto its past by enriching it and enfolding it into the future."

"We have created a new form of language today, new vocabulary for the new things of today. ... We encourage that. Learning doesn't stop." At the same time,

he says "We have lost the old language and the very important element the kūpuna had. They created terms from their environment to explain their life and their beliefs and feelings."

To understand tradition, one must be careful and dig into the resources we have, says Lake. "Once a person has mastered the basics of language fluency, it opens up more areas for (study of) prose, poetry,

genealogical chants, the figurative and metaphorical language of our ancestors.

"Then we can understand how our po'e kahiko used the beauty of nature to communicate. ... Knowing the language will give understanding of the riches of our culture."

Revival of certain spiritual ceremonies, such as the rededication of Pu'ukoholā Heiau, in which Lake played a major role, affirm that our future is based on our past, says Lake. "We must recall our tap roots, our sources, our grandparents all the way back. ... who gave us the essence of being here."



John Lake