LOHA, UNCLE GEORGE

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





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.

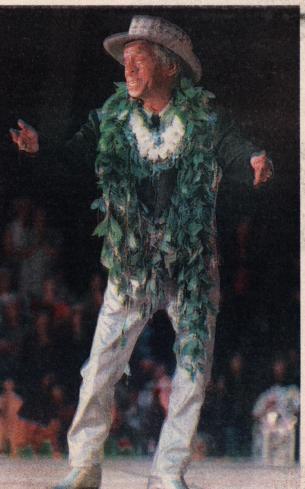
"Later that day, after visiting his body at his home in Hilo, where I held his hand for over an hour, I went for a swim in the ocean, (and) ... a very large turtle swam up to me three times and allowed me to touch its head," she said.

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

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.



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.

KEN SAKAMOTO / 1999



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/musicgomusic)

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

