

## ANOTHER LINK *in the* HAWAIIAN SPIRIT



By Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

Kumu hula John Kaha'i Topolinski — on the street where he lives in Waipio Gentry — says he will 'always be indebted' to his teachers.

### Kumu hula Topolinski carries on the culture in his art

By Burl Burlingame  
Star-Bulletin

**I**SSUES of sovereignty, past injustices and politics aside, Hawaiians still have to live in the here and now. Kumu hula John Kaha'i Topolinski understands that.

Call him the suburban Hawaiian, living a life framed by the values of his ancestors. A family is still a family, and the land is still the aina, even though cinder block has replaced thatch, and pickups have replaced canoes. Topolinski pulls on a kiho — a tapa wrap — T-shirt and jeans, and poses on the neighborhood asphalt. The juxtaposition of culture, commerce and community cracks him up.

Today is the 20th anniversary of the founding of Ka Pa Hula Hawai'i, Topolinski's halau. Topolinski's work helped fuel the Hawaiian Renaissance in the early 1970s, bringing international respect for native Hawaiian culture.

And he remembers distinctly the incident that led him down this path. "I was always fascinated by hula, and when the dancers would perform, I was always front row center, mesmerized," said Topolinski. "But I never danced myself. Men didn't really do that then, except for comic hula.

"Then I went to Brigham Young University

in Provo, Utah, and I was dating the daughter of the governor, Gov. (George Dewey) Clyde. One night, at a party at the governor's mansion, she asked me to dance the hula. I told her I couldn't. I didn't know how.

"She was shocked. 'You can't do the dances of your people?' she said. I was embarrassed, and when I came home, I began to learn all I could."

He learned so well that he became hanai'd to Mary Kawena Pukui, the Hawaiian scholar and linguist. She called him "Johnny Top."

"There weren't many choices in the '60s. The schools weren't teaching this, and Bishop Museum — then! — wasn't helping to perpetrate the culture, just file and catalog it. Hula is our kuleana, and it's up to Hawaiian families to keep it alive."

He discovered that he came from a long line of court dancers, and once Queen Emma had made a special trip to the family homesite in Kohala to watch them dance.

Raised in the "Hawaiian-haole" culture, and proud of both, Topolinski's father was Canadian and his mother from the Big Island. "Father encouraged mother to pass on the culture. Hawaiian was my first language, until I got sassy and refused to speak it. The other kids were talking English. I regret not keeping with it."

He remembers that family support was what defined him. "The Hawaiian way is the family way. The mother nurtures. Today, even when the mom has to work, the balanced families are those where the parents take the time, no matter how damned tired they are, to teach the concept of ohana. The network is still there — Hawaiians have just changed their mode. My mother used to drum into me that a true Hawaiian goes with the flow but does not compromise his principles."

"Let me give you an idea of what my mother was like. She's a Mahi, from Kohala. When the royals last century said, 'Let us blunt the sharp edges of our spears,' the Mahis never did. My mom once pulled a sharp spear out of the closet, and showed me. 'Never let your guard down,' she said. 'Keep the edge sharp.'

"You also need to keep who you are, and keep the best of all racial backgrounds. Children of two cultures have great beauty. After all, it took two people in love to make this child. Remember the love. Mary Pukui said that it was the essence inside that made a Hawaiian. It's not the aina, it's not the calabashes, it's not the feathered capes that define a Hawaiian, it's the spiritual values

See LINK, Page E-2



## LINK: A kumu hula shows values define the Hawaiian

Continued from Page E-1

that continue like a link between generations. We all have the same breath."

And, as a Hawaiian, Topolinski is "furious" at being "lumped in the same groups as those folks who say 'throw out the white man!' Those ... whiners! I am fiercely proud to be what I am, Hawaiian and American. I'm glad I went to school on the mainland; I learned to debate an issue without getting emotional, for one thing. And if we weren't Americans, there wouldn't even be a discussion of Hawaiian rights."

Topolinski said he'd be satisfied with a formal apology from the U.S. government for illegalities during the overthrow, and an accounting and payback for the ceded lands.

Beyond the immediate family, there is the larger family of neighborhood and culture and learning. A history teacher himself, at Mililani High School, Topolinski said he'd "always be indebted to his teachers."

"Hawaiians like Ma'iki Aiu Lake, who opened the school for hula teachers so long ago — she was the real impetus for the perpetuation of this art form. She taught me not to shun Western ways, but to study them, to rip it apart and rebuild it. And Mary Pukui, who taught me language, and that passing on a culture isn't a visionary thing, it's hard work. If we do it right, someday it would be of value to all people, not just Hawaiians."

"Without my teachers, and without my students, I would be nothing."

At Mililani, Topolinski says he tries to be both Topolinski and friend to his students. A teacher needs to pass on life experience as well as book knowledge. "Sometimes they just have problems and need someone to talk to," he said. "If they can't do that at home or with their friends, I'm there. It must mean something — when I see former students on the street, they always acknowledge me. What I want them to know is that they all have potential, that they all can succeed."

Why do kids go into gangs? As



John Kaha'i Topolinski and his halau appeared in Mele Hawaii, a Hawaiian music series on Hawaii public television, in 1974.

surrogate families with alternate value systems? And what about hula halau, with their strict codes of conduct?

Topolinski sighed. "It's true," he said. "A halau is actually a nifty little support group. I have strict etiquette; no dope, no immorality, no teaching others while they're a student, respect for elders. The rules keep it cohesive. When kids are accepted, they know where they stand, which isn't usually the case these days. You might say my halau is a gang!"

"Hula isn't just dancing. It's spiritual and physical, body and mind. I've had kids actually meet and marry within the halau. Hawaiians are a grand, lusty, affectionate and adventurous people, and what is 'Hawaiian' will be here forever."

Topolinski remembers another key moment when he was called upon to be Hawaiian, worlds apart from the awkwardness in Utah. This event was a visit from Prince Philip in 1987, who was squiring a reception for animal preservation at Bishop Museum. Topolinski was asked to chant for the royal visitor.

"I stood right in front of him and chanted, and he looked interested," said Topolinski. "Afterwards, he asked that I be presented to him. Me! There were politicians'

wives standing around with leis for the prince, and they were steaming!"

"The prince and I talked. He said, 'Isn't it a pity that your monarchy had to end in that manner?' And then he said, 'I did not understand your words, but I felt their power.'"

"At that moment, I felt everything in me, the pride of being both Hawaiian and European, come to the surface. I began to cry. He looked at me and said, 'Oh, yes — the eyes water, don't they? But we must carry on, old chap. You and I.'"

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