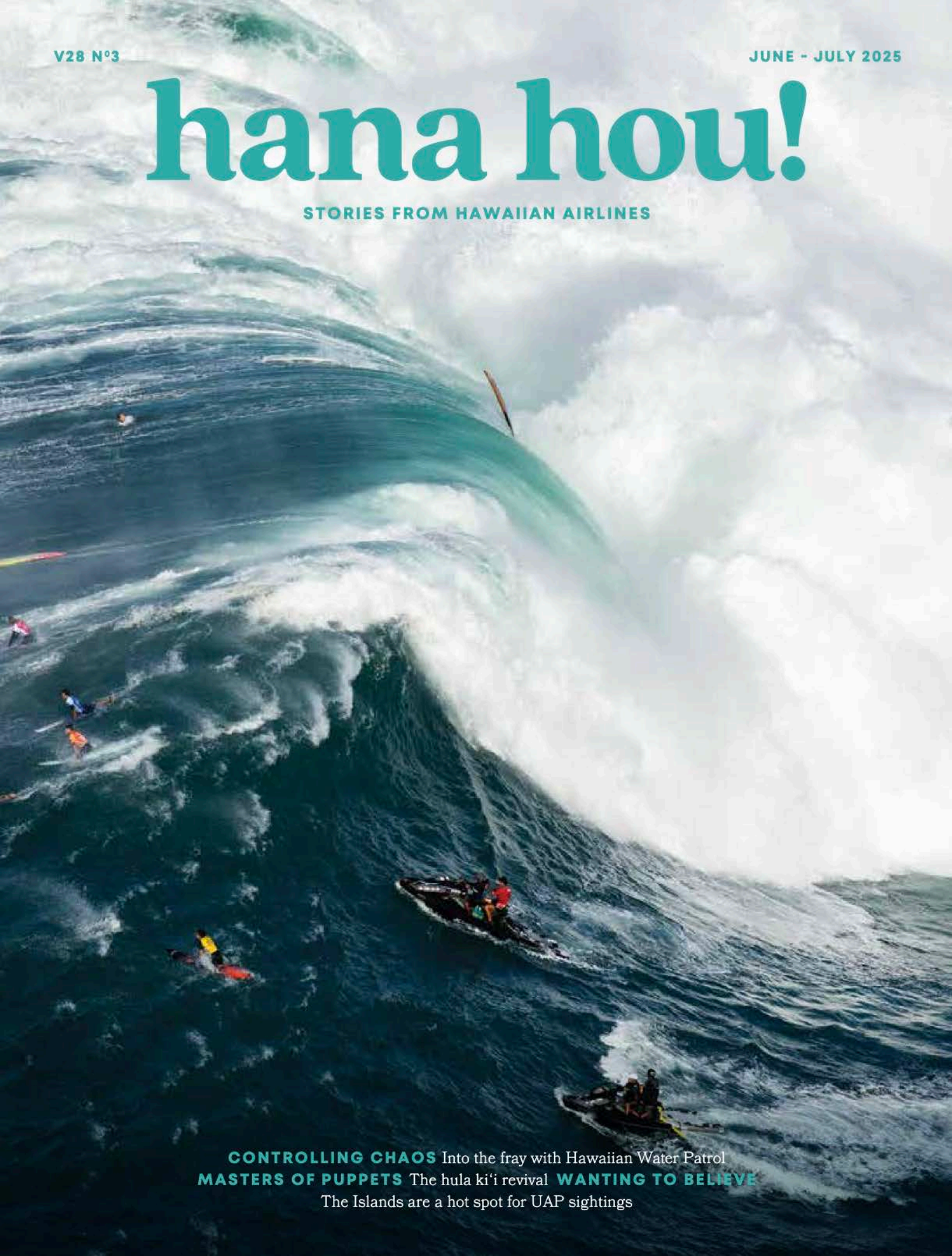
V28 Nº3

JUNE - JULY 2025

hana hou!

STORIES FROM HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



CONTROLLING CHAOS Into the fray with Hawaiian Water Patrol

MASTERS OF PUPPETS The hula ki'i revival **WANTING TO BELIEVE** The Islands are a hot spot for UAP sightings

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Return of the Puppets

Reviving the nearly lost art of hula ki‘i

One summer afternoon on Kaua‘i in 1820, King Kaumuali‘i and Queen Kapule summoned two young missionary couples to their home near the mouth of the Waimea River. The Whitneys and the Ruggles had arrived on the island just a few days earlier, and the monarchs had arranged a fun surprise for them. When the guests entered the royal household, an elderly man seated on the floor began to drum and chant. Behind him stretched a kapa (bark cloth) curtain. Above it appeared six “idols,” as one of the missionaries called them, which began to move in time to the music.

The missionaries were not amused. In her journal entry recording the scene, Mercy Partridge Whitney wrote, “We were soon convinced of the folly & vanity of such an exhibition, & as soon as politeness would permit, took leave of the King & Queen and returned home.” The negative review of Kaumuali‘i’s well-intended surprise is the first documented account of a little-known form of hula called hula ki‘i—a.k.a. Hawaiian puppetry.

Abhorring hula in all its forms, Hawai‘i’s missionaries suppressed it with infamous zeal. Of course, hula never really went away, and neither did hula ki‘i.

The Hula Preservation Society's Maile Loo-Ching (seen above right) works to promote hula ki'i, a.k.a. Hawaiian puppetry. Here she shares a moment backstage with dancer Meridith Kawēkiu Aki before a hula ki'i performance in San Francisco. On the opening page, dancers merge with puppets in a scene from that show.

But while hula came roaring back, hula ki'i has remained an obscure genre. Lately, though, it's been having a moment.

Last summer, in conjunction with the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture, hula's dancing puppets seized the limelight. They danced on the front lawn of Capitol Modern, the Hawai'i State Art Museum, and for the rest of the year occupied its first floor in a curated exhibit. They appeared at talk-story sessions and turned up on local TV news. They flew back and forth over the Pacific Ocean to stage an elaborate theater production in Honolulu and San Francisco.

Behind this upwelling of hula ki'i energy lies a small collective of Hawaiian puppetry practitioners working with the Hula Preservation Society. The Kāne'ohe-based nonprofit serves mainly as an oral history archive, but since 2009 it's been a driving force in perpetuating hula ki'i in the twenty-first century. "It is a passion project," says Maile Loo-Ching, the archive's executive director. "It's about educating the wider community and educating the hula community, too—because even a lot of hula people don't know about hula ki'i, by no fault of their own."

Just as the Hawaiian word "ki'i" has many meanings—including statue, image, drawing, doll, idol and petroglyph—hula ki'i has many variations. A person and a ki'i might dance together, or the ki'i might dance above a screen with its person hidden below. The ki'i might be a hand puppet, a finger puppet or an enormous puppet the dancer wears as a body mask. The ki'i might be a carved figure made to dance by a person seated behind it. Or there might be no ki'i at all, and the dancer simply assumes the form of one. "There's so much diversity and nuance and variety in hula ki'i, it's quite extraordinary," Loo-Ching says. "But that's how hula is, too."

Loo-Ching's first encounter with hula ki'i came in the late 1990s when, after returning home from Stanford University with a degree in artificial intelligence, she became a hula student of Winona Beamer, the renowned Hawaiian educator, musician and kumu hula (hula instructor). Hula ki'i was one of several rare hula genres that Auntie Nona, as Beamer was widely known, performed and taught. As a child, born in the 1920s, she had seen her great-grandmother perform it, squatting behind a tall ki'i, chanting and laughing as she made it dance on the floor. Her grandmother showed her a different approach, where dancers operate hand puppets with heads made from young coconuts. That's the style Auntie Nona adopted.

Auntie Nona included hula ki'i in broader hula programs built around historical themes. In the late 1940s she toured the United States, Canada and Mexico in an old hearse with her hālau (hula troupe) and their coconut-headed companions, performing a show depicting the evolution of hula from pre-missionary times into the twentieth century. In later years she incorporated hula ki'i into community enrichment programs, using puppets to celebrate Hawaiian culture and bring myths and legends to life. "She knew that ki'i would be a way to really draw people in," Loo-Ching says.

Auntie Nona and Loo-Ching jointly founded the Hula Preservation

Hula ki'i may include finger puppets, hand puppets, carved-wood figures and enormous body masks the dancers disappear into. Sometimes the dancers simply move as if they themselves are puppets. Above, a hand puppet on display at the Capitol Modern, the Hawai'i State Art Museum, in 2024.

Society, which grew organically out of an interview with the teacher that the student videotaped for reference. Before long, scores of Auntie Nona's hula world peers were sitting for Loo-Ching's camera, talking about hula history and Hawaiian life in general in the twentieth century. Auntie Nona grew so fond of her student she made her a hānai, or adoptive, daughter. But Loo-Ching was not Auntie Nona's hula ki'i protégé. That was the role of another student, Mauli Ola Cook.

Originally from Connecticut, Cook came to Hawai'i to study modern dance at the University of Hawai'i in the late 1970s. Later, with funding from the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, she did an apprenticeship in hula ki'i under Auntie Nona. During a year of long weekends, Cook formally learned from her "beloved auntie and mentor" all aspects of hula ki'i, from gathering coconuts to writing and performing skits and mele (song).

Cook settled on Kaua'i and became an arts educator and storyteller. She has shared hula ki'i with generations of schoolchildren, as well as library patrons, hospital patients, youth correctional facility residents and cable TV audiences. She and her hula puppets have been at it for more than thirty years, albeit not nonstop. "I'll let the ki'i rest for a couple of years sometimes, and then they start squawking at me from under the bed—'Auntie Mauli! We want to get out of the box! Let's do something!'" Cook says.

In 2018, as an eruption of Kīlauea was reshaping Hawai'i Island's lower Puna coastline, nearly a thousand people descended upon Hilo for an international hula conference, Ka 'Aha Hula 'o Hālauaola. Among them was a kumu hula from California, Māhealani Uchiyama, who signed up for one of the conference's many workshops. It was a three-day training in hula ki'i, led by Cook and Loo-Ching. They covered how to create ki'i, bring them to life and dance with them, all in the Beamer tradition. Uchiyama was enchanted. "I just thought they were the coolest thing," she says. "And I wondered, 'How can I bring this to my hālau and get it implanted there?'"

Back home, Uchiyama got grant funding to enlist Cook and Loo-Ching to train her hula dancers in hula ki'i. Before long her Māhealani Uchiyama Center for International Dance in Berkeley was abuzz with women sewing tiny costumes and hot-gluing seashell faces and raffia hairdos onto little coconuts. "You can't just go to 'Aloha Hula Supply' and buy a ki'i," Uchiyama says. "If you're going to dance with a ki'i, you have to make it. You personalize it, and it becomes an extension of yourself when you dance."

Her dancers' two years of hula ki'i training, both live and on Zoom, culminated in an elaborate theater production, a hula ki'i extravaganza called *Wai Ola: 'Aukele and the Waters of Life*. Cook wrote the script, basing it on the epic Hawaiian folktale of 'Aukelenuia'īkū, a hero whose journey is fraught with peril, including ten jealous brothers who want him dead. The brothers are played by ten hand puppets operated by ten of Uchiyama's dancers.

Four kumu ki‘i, or masters of Hawaiian puppetry, comprise the Hula Preservation Society’s hula ki‘i collective. Seen above at last year’s Hula Ki‘i Day presentation at the Capitol Modern, they are (from left): Kapono‘ai Molitau, Taupōuri Tangarō, Auli‘i Mitchell and Mauli Ola Cook.

‘Aukele is played by both a live dancer and a puppet. Cook narrates and Loo-Ching serves as ho‘opa‘a, the chanter and drummer, helping to build a lush soundscape for the ancient story.

In one of the attempts on ‘Aukele’s life, his brothers throw him into the pit of a man-eating lizard-woman, Mo‘oinanea. But rather than devour ‘Aukele, she sees his goodness and offers him help. Uchiyama operates Mo‘oinanea. The original puppet cast in the role—which had gray dreadlocks much like Uchiyama’s—proved hard to work with. With a head made from an oversize gourd mounted on a pole, it towered over her like a giant cake pop in a dress. It was top-heavy and unwieldy. Before the show played in Honolulu and San Francisco in 2024, Uchiyama turned to Auli‘i Mitchell, a kumu hula and master hula ki‘i practitioner on Hawai‘i Island, for help.

Ordinarily, the hula ki‘i Mitchell makes are small, hand-held figures carved from wood. His Mo‘oinanea was a departure. Eight feet tall and more lightweight and lizardlike than the original, it exemplifies the body-mask style of hula ki‘i. Uchiyama disappears inside of it. She’s seen only when Mo‘oinanea bestows gifts upon ‘Aukele, and then it’s only her hands that appear.

Mitchell first encountered hula ki‘i in the 1980s when his mother, Aana Cash, a master kumu hula (and childhood friend of Auntie Nona’s), sang to him a mele that her father had sung to her. She knew it was for hula ki‘i, but that was all she knew. Mitchell was in his early twenties then, already a kumu hula himself, teaching under his mother. “She gave me the song and challenged me to find the true meaning of hula ki‘i,” he says.

He started in a storage room in Honolulu’s Bishop Museum, where he saw a hula ki‘i family of three—a mother, father and infant—all carved from wood, probably in the nineteenth century. “After seeing the originals,” Mitchell says, “I was lost in it.” He re-created the characters in papier-mâché, took a seated hula position behind them and taught himself how to make them dance. Working with the Elderhostel program in Hilo at the time, he had a ready-made audience to help hone his performances. When humidity eventually took its toll on his papier-mâché partners, he laid them to rest.

Before making his next set of ki‘i, he traveled to Washington, DC, to see a group of six Hawaiian puppets at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. Representing stock characters from Hawaiian folklore, they have names like Nihiaumoe (Midnight Prowler) and Makakūikalani (Royal Boaster). They once danced for kings, from King Kamehameha III to King David Kalākaua. In 1886, during Kalākaua’s fiftieth-birthday jubilee, they stole the show during the intermission of a four-act drama at the Honolulu Opera House. Rising up from behind a screen, they danced hilariously to the beat of the ho‘opa‘a. The crowd demanded an encore.

These are the same puppets that University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa anthropologist Katharine Luomala stumbled upon in 1966, when she opened the wrong drawer at the Smithsonian

Hula ki'i performances can range from the sacred to the comical. Above, Tangarō performs an oli (chant) before dancing with his hula ki'i, which he wove from wicker and modeled after an ancient ki'i in a museum. "His name is Pāulihiwakalaniohilo," Tangarō told the crowd. "But I call him Frank."

and found six little faces looking up at her. That surprise encounter launched her on a scholarly study of hula ki'i resulting in her 1984 book, *Hula Ki'i: Hawaiian Puppetry*. It was this book that led Mitchell to meet these royal puppets himself. "When I saw them it was literally like they were lying down sleeping," he says. "I felt attached to them immediately. I wanted to awaken them."

Each is about a foot tall with movable arms, no legs and long gowns that hide the puppeteers' arms. Back in Hawai'i, Mitchell took a mallet and chisel to some driftwood and taught himself to carve ki'i like the royal puppets at the Smithsonian. "When I started they looked really spooky," he says. "Then they started to look like me, and then they took on their own personalities. And now I'm able to go between the world of humanlike and godlike."

On the front lawn of the Hawai'i State Art Museum last summer, a curious crowd gathered for Hula Ki'i Day. Loo-Ching and the four masters of the Hula Preservation Society's hula ki'i collective presided, with a few dozen hula dancers assisting.

Cook told stories and danced sweetly with hand puppets and dancers from Kaua'i and O'ahu. Mitchell drummed on an enormous ipu (gourd) as students of his from various points on the globe performed seated hula, moving the jointed arms of little wooden figures they themselves had carved. Among their mele was the song passed down from Mitchell's grandfather.

A kumu hula from Maui, Kapono'ai Molitau, led his dancers through both the seated form of hula ki'i and the body form. In one number the dancers stood with their knees bent and unmoving, as if they themselves were statues of Hawaiian gods. Moving just their arms and faces, they illustrated the oli (chant) "Auwe! Pau Au i ka Manō Nui, E" (Alas! I've Been Consumed by the Great Shark). It's based on a Hawaiian proverb noting that the blossoming of the wiliwili tree coincides with shark mating season. "So when you see the pua [flower] wiliwili blossom here in Hawai'i," Molitau told the audience, "no go jumping in the ocean unless you want to mate with the manō."

Taupōuri Tangarō, a kumu hula from Hawai'i Island, took the stage with a tall black ki'i woven from rattan. "His name is Pāulihiwakalaniohilo," Tangarō said. "But I call him Frank." Sitting onstage behind Frank—who somewhat resembles a laundry basket with mother-of-pearl eyes and a mouthful of dogs' teeth—Tangarō danced him to life, lending Frank his arms as if they were Frank's own. In another number, Tangarō took the form of a ki'i himself in a humorous, unapologetically risque dance—the kind of thing that would have had missionaries looking for the earliest opportunity to excuse themselves.

As part of the thirteenth quadrennial Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture in June 2024, Hula Ki'i Day drew a demographically diverse audience from Hawai'i and other Pacific islands. The festival theme was "Ho'oulu Lāhui: Regenerating Oceania." Before Tangarō performed, he told the crowd that hula ki'i never died—"It just went to sleep for a while, and we're the people who are waking it up." In his closing remarks Tangarō circled back to connect hula ki'i with the Ho'oulu Lāhui theme, telling the crowd, "There's a whole lot more of our culture that's waiting for you to wake it up." **hh**