



HUMBLY SHARING HULA TRADITION
DION DIZON by Sarah Yamanaka



Dizon, center, dancing
with Hālau Hula
O Kukunaokata at
Pāpōhaku Beach Park
in the late 1990s

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Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā dances at the first public Moloka'i Ka Hula Piko in 1991 at Kapuāiwa

This year's Moloka'i Ka Hula Piko is May 30-June 1 with a schedule of events familiar to many — an excursion to the birthplace of hula on May 30, a talk story session on May 31, and ho'olaule'a, June 1. Unlike events that feature hula as entertainment, the annual Moloka'i Ka Hula Piko helps to preserve its authenticity by taking people back to its roots on the island on which it was born.

Kumu Hula John Ka'imikaua founded the event in 1991, just one of many contributions he has made to hula, the native Hawaiian community and the State of Hawai'i. Nurtured in all things Hawaiian from the age of 5 by his grandparents, Kumu John at age 14 came to study for three years under a woman on Moloka'i by the name of Kawahine-kapu-hele-i-ka-po-kane.

Under her tutelage, Kumu John became the guardian and carrier of the 'ike (knowledge) she imparted, which included the mo'okū'auhau (genealogy) of his Kumu and her Kumu said to date back to the first

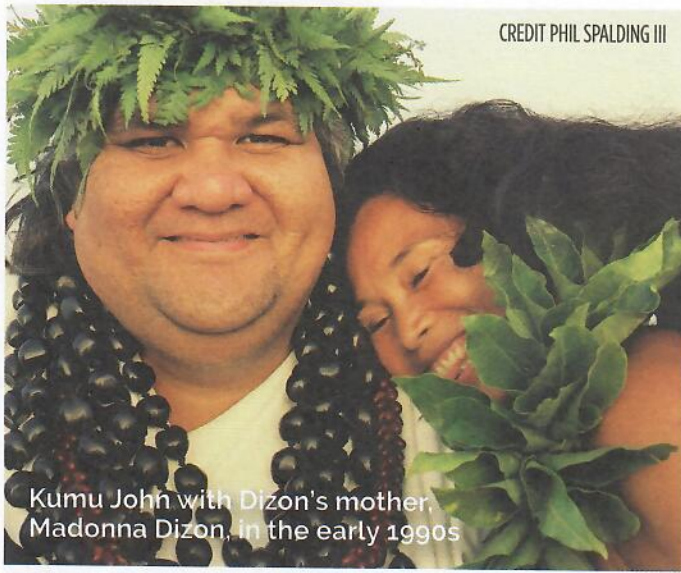
keeper of this knowledge in 900 A.D.

In 1977 at the age of 19, Kumu John started Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā. With a mission to enlighten and educate people through the ancient chant of pre-Western Moloka'i, Kumu John and his halau participated in many community events and traveled abroad.

A consummate artist, historian, storyteller, writer, chanter and Kumu Hula, Kumu John passed in 2006 at the age of 47 leaving a legacy that his halau continues to uphold.

Dion Dizon is a volunteer organizer for this year's Moloka'i Ka Hula Piko and we meet at Kapolei Regional Park for our talk story. Why here? Kumu John was involved in establishing the pā hula (hula mound) at the base of Pu'uokapolei where we're sitting.

A then 15-year-old Dizon joined Kumu John's hula halau in 1991, the first year the event was formally opened to the public. She shares her experiences with Kumu



Kumu John with Dizon's mother, Madonna Dizon, in the early 1990s

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Dizon shares just a few of the ways Kumu John was involved in the Hawaiian community — he helped establish the pā hula at Pu'uokapolei, contributed to a poster of the ahupua'a system for the state's coastal zone management (program), was an influential voice in the state's 'Aha Moku Advisory Council (AMAC), and shared his cultural knowledge and provided feedback

John with laughter and fondness, attesting to his caring nature.

"He was so down to earth," she recalls with a smile. "We just really shared that personal relationship with him, and each of us had a different kind of relationship.

"He spent some time in the hospital, and those were some of the best times when we'd go and visit him, and you know, just have these intimate conversations, just talk story.

For Dizon, Kumu John's natural instinct to reach out and connect, to create a sense of family, as well as his acceptance of all are what kept her grounded. She fondly remembers what the halau referred to as his "kumu duties," when they would set up the couch with people gathered around, and Kumu John would speak to the many individuals who would come and sit with him throughout the day.

"It's only now as an adult that I realize just how involved and how important he was to the community," says Dizon. "He was such a great resource for our halau; he wasn't just our kumu hula. His knowledge spanned over not just hula, Moloka'i tradition, you know, but historical events (too).

to those who inquired. Really, just the tip of the iceberg.

"He was a great resource within the community," she says. "And so his passing was very much felt, far and wide."

Hawaiian oral traditions refer to Moloka'i as the 'birthplace of hula.' Before the Moloka'i Ka Hula Piko begins, representatives gather to make their way to the sacred site to participate in a ceremony that's by invitation only.

Dizon says the site is in the district of Ka'ana located in the area of Maunaloa on a small hill known as Pu'u Nānā. She explains that in their lineage of recordkeepers, Laka had been born into the La'ila'i family then left the island to teach hula, which, until then, had only been practiced on Moloka'i by members of the family.

She rode the Holomua ocean current to Ni'ihau, then Kaua'i, and worked her way down the island chain leaving behind a hula tradition unique to each island. She ended her journey on Hawai'i Island, but returned to Moloka'i in her old age. It's believed that Laka's bones, and those of her family, are buried at Pu'u Nānā.

“So that’s where we actually built a traditional pā hula where we all stacked stones,” shares Dizon. “You can actually see it from the airplane if you’re really looking.”

The public will have the opportunity to visit this site on May 30 on an excursion, Huaka’i (Journey) to Ka’ana.

This year’s event theme ties into the nature and talent of Kumu John.

Kumu Hula Elsie Ryder of Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā wished to feature Kumu John’s contemporary work, one of which was a CD he had recorded, “Mai Ka Na’au Kūhohonu,” to commemorate the 20-year existence of Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā in 1997. That is this year’s theme.

Kumu John was a generous songwriter, giving his penned creations to artists such as Moana Salazar, Weymouth Kamakana and Raiatea Helm.

On May 31st, the public is invited to what

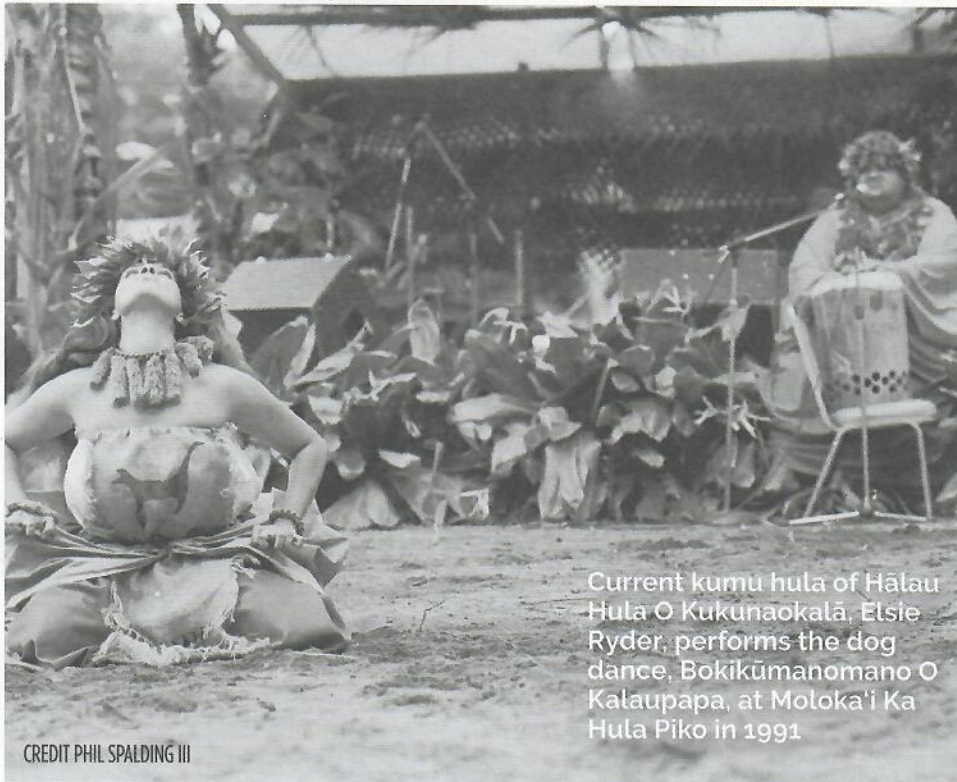
Dizon says will be more like a kanikapila or talk story session with various artists who have recorded or performed the songs of Kumu John.

“That’s the thought behind it,” states Dizon, “that the ‘ike was not just ancient.”

The ho’olaule’a on June 1 takes place at Kualapu’u Park & Community Center featuring performances by various hula hālau, as well as Moloka’i vendors offering made-on-Moloka’i products and local foods.

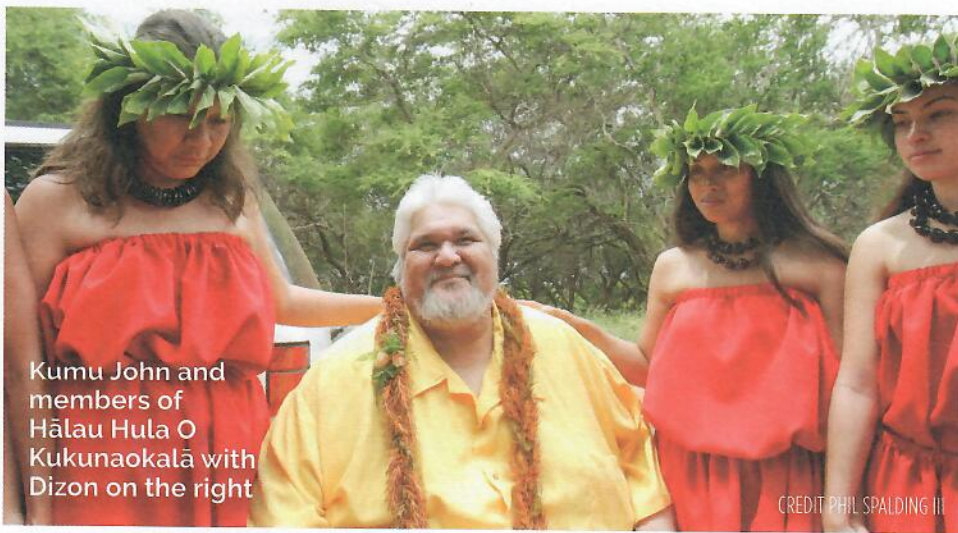
A key aspect of the huaka’i is being able to perform hula at the site referenced by chants, dances or the song music.

“...to do the dances at the place names, to go to that place and bring it there,” says Dizon as she tries to explain the significance. “There’s a belief for what Kumu John taught ... that everything that happened on the land exists on the land



Current kumu hula of Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā, Elsie Ryder, performs the dog dance, Bokikūmanomano O Kalaupapa, at Moloka’i Ka Hula Piko in 1991

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Kumu John and members of Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā with Dizon on the right

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today.

“There was something that kupuna Auntie Vanda Hanakahi of Moloka‘i had said,” relays Dizon. “When you come to a place, it’s not that you have to come bearing huge gifts. Sometimes your leo (voice) is at the very least, enough, to give that way.

“So whether you offer an oli (chant) — or for us, a dance — I think because of the spirituality of it ... when we call, they come. The way is open. Anything that we do starts first with the spiritual, and honoring always, first, is Ke Akua (God). Number one. In that preparedness ... there’s something timeless about it.

“Kumu John would always say something like, ‘The intellect can be a deceiver,’ and oftentimes it’s like we’re running around not really thinking. We’re driven by technology, driven by all these things. But in that timelessness and that space is where we can really feel, and that was the thing that always kept me grounded. It’s reconnecting like that. All the time. First and foremost.”

Before the onset of Western ideals and being overwhelmingly shaped by tourism, hula was — and still is — a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual practice in Hawaiian culture that carries into daily life.

“Hula for our ancestors was not

entertainment,” states Dizon, simply.

“We are responsible for how we conduct ourselves. We are responsible for the ike of the halau, for its care and how it goes out into the future. And that’s why we’re very quiet about what we do. It’s not something we bandy about lightly.

“I think it always comes back to that feeling of sacredness, of connectedness, and it’s just not dime a dozen in the experience of hula today.”

Dizon says it’s not something you choose; it’s something that you’re always minding with integrity and consistency. “To live righteously, to live in an upright manner, to be clean that way,” she says.

In its early days, Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko was held at Pāpōhaku Beach Park when the Moloka‘i Visitors Association had its own monies to support the event. But for the last 20 years or so, Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā and Hula Hālau O Moloka‘i have been working hand in hand through grassroots fundraising to keep the annual event going.

“We couldn’t do it without them. Our halau isn’t good at Portuguese sausage sales, selling tickets,” laughs Dizon. “Our t-shirt for the event is the only thing we sell. Ever. ...we make less than a thousand

shirts, you know what I mean? Every year." As in limited edition.

"... but I think we still get a good amount of people where we make parking problems and stuff," she says, cracking up. "It's enough to where you cannot find parking. Success! That means had plenty people! That. Stayed."

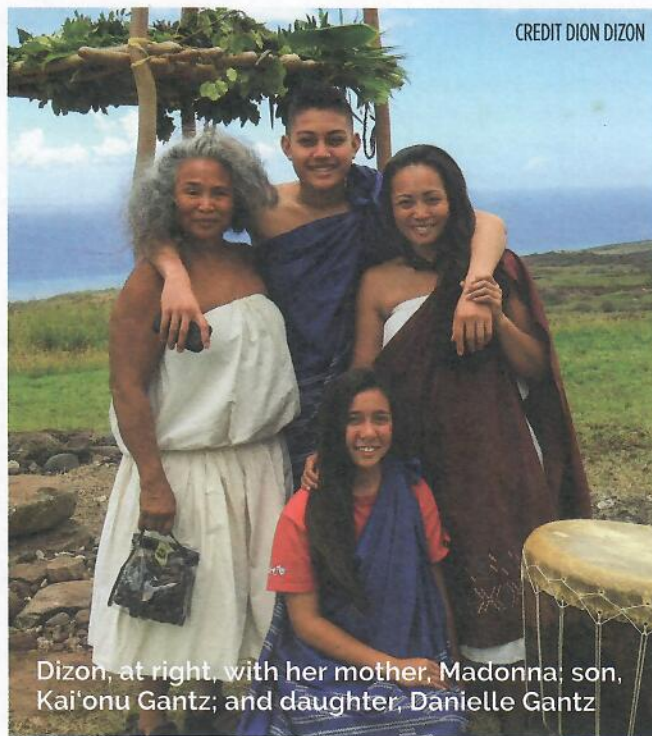
When it comes to looking toward the future and who will continue the halau, Dizon mentions that three generations of her family are in it — her mother, Dizon and her two children, who were raised with hula from the womb to teens and beyond.

Although her children are now away in college, Dizon says hula and the halau are part of their foundation, which makes her happy.

"The younger kids in the halau understand the work of the halau," she shares, "they understand what we do. So I think it'll just be a matter of succession and time. They always have a choice, and even for my kids, growing up, it was just really they went wherever I went. And after that, they gotta make their choice, because if they're doing it only because of you, it's not sustainable."

I ask Dizon to share an experience that remains close to her heart. Of course there are many with Kumu John, but she reveals one that dips into the mystical during her very first Ka Hula Piko.

"This was still early in the morning," she recalls, setting the scene. "The symbolism then, was the coming birth from darkness into light, and so it was an early morning



Dizon, at right, with her mother, Madonna; son, Kai'onu Gantz; and daughter, Danielle Gantz

ceremony.

"We were driving up (to Ka'ana), and it was just otherworldly, because there was a mist on the ground that year. So as we pulled up, the lights reflected off of it, and then you see these Hawaiians emerging (from the mist). It was the men in their malo with their head lei, because we dressed for this, and the women. That year was warm, and you just felt enveloped and embraced in this mist. And that was my very first experience.

"My whole experience in the halau has been a magnification of that," says Dizon, wondrously. "It's like a parallel world that you don't notice if you're not paying attention. But it's always translating these experiences, you know, these hō'ailona (signs or symbols) and that's the sensitivity that comes with it. Nothing is random. It's all meant to be the way it is. It's making that connection. It's not bridging the gap, because there is no gap. It's just we're not

perceiving of it.”

What makes the Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko so unique to Hawai‘i is what makes it different from other hula events.

“It’s different for sure,” explains Dizon, “however, we have stayed true to the root of (it), because I think the thing that makes us unique is that, for us, the majority of everything we do, the dances we do ... we’re not creating it, we’re preserving.

“Kumu John would always say that the dances, the foot movements, the things that you see, were what our ancestors did. From the beginning. ...And there is a level of sacredness to it.”

Dizon says Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko is a humble event, a give back for the community and a celebration of where the ‘ike comes from.

“A lot of people are drawn to the fact that it’s different, a more authentic experience of hula,” she says. “It feels old. And it is. It’s for the people who are looking for ...” Dizon searches for the words, “... not Waikiki. They’re looking for

more, for a deeper meaning. So I think we tend to attract the seekers.”

As for Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā, Dizon explains that the focus has always been to educate and enlighten people about pre-Western Hawai‘i through the traditions of ancient Moloka‘i.

And when it comes to performing hula, there is a level of focus, as well as “... that sense of kuleana, of responsibility, because what we bring,” says Dizon, “is not for entertainment, you know. This is not a show. We never look at what we do as a show. It’s a sharing and it’s educational. And I think that energy comes with it.”

The heart and mission of Kumu Hula John Ka‘imikaua is deeply embedded within the Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko and the members of Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā.

“It’s hard to say, ‘I miss you,’ because he’s there with us,” shares Dizon. “He’s with us in everything that we do.”

For more information on the Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko, visit kahulapiko.com.



Members of Hālau Hula
O Kukunaokalā and Hula
Hālau O Motoka‘i



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THE MAGAZINE OF MAKANI KAI AIR

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JULY - AUGUST 2019

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THE MAGAZINE OF MAKANI KAI AIR

DION DIZON
PRESERVING THE
AUTHENTICITY
OF HULA

PROTECTING
MOLOKA'I'S
NATIVE
SPECIES

MAKANI KAI AIR

