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Marks of Distinction

The commitment and kuleana of the maka uhi, the Hawaiian facial tattoo

"When you look at somebody with a facial tattoo, you cannot help but stare," says Kyle Nakanelua. Three black lines run down the left side of his face across his eyelid to his chin. Two of the lines zigzag in a pattern reminiscent of water or electric currents, and when he smiles they eddy around his mouth. The retired Maui fire captain is accustomed to people avoiding his gaze or openly gawking. "I'm OK with that," he says. "When I talk to people, I want to look into their face, too. I want to see their eyes, their wailua [spirit]. I want to know who I'm talking to."

Nakanelua's markings signify a potent evolution—for him personally, but also for his indigenous culture. He came of age in the 1970s during what's now known as the Hawaiian Renaissance. As a high school student, he witnessed fellow Native Hawaiians reclaim their identity, protest the US military's bombardment of Kaho'olawe and launch the replica Polynesian voyaging canoe *Hōkūle'a*. "After *Hōkūle'a*," he says, "our language came back. Hula came back. Men's hula came back. All these things started to blossom, and kākau—tattooing—was one of the final things to come forward."

The English word "tattoo" derives from "kākau" in Hawaiian and "*tatau*" in Tahitian and Samoan. But contemporary tattoos bear only superficial resemblance to the hand-tapped Polynesian markings that date back centuries. More than a decorative art or means of self-expression, kākau is a spiritual practice. The tattooist chooses the markings, or uhi, for you after you perform various protocols. These uhi represent a visible covenant between you, your akua (gods) and your kuleana (responsibility) to your ancestors and community. The most dramatic manifestation of this covenant

is the maka uhi, or facial tattoo. Those who wear it shoulder great responsibility.

Nakanelua recalls a story his friend Sam Kaai told him, an indigenous account of the Hawaiian Renaissance: "When Captain Cook landed in Hawai'i, he touched the mo'o [lizard deity]. The mo'o's tail fell off and it escaped. The mo'o was our spirit and its tail was our identity. The mo'o ran away to hide. So our whole identity was hiding from us for two hundred-plus years. Then, when *Hōkūle'a* came on scene and its steering oar hit the water, the mo'o's tail grew back."

Nakanelua's own tail grew slowly. After school he served in the Air Force, then joined the Maui Fire Department. In 1989 he took on the responsibility of caring for his grandparents' lo'i kalo (taro farm) in Wailua, a remote village in East Maui. He began incorporating indigenous practices into his life—speaking 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), wearing a malo (loincloth) and practicing lua (martial arts). When he talked about getting a tattoo, his sister intervened. She knew someone who knew the proper protocols.

Full of confidence, Nakanelua flew to O'ahu to talk to Keone Nunes. "I figure I tell him what I like and he's going to put it on me," Nakanelua remembers. "He says, 'Oh no, we're not going to do that. You need to learn your mo'okū'auhau [genealogy]. When you get that sorted out, come back to me and we'll look into the designs that are appropriate for you." Nakanelua laughs. "I was pissed off! But he told me exactly what I needed to hear."

After Nakanelua dug into his lineage—which includes powerful chiefly families—he felt an obligation to live up to his ancestors. "I thought, 'Wow! This is serious. I gotta do the right thing, because no can make them shame. Mo bettah die than make them sad and disappointed.'" As promised, Nunes identified specific motifs associated with Nakanelua's family and tattooed them on his leg in the ancient ala niho style, from the hip down to the ankle. "At that time there were only four people in the world with the ala niho," says Nakanelua. "I became number five." His brothers in ink included cultural powerhouses: the artist Sam Kaai, revered hula teachers Keali'i Reichel and Uluwehi Guerrero, and Nunes himself.

Today Nunes is recognized worldwide as the authority on Hawaiian tattooing, but at the time he was still a novice using a conventional tattoo gun. He reluctantly began tattooing in 1991, only after realizing that he possessed rare knowledge. At that time, little information about kākau existed. There were mentions of the practice in the oral and written histories. Drawings by early European explorers featured uhi, and mummified remains offered further clues. But there were no living practitioners. Nunes knew more than most; growing up on O'ahu's rural leeward coast, he heard kūpuna (elders) describe old traditions, including kākau. One of his aunts had been a tattooist's assistant; her firsthand knowledge was precious.

Nunes had learned the prayers and patterns associated with kākau, but not the practical application. So he sought out a living master: Samoan tattooist Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo. While Hawaiian and Samoan tattooing traditions aren't identical, they're similar enough to translate. Both approach the art as a sacred practice. Both use needles carved from bird or fish bone and use ink made with soot from the burned nut of the kukui (candlenut) tree. Paulo accepted the Hawaiian as an apprentice, showed him how to make instruments and hand-tap in the old way. Designated assistants or "stretchers" hold a person's skin taut while the tattooist (historically male) gently hammers ink-drenched needles into the skin with a mallet.

Nakanelua shows off the striking checkerboard pattern on his inner leg. "This was Keone's first design with traditional tools," he says. "It's a very old motif called mo'o." One of the definitions of 'mo'o' [in addition to the lizard deity] is 'succession.' So Keone's first traditional work was a succession of that which was and that which was to come." From that point forward, Nunes devoted himself to traditional tattooing.

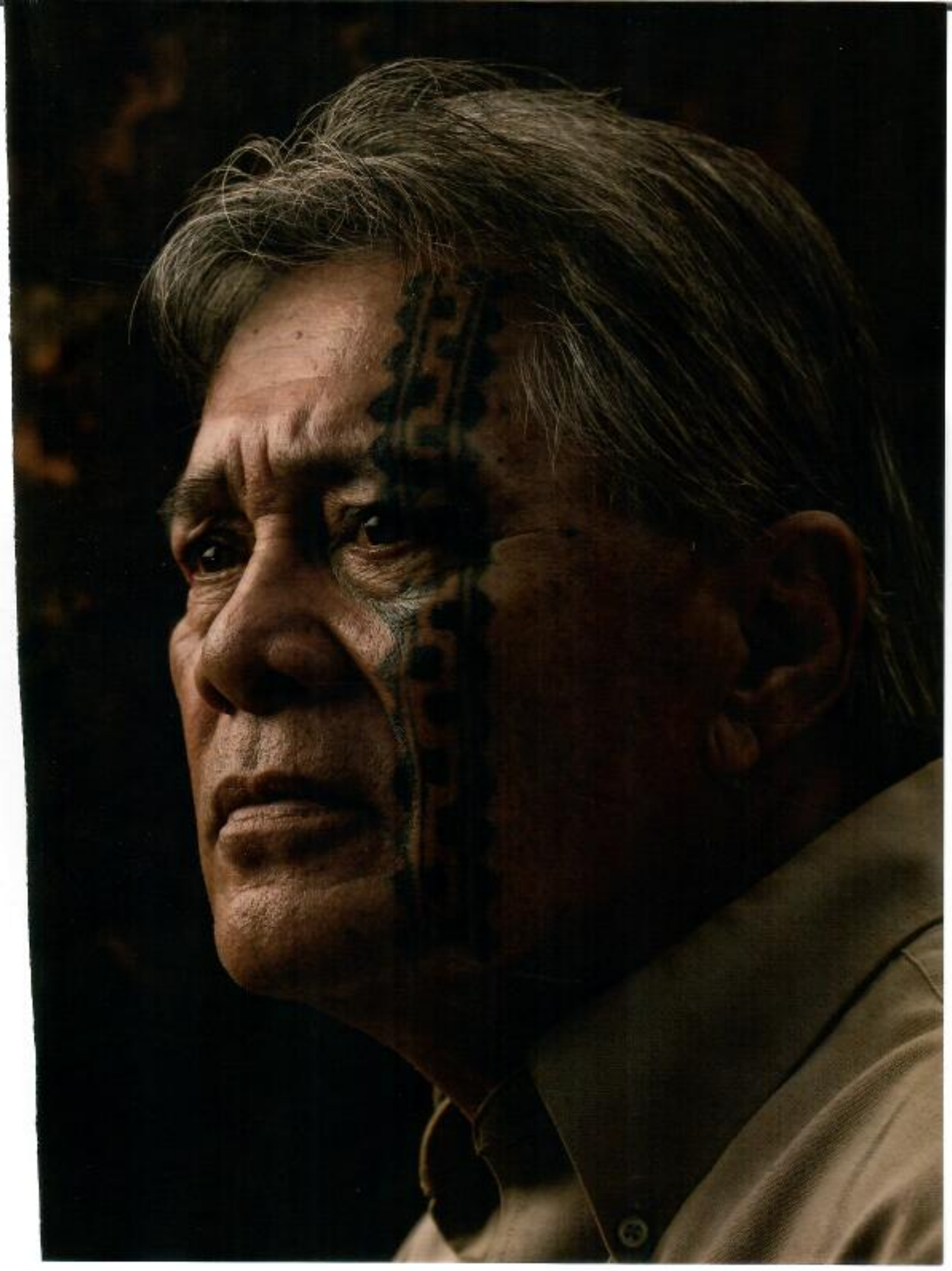
FACING PAGE / **Hawaiian tattoos typically feature geometric shapes placed asymmetrically on the body, such as Kyle Nakanelua's uhi maka (facial tattoo), which evokes his family lineage.**

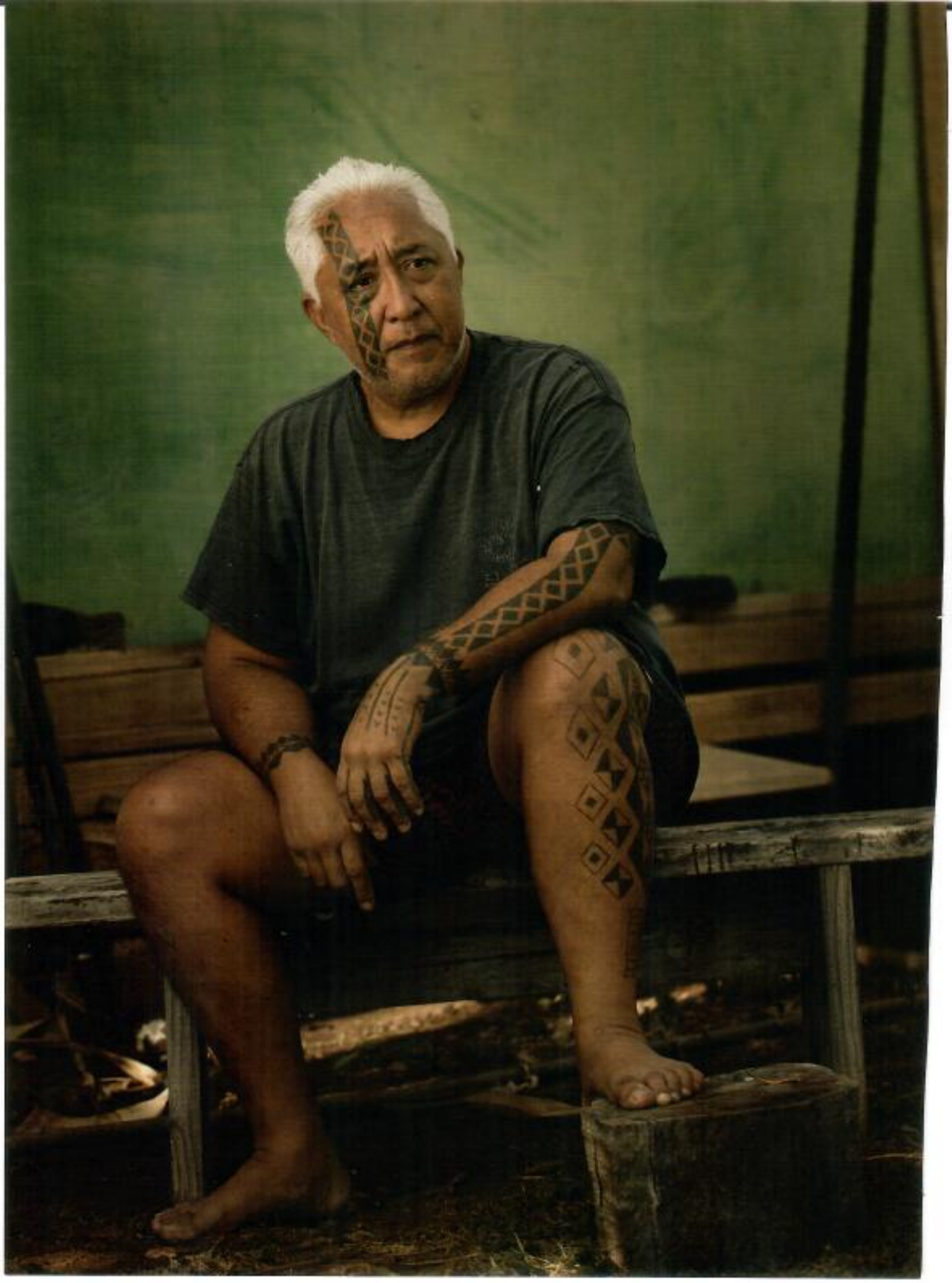
PREVIOUS PAGE / **Hoaka De Los Reyes' marks allude to his work as a stone carver—the dark, notched lines represent the stone walls of a heiau (temple) or fishpond; the spaces between are pathways.**

Nunes moved into an old church in Nānākuli, where he tattooed hundreds of people. They came to him with genealogies in hand, ready to perform the required protocols, which ranged from consuming special foods to learning to speak Hawaiian. The tattooist prepared, too, observing dreams and hō'ailona (signs) and cleansing his tools in the ocean before dawn. Nakanelua participated in a hua moa, or rooster's egg ritual, which symbolizes rebirth. "They break the egg on your head and rub it on your body," he says. "That's the amniotic fluid and the view from the womb."

Nakanelua recalls conversations about the optics of facial tattoos. In ancient Hawai'i the kahuna ke uhi (master tattooist) occupied a respected position; he alone could spill the blood of the ali'i (chiefs). Uhi were treasures that families saved up for. But in modern society, tattoos—particularly facial tattoos—carry a stigma. "We wanted to pull that paradigm more towards the middle," says Nakanelua. "To highlight sacredness and the aspect of disciplined power, or power that was channeled."

Feeling protective of kākau, Nunes carefully considered how to reintroduce the maka to a modern audience. He decided three men were ready for the responsibility. One was a steelworker,





FACING PAGE / **Kalehua Krug wears multiple uhi maka: The lei hala (triangles running from the back of his head to his chin) symbolizes a progression in learning. The black stripe across his mouth supports his role as ceremonial speaker.**

ABOVE / **Kamali'i Hanohano devoted himself to kākau (tattooing) from a young age and views the practice as a way to reestablish a fully indigenous approach to life.**

already fully inked. Another was a Hawaiian immersion schoolteacher. The third was a Hawaiian curriculum specialist for the University of Hawai'i. "They were the perfect candidates," says Nakanelua. "The current face of the old people who held these positions."

But what about a fire captain? Could someone in a position of white-collar authority show up to work wearing a maka? "To celebrate my fiftieth year on the planet," says Nakanelua, "we decided to do it." This time part of his preparatory protocols included calling the state fire chief and the union. Everyone was supportive—mostly. "My immediate supervisor kind of hemmed and hawed," says Nakanelua. "I had to tell him, 'I'm not asking for your permission. There are no rules that prevent this. As a courtesy to our rank and privileges, I'm notifying you that this is going to occur.'"

When the day arrived, Nakanelua lay down on a lauhala mat, sank into a reverie and emerged less than an hour later with what he calls "one of his greatest treasures." His 13-year-old son served as a stretcher.

"That old mo'o, its tail is growing back," he says. "With these traditions or ceremonies, it's the old people and their ways coming forward. And now you have obligation. You have responsibility. It's not you anymore; it's them. You're them, here and now, and what comes from you extends them."

Nakanelua's children have followed his example. His daughter got her ala niho after graduating from law school. His son is covered in ancestral motifs. His wife didn't want anything to do with tattoos until last year. "She woke up one day and said, 'I deserve an ala niho.'" Nakanelua says. "We were all present—myself, my son and my daughter—and we looked at each other and said, 'We can make it happen.'" One of Nunes' students came to their family home with tools, ink and stretchers. As Nakanelua watched his wife endure the pain and transformation with each tap-tap-tap, he says, he fell in love all over again.

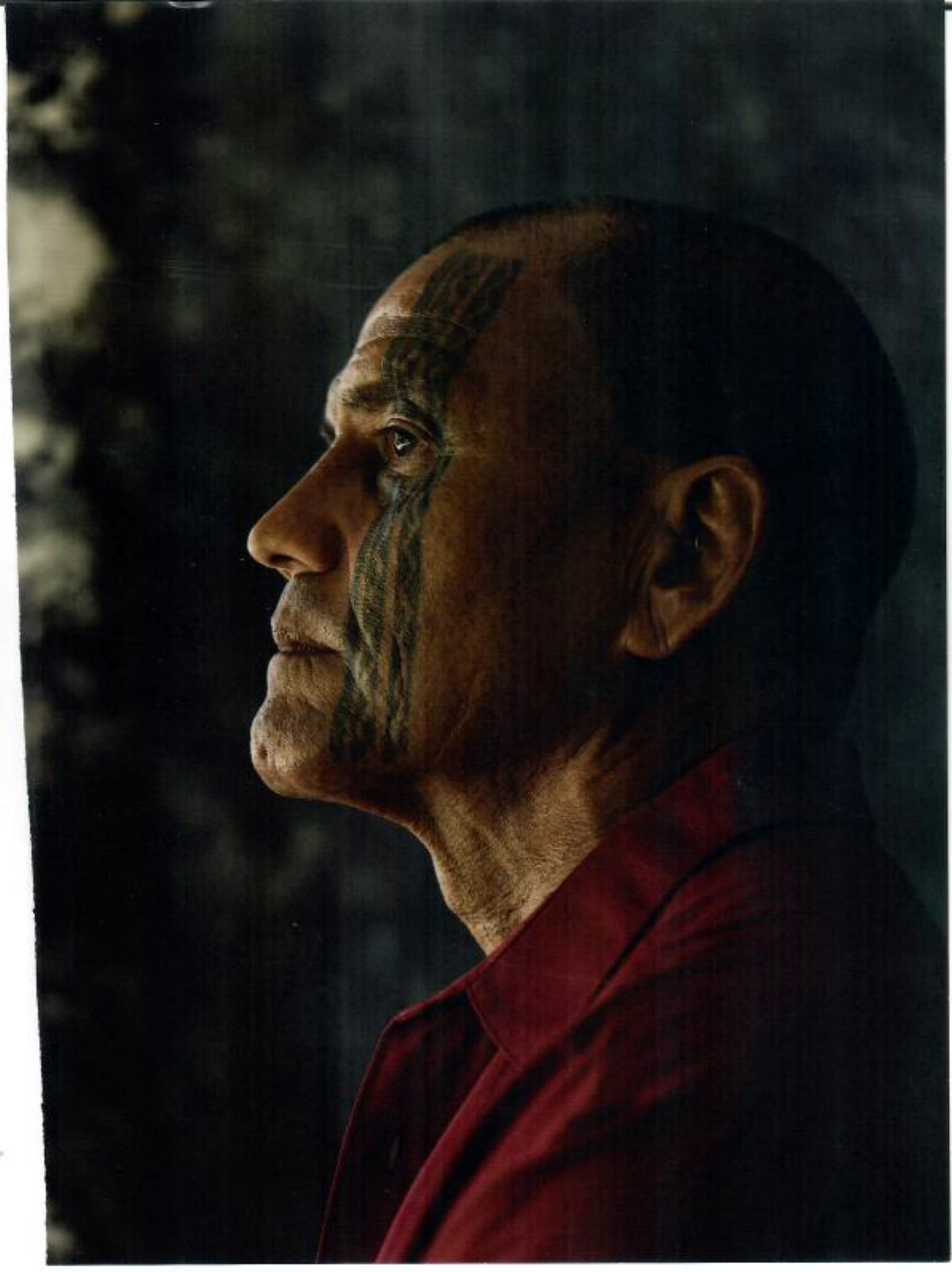
Kalehua Krug was among those first three men to receive a maka in modern times. "The pain was actually euphoric," he says. He felt intense waves of sadness, joy and pride to participate in the resurrection of a practice that had almost died. His face is now covered in uhi, including a solid black stripe across his mouth that relates to his role in ceremonial speaking.

His dramatic visage attracts attention. At the airport he's always "randomly" selected by security for extra inspection. But at Ka Waihona o ka Na'auao, the Hawaiian charter school in Nānākuli where he serves as principal, he receives nothing but love and admiration. "The young ones see it as decorative, not scary," he says. "They already want to do it to their faces."

Krug grew up feeling ambivalent about his identity. "My mom is Hawaiian-Portuguese and my dad is from Montana, so I have this beautiful pink hue to my skin," he says. "I remember liking that I was Hawaiian, but not really understanding what that meant. I knew the names of my family. I knew the history. But I didn't know how to tether to it."

He was 19 when he sought out Nunes. He already had a few Hawaiian-style tats: the state flag on one arm and "Hawaiian" written in Old English font on the other. Nunes challenged him to reach for something deeper—the essence rather than just the appearance of being Hawaiian. It took a year for Krug to commit, but from the first tap he was hooked. When Nunes opened up his first formal class for students interested in learning kākau in 2000, Krug was among the five chosen students.

He studied with Nunes for eleven years. He spent evenings and weekends at the church, where the cadence of tapping echoed from the past into the future. Today Krug weaves kākau into his life as a school principal, activist and musician. "Kākau is not there to lock itself in time," he says. "It's there to evolve and provide a form of magic for people to believe in and be moved by."



FACING PAGE / **"I don't wear this [uhi maka] as decoration or to beautify myself," says Honolulu building inspector Vaughn Victor. "I wear this in representation of the one hundred generations behind me. When I leave my house, I'm on point every second. What I do and how I do it is critical, because I'm being judged before I even open my mouth." Among Keone Nunes' first students, Victor has himself tattooed hundreds of people.**

Krug continues to expand upon what he learned from Nunes. Hawaiian tattoo motifs tend to involve straight lines and sharp angles—precise geometries that don't leave much room for error. Initially Krug used stencils and heat paper to transfer these patterns onto the skin. As he grew more confident, he switched to a pen. "But our ancestors didn't use pens," he says. He wanted to re-create the traditional process as much as possible.

The opportunity presented itself around ten years ago. Krug was invited to Kaho'olawe for the annual Makahiki festival. The priests presiding over the ceremonies all wanted uhi. It was bound to be a meaningful occasion: the first kākau performed on the island in living memory, in a hale (house) that held an ancestor's sacred bones. As Krug prepared to work on the first priest, he felt moved to put his pen away. He asked if the young man were comfortable being an experiment. The response: "Yeah, go Hawaiian!" And so Krug prayed, then tattooed the priest without any modern aid. It was a success and has become his standard method.

Krug has also experimented with the ink. Even hand-tap tattooists tend to mix kukui soot with conventional ink. Practitioners of the past used a mixture of kukui soot, oil and sugar cane juice. The old recipe is less viscous and a little finicky, but Krug gave it a try when working on his son. "My son's skin has been touched only by our traditional inks," he says.

For several years now, Krug has been sharing the practical and esoteric aspects of kākau with his son and other students. "I teach them to carry themselves in a way that allows people to talk to them," he says. "I'm a big guy, and the tattoos scare people off sometimes. My intention is to be a bridge builder."

Kākau can serve as conduit between people, living and departed, and the natural environment. Tattooists harness the mana (spiritual power) of the plants and animals that they use: the kukui nut soot, the 'ūlei wood mallet and bird-bone needles. In turn, those species live again through the tools and the resulting marks worn by people.

In 2012 Krug traveled to Midway Atoll to ask permission of the mōlī (Laysan albatross). "I didn't want to take anything from the birds without them knowing who I was," he says. Hawaiian tattooing needles borrow their name from the bird, and while mōlī needles can be carved from various animals' bones or tusks, albatross is ideal. Less porous than whale or cow, the long-distance flier's bones are dense, thin and lightweight. Harvesting albatross bones was probably never easy, but today it requires a trip to one of the most remote patches of sand in the Pacific.

Krug arrived on Midway as roughly one million majestic black-and-white birds descended en masse to nest. Each morning he set out by bicycle in search of a bird to interact with. He laughed and yelped as uncooperative albatrosses dodged his grasp and pecked his arms. He didn't mind; it was all part of rekindling the relationship.

"Just being able to see them and rebuild that natural connection was powerful," he says. "They teach us about themselves, but also about who we are. Because when we use them, we utilize their essence, we become them, too. We enact behaviors that are mōlī-like and live a life that betters their existence." That includes visiting them, advocating for them and protecting their habitat, he says. "That's our responsibility to them." During Krug's stay on Midway, he carved a set of tools and left them there as testament to this relationship. On his final day on the atoll, as if preordained, an albatross allowed him to hold it.

Keone Nunes remains this era's kahuna ke uhi. When he moved to Thailand in 2019, he left his youngest student, Kamali'i Hanohano, at the helm of kākau in Hawai'i.

Hanohano was a devout student from the start. He witnessed his first kākau session in high school art class. His teacher at Kamehameha Schools surprised students by canceling the final exam and instead inviting Nunes to tattoo him in class. Hanohano was transfixed. Afterward he spoke with Nunes, who agreed to work on him provided he got his family's blessing. "That meant asking my father, who is a really staunch man," says Hanohano. "To make a long story short, he said no." But Hanohano was determined. Every month for the next four years, he asked again. One day his father unexpectedly replied, "OK. Take your brother."

Tap by tap, Hanohano received his ala niho in the Nānākuli church. "I was ecstatic," he says. "I think I smiled the whole time." In retrospect he's grateful that his father made him wait. Those four years allowed him to cultivate a deeper connection to his culture and to Nunes. The following year, when Nunes asked him to come sit with him, Hanohano knew it was a test—"to see if I was the right fit," he says. "Little did I know I was starting a lifelong apprenticeship."

Hanohano dived in headfirst. He put his university degree on hold and moved to Wai'anae—first into a spare room in Nunes' house and then four houses down. "That afforded me a day-in and day-out learning environment," says Hanohano, who sought to replicate his ancestors' learning style. "I tried as best as possible to emulate my kumu [teacher]—to move, breathe and act as he did."

He spent seven years in that immersive experience. Apprenticeship

is unpaid, so to make ends meet he did odd jobs and sold possessions to get by. His girlfriend supported him, even while pregnant with their first child. "It can be challenging when learning tradition in a contemporary world. It was hard," he admits. "It was a financial sacrifice. But people invest thousands of dollars to go to college and get a doctorate." And while he didn't end up with a degree, "the knowledge and experiences from Keone, in my opinion, were far more valuable than schooling from an institution."

Today his life revolves around kākau. When he isn't actively tattooing someone, he's researching or preparing. "The sound of the mōlī echoes in the heart of my family," he says. "If poi sustains our bodies, kākau uhi sustains our soul." He views kākau as a means to advocate for all traditional Hawaiian practices. "I would love to see us regain spiritual autonomy—to reconnect to the natural world through ceremony and protocol on our terms, and not only when we can financially afford to do so." Ideally, Hanohano hopes to create a space for apprentices to learn without the distraction of financial stress. "Our currency should be mana," he says. "Until we get to that point, we still have work to do."

In the meantime, Hanohano continues to hone his understanding with every uhi he bestows. Each is different. Beyond ala niho and maka, there are marks to accentuate a skill or commemorate a loss. Historically, tattoos on the tongue gave the person authority to speak for someone who had passed.

"An uhi is an embodiment of kūpuna, a living marking that is meant to build a relationship," says Hanohano. "It becomes part of you in a sense, but in the same breath it has a nature of its own. I maintain conversation with my uhi, I feed my uhi, I treat them as a conduit for kūpuna.

"You don't have to be the all-knowing Hawaiian, whatever that means, to wear these markings. But the kahua [foundation] has to be set. The timing has to be right. We have to be really careful about what is chosen. We're opening the door a little bit more for kūpuna and akua to come through. If you're not ready to feed it, you can expect it to bite back. It can have adverse effects. In extreme cases the person can actually go pupule [insane]. Events transpire in their life that are not positive: relationships being severed, suffering hardships or stuff like that."

Hanohano feels no shame in acknowledging that sometimes the weight is a little too heavy. He has yet to receive a maka—though he eagerly anticipates wearing one someday. "I just feel that I'm not ready yet," he says. "Visually, it communicates a certain amount of knowledge. I would rather be underestimated than overestimated."

His time is coming. When Nakanelua's wife requested an ala niho, it was Hanohano who flew over to perform the rites for the esteemed Maui family. And last year, when Hanohano's father retired from the fire department, he asked his son for an uhi. "So we're going over our mo'okū'auhau and having that dialog now," says Hanohano. "It's up to me to determine what will be the most appropriate. He's trusting me—allowing me to dictate what permanently goes on him. It's very special." **hh**

FACING PAGE / **"I'm probably the only person in the federal government with a facial tattoo," says Tim Bailey. His marks represent the flight pattern of the nēnē, the endemic goose he has safeguarded during his thirty-three-year career at Haleakalā National Park. The placement of these marks honors his ancestor, Kahekili, the great Maui warrior who was famously tattooed from head to toe on his right side.**

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