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The Networker

Uncle Apo Aquino with an 'upena (net) he wove himself. The Kona artist and fisherman is one of only a few Native craftsmen left who practice (and teach) traditional Hawaiian net making and throwing.

"Uncle" Apo Aquino welcomes me, barefoot and beaming, into his studio. I'm here to learn the art of making 'upena, fishing nets. It's my first day, but I'm already picturing myself leaving with my own handmade, floor-to-ceiling-length 'upena like the one hanging behind him. I don't know how to fish, but Uncle says he can teach me that, too.

Back in the day, Hawaiians made their own nets from cordage, which they also made. But modernity rendered the tedious, painstaking craft obsolete and it, like so many traditional arts, is dying. Apo is one of only a few Native weavers left. Growing up in a large Kona family, young Apo had to help feed the 'ohana, so his father and uncles taught him to weave 'upena, as much out of necessity as passing on tradition. "I've been fishing the Kona Coast my whole life, mostly with monofilament nets like this," says Apo, pointing to a rainbow-hued kiloi 'upena (throwing net) in Kona Town Hui, his art studio-cum-'upena making classroom. "If you see a local fisherman with a multicolored net made of monofilament line, I wove it with my own two hands."

That one's a utility net, meant to catch fish. But not all of Apo's nets are plastic. He points to a bowl filled with strips of dried, curling hau bark. "That cordage? I made it for this net after I stripped the bark off a local tree," he says, pulling out a net suspended in a triangular frame. This one's more artistic than functional—he won't be fishing with it—but Apo says he's "most proud of *this* net."

Maybe I'll learn how to make cordage tomorrow. For me today, it's the most basic of basics: the half hitch knot and how to create the piko (center) of the 'upena, from which the "eyes" radiate. A plastic spacer helps ensure that each eye will be the same size. As Apo's nimble fingers make an embarrassment of my own, he tells me how he went from subsistence fisherman to artist.

"A year or two ago, I wanted to know how my ancestors, who fished this coast for hundreds of years, did things. So I started making 'upena out of plant fibers. I never thought of them as artistic until people would visit and say, 'Wow, what an art!' Now they're hanging at the Mauna Lani Resort, the Volcano Art Center and even in some homes across the country. They're going to places where people might not have an understanding of my ancestors." On his mother's side, Apo descends from Keōua Kū'ahu'ula, an ali'i (chief) of Ka'ū in the late 1700s.

I manage to produce a series of tangles where knots should be. Apo chuckles. "You're not gonna learn it in just a day. Took me a long time to figure it out." He quickly ties a half hitch, a loop and another eye while he explains how to calculate the circumference of the 'upena. Apo hasn't written down the formula; it's in his head. I'm about to tell him that this is more math than I bargained for when he points to a yellow 'upena. "I dyed this with 'ōlena [turmeric] I grew. And I dyed this one blue using indigo growing wild on the island. That's the art part of me. The fishing part of me connects all of this to our ocean and caring for it by not overfishing, which my kūpuna [elders] taught me. Use my nets to catch fish, but take only what you need. My legacy is to keep my Hawaiian culture alive by sharing this knowledge with my students."

We head out back to kiloi 'upena, or "throw net." Apo tosses a slipper onto the pavement—almost as good as a fish. He throws, and the net dances in the wind before landing on our catch. My attempts are less graceful, and I spend more time disentangling myself than throwing.

All is not lost, though: I leave with my unfinished net, and maybe with some practice, I'll eventually catch a slipper. Hanging it up at home later that day, though, I see the artistry in the knots and think that maybe the point isn't to create a functional 'upena—it's to make art so that a vanishing craft can live on in a modern world. **hh**

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