

Honoring Tradition

Members and guests of the Institute of World Culture were treated last month to informative, well-crafted and very moving presentations of Hawaiian myths and traditional art forms. In series of performances, workshops and a seminar on *Hawaiian Spirituality, Ecology and Dance*, Hula Master, Kumu Kehaulani Kekua and artists Aikane Alapa'i and Tiana Laranio demonstrated skillfully through recitation, chanting and dance the living reality of Hawaiian cultural Traditions. The presentations drew the audience into active perceptions of the possible connection between the human experience of spirituality and the dynamic life processes in the natural environment. Hawaiian myths teach that nature is alive with spiritual powers depicted as gods and goddesses and that all forms of life including plants, animals and humans experience the influence and guidance of these powers. Thus, Hawaiian myths are not stories of the fantastic but invitations to understand the deep and divine interdependence of all of life. Harmony, health and happiness depend on our understanding of this interdependence.

Such perspectives and performances reveal that a vital cultural Tradition worthy of respect is not simply a collection of superficial rituals, dead dogmas or calls for conformity by authorities claiming special knowledge of a Tradition. Living Traditions are created and kept alive by human imagination and inspire a creative instantiation of the values and ideals symbolized in a Tradition. Thus, we

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honor and learn from a Tradition so that we can become active participants in its ethical and practical use. What is symbolic in a creation myth can become a scientific basis for “living off the land.” The choices made by a goddess depicted in a story may suggest a wise way of bringing harmony into our social relationships.

However, honoring Tradition is to be done with interpretative respect not with blind ritualism. We should discern the core ideas in a myth about a sacred purpose, a social obligation or a rite of passage, for example, and design fresh ways to communicate those ideas. Authentic reenactments of Traditions are never mechanical but can stimulate the inner vibration in a Tradition and thus make of it a creative source of transformation. Chanting, singing and oratorical recitations may be the necessary tools for building the communities of the future.

Experiencing vitality in a Tradition teaches us that we live in a context that is not just a chaos of sound and sight, getting and spending. The chaos and cacophony of contemporary life may magnify our psychological uncertainty, but a living cultural Tradition offers moral direction and social cooperation. Better to be guided by Tradition than coerced into conformity by the rules and punishments established by a government. With a living Tradition we awaken our creative imagination and discern self-chosen applications of traditional values. With a living Tradition we live self-consciously in cosmic plenitude, moving beyond the

narrow presumptions of conventional beliefs.. Living in a world guided by Tradition, we discover invisible dimensions of life and experience vibrant currents of interaction among all forms of life.

What is the creative source of this multi-layered and many-splendored Plenitude? One is reminded of lines from the Indian “Hymn to Creation” passed down in the *Rig Veda*:

“Who knows from whence this great creation sprang?
That, whence all this great creation came,
Whether Its will created or was mute,
The Most High Seer that is in the highest heaven
He knows it – or perchance even He knows not.”

What we **can** know is our rightful place in this universe. How could we not take responsibility for how our thoughts, words and deeds affect the universal chain of cause and effect? How could we separate ourselves from this “Great Chain of Being” linking the invisible to the visible world? After listening to the Hula Master describe a forest, one vows only to tip toe not stride into the forest and to do so only by invitation of its inhabitants. Should not the birds teach us the song of life, the flowers how to fulfill our potential and the trees how to stand tall with courage and perseverance while letting the winds whether gentle or ferocious bring graciousness into our limbs. Such are the thoughts evoked by our visiting teachers steeped and skilled in the resources of Hawaiian culture. Appreciation of the education they offered us can be expressed by honoring the possibility that

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a living Tradition is a rich source of progress, beauty and universal, ecological harmony.

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