
Native Hawaiian Traditional Healing

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"A person's life is very important. *Laau lapaau* [herbal medicine] is serious business," said Papa Henry Auwae, one of Hawaii's few remaining master traditional healers. He has spent the past 70 years treating people from as far away as Switzerland, Italy, and Canada with herbal and spiritual medicine. Papa Auwae spearheads a statewide organization of Native Hawaiian traditional healers committed to preserving the art of *laau lapaau* in its purest form. This organization, known as *Kupuna Laau Lapaau*, was established in 1991 with the assistance of *E Ola Mau*, a not-for-profit Native Hawaiian organization comprised of both Western health care professionals and Native Hawaiian traditional healers. The mission of *E Ola Mau* is to ensure that Native Hawaiians achieve *lokahi* (healthful harmony of self with others and all of nature) and function effectively as citizens and leaders in their homeland. *E Ola Mau*'s role has been to improve the health of Native Hawaiians by bridging the gap between Western and traditional healing.

Papa Auwae is at the forefront of renewed interest in Hawaiian traditional healing arts. Until a 1988 meeting in Kona sponsored by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, Papa Auwae practiced the art of healing within the circle of his family and friends. At the Kona meeting, Papa Auwae made a decision to share his knowledge and to work with the *kupuna* (elders) healers. He decided to share secrets that he had learned from his great-great-grandmother at the age of 7. At the heart of Native Hawaiian traditional healing is the love of God, the source of all healing. Therefore, healing sessions begin with prayer and counseling before *laau* or herbs are given. Treatment of patients, according to Papa Auwae, is individualized and medicines are prepared for a particular patient. He was instructed never to take money for his services. Papa believes that the medicines are put on earth by God, not humankind, and therefore, is to be shared with all ethnic groups.

Native Hawaiian traditional healing is rooted in nature and history. For Hawaiians of the past, religion and healing were two sides of the same coin. Hawaiians held a holistic view of the universe that shaped their concepts of wellness and illness, and life and death. Hawaiians believed, as did other Polynesians, that humans and nature were interconnected. Each plant, animal, and object of the earth, sea, and sky have a spiritual content. There-

fore, a river was not a river—it was the home of a divine spirit. Based on this philosophy, everything had a soul, a name, personality, power, and feelings. Hawaiians personified forces of nature into various gods which had dual functions.¹⁻³ *Ku*, for example, was the masculine god and *Hina*, the feminine. Both individuals were parts of the "*Ku- and-Hina* godhead." Where *Ku* was found, *Hina* was also present.²⁻³

No supreme god existed in ancient Hawaii, and generally the nature of the gods was neither all good nor all bad. The gods contained *mana* (spiritual powers) and were found in different *kinolau* (body forms). The *aumakua* or ancestor gods formed the closest relationship to humans. These gods, which had once been living souls who had departed from earth, had the dual nature of protecting as well as punishing their descendants. Families prayed to their *aumakua* in time of sickness or family problems. Formal prayers were composed and repeated perfectly as chants to the gods. Before the chant was recited publicly, each work was examined for any harmful inner meaning. It was believed that the spoken word could bestow blessings or perhaps a curse. There was power or a force found in the words themselves.^{2,4}

In ancient Hawaii, ethnomedicine consisted of a wide spectrum of practices, ranging from herbal medicine to sorcery, with many levels of classes between. Orders of priests called *kahuna* (keeper of the secrets) were trained to apply their religious knowledge and practical skills to adjust the "equilibrium of relationships in the cosmos" to achieve the results desired.⁵ Their responsibility was to advance knowledge and confront new situations dealing with the unknown. The highest orders of priests served the paramount chiefs and were described as knowing all the specialties. The lower orders included the *kahuna lapaau* or medical doctors.⁵

Training of the *kahuna* consisted of selection at an early age which was based on intelligence, interest, and eagerness to learn. Instruction would begin at dawn and continue until sunset, at which time students were taught to observe, to listen, and to learn by experimenting. According to Hawaiian historian Samuel Kamakau, if young boys were dedicated to the *kahuna* class, the boy's body was kept pure. His hair could not be cut; his clothing, his sleeping mats, his house, and his food and drink were considered *kapu* or sacred.⁴

Hawaiians did not make a distinction between disease, healing, and religion. The interaction of psyche and body was viewed in a spiritual context, and healing embraced the total being—body, mind, and spirit. Hawaiians believed, and in the

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believing certain plants were afforded psychological healing potentials, regardless of whether or not they contained therapeutic value. The medical *kahuna* practiced what Westerners refer to as "empirical medicine." Healers observed what worked and what did not work.² The *kahuna* code of ethics was to do only what one had been trained to do. Therefore, referring a patient to another *kahuna* was common practice.²

For a number of years, the government of Hawaii tried to regulate and license the *kahuna*. Part of the pressure stemmed from Western disapproval of Hawaiian medicine. Another factor was a general move to license all healing practitioners, including Western and Chinese. In 1886, the act to establish a Hawaiian Board of Health was passed which specified that a three-person board would examine Hawaiian practitioners in terms of moral character and maintenance of treatment records. In 1959 when the Territory of Hawaii became a state, laws pertaining to the traditional healer were abolished.

Today, renewed interest in Native Hawaiian traditional medicine has the blessings of the federal and state governments which are seeking to improve the dismal state of Native Hawaiian health. In October 1988, U.S. Congress passed Public Law 100-579, the Native Hawaiian Health Care Act (NHHCA). The NHHCA provides for the establishment of up to 9 Native Hawaiian Health Care Systems throughout the state and fosters healing options that are culturally appropriate. The law encourages the services of traditional Hawaiian healers as providers of care. A traditional healer is defined as an individual of Hawaiian ancestry whose knowledge, skill, and experience are based on demonstrated learning of Hawaiian healing practices acquired by direct association with Hawaiian *kupuna* (elders) and oral traditions.

Papa Auwae works closely with members of *Kupuna Laau Lapaau*, as some prefer to be called, using the respectful term for elder. The average age is 70. There is a recognition by the *kupuna* that because of their age, it is important to preserve and perpetuate herbal healing practices. According to Kukana Isaacs, coordinator of the organization, fewer than 20 have "come out" to share their knowledge with everyone. These *kupuna* are committed to creating a registry of healers, to setting standards of practice, and to training *kakoo* (assistants) and *haumana* (students). Most important, they are committed to learning from Papa Auwae and from one another. Papa Auwae is recognized as the *kupuna* with the most years of training. These healers have made a decision to come together to form a common body of knowledge so that little is lost. Papa Auwae stresses the need for standards because he believes there are quacks or charlatans who call themselves traditional healers. As head of the *kupuna* organization, Papa feels that they are not ready to be licensed or certified at this time.

Papa Auwae uses thousands of plants and spiritual strength to alleviate mental and physical health problems. Some Western physicians have become interested in Hawaiian healing and are beginning to accept some of the Native Hawaiian healing principles. The effect the mind has on the immune system is being studied in the discipline of psychoneuroimmunology.

Papa Auwae and *Kupuna Laau Lapaau* continue their firm commitment to preserve the art of *laau lapaau* for all people. Currently, more than half of the world's population relies on

traditional practitioners for health care services. Internationally, the World Health Organization promotes the study of indigenous medicine and investigative studies of efficacy, and the incorporation of traditional medicine into health care services. In Hawaii, Papa Henry Auwae says he will teach anyone with the heart to learn as long as he or she doesn't use it for profit. With the assistance of *E Ola Mau*, the traditional healers conduct workshops in communities throughout the state. *E Ola Mau* has been entrusted with a directory of traditional healers and looks forward to the time when this registry can be shared with all health care providers for the benefit of all people of Hawaii. For more information, contact *E Ola Mau* at (808) 586-4800.

Note: To respect the wishes of the *kupuna* in the statewide organization *Kupuna Laau Lapaau*, diacritical marks are not used in this article.

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Imi Hoola Program** ***Those Who Seek to Heal

Beginning in September 1995, the University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine plans to restructure its program for disadvantaged students. The new program is called *Imi Hoola* and is designed to enhance unsuccessful medical school applicants survive the rigors of medical school by providing a structured academic program, academic counseling, tutoring, and psychosocial support. Each school year, 10 post-baccalaureate students who have applied, but were not accepted into medical school, or who made a late decision to enter a health profession school, will be selected to participate in an intensive 13-month post-baccalaureate program.

The mission of the John A. Burns School of Medicine is to train students to a high level of competence as primary care physicians, with the goal of improving health care in Hawaii and the broader Pacific. The school aims to make medical careers possible for members of underrepresented Pacific Island groups whose educational goals have been hindered by a disadvantaged background. The goal of *Imi Hoola* is to increase the number of Pacific Islanders in medicine. The program is designed primarily for, but not limited to, persons of Hawaiian, Filipino, Samoan, Chamorro, and Micronesian ancestry.

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