

A RETURN TO RITUAL: MAUI'S CELEBRATION OF THE ARTS

Sacred Ceremonies and Chanting Honor Tradition, Spiritual Healing,
and Gratitude

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BY BEKAH WRIGHT
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A line of people make their way to Kapalua's DT Fleming Beach in the pre-dawn darkness. Despite the silence, there's a heightened sense of excitement in the air. For some, it's the first time they're about to embark on this venture. For others, like me, they've experienced the upcoming ritual in the past and have been longing to relive it again.

Soon, two cultural practitioners motion for the growing crowd to circle up and draw closer. Instructions are parlayed: Enter the ocean with your heart open for cleansing out the old and welcoming in the new. Think of your 'ohana, or family, meditate on those things for which you're grateful, and welcome in new directions and changes.

Some of the throng pushes past the break, wading in to where the surf is hitting near their sternums. Others dive through waves, seeking out their just-right spot. I'm with those at the edge of the water, digging my heels into the sand so the pull of the surf doesn't buckle my injured knees. Oh, how I long to be out in the "deep end." My thoughts of *mahalo*, gratitude, begin right here – *Mahalo for bringing me back to my beloved Maui.*

Without a signal of any sort, the waders make their way out of the surf and back onto the shore. We turn to face the sun, which has yet to peek through the clouds over Pu'u Kukui Preserve, a protected rainforest and watershed area. Chanting begins. A chant to which my heart always returns, particularly when I'm frightened or need comforting. And, though he's not leading the chant today, it's the voice of Celebration of the Arts Founder Clifford Nae'ole I hear.

*E ala ē, ka lā i ka hikina,
Awaken/Arise, the sun in the east,
I ka moana, ka moana hohonu,
From the ocean, the deep ocean,
Pi'i ka lewa, ka lewa nu'u,
Climbing to heaven, the highest heaven,
I ka hikina, aia ka lā, e ala ē!*

In the east, there is the sun, arise!

Mahalo, I whisper as the chant concludes. Mahalo for this place where my spirit feels at home. Mahalo for my Hawai'i 'ohana. Mahalo for E ala ē and the man who introduced me to it, Clifford.

E ala ē concludes with one of the practitioners charging us to go forth and embrace the days ahead as Ritz-Carlton Kapalua's 25th Celebration of the Arts (COA) begins.



Celebration of the Arts was conceived to impart Hawaiian culture, food, dance, art, crafts, music, film, and talk story, or conversation as a way to create common ground



Clifford holds the leaves, while performing the *Wehe ka ipuka*... Open the Doorway

between visitors, locals, and Native Hawaiians. "I feel visitors can contribute much to the future of Hawai'i if they're educated and, therefore, become emotionally attached," Clifford says of why he started COA. "I urge visitors to take these emotions home and keep an eye out for any legislation, health reforms, educational programs, or indigenous rights that are taking place in their homelands."

It feels entirely fitting that COA is held at the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua. Somewhere, I got it into my head that Kapalua is the juncture where heaven meets the Earth. I've asked Clifford about this before, but he says he's never heard this supposition. I remain convinced, however, it's true.

The property includes the dunes of Honokahua, a sacred burial site. When the resort was being built, Hawai'i was going through what Clifford calls "an awakening." "Up until the attempt to build the hotel, the Hawaiians had no say in terms of how their artifacts or skeletal remains were handled when dug up for 'progress,'" he says. Protesters convened as 1,800 remains were about to be removed from the site. "Fortunately, an agreement was solidified between the State of Hawai'i and the hotel, allowing the burial site to remain intact." As a result, the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua was relocated further up the bluff and away from this preservation area.



While yoga isn't on COA's itinerary, it is definitely on tap at the hotel. The Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua's Fitness Center has a robust class schedule featuring everything from Somatic to Laughter Yoga. Many of the 30- to 60-minute classes are free to guests. (As an FYI, yogis under age 18 must be accompanied by an adult.)

Additionally, there's a Mindful Medita-

tion with Music offering at the hotel. Over the years, I've foregone this offering in lieu of seeking out the idyllic meditation spots on resort grounds. One is midway along a walking path overlooking the Pacific. The other is tucked under a rocky outcropping, where the surf rolls in, alerting me, "Your meditation session has concluded."

What makes Celebration of the Arts feel so fitting to a yogi are the rituals that serve as a spiritual connection to the islands. To me, being allowed to witness and participate in these ceremonies is precious.



As 8 a.m. rolls around, a large group waits at the entrance of a ballroom. Soon, a velvet rope is pulled aside, allowing us access to this "red carpet" event. We're about to experience the *Ka Wai A Kāne* ceremony.

The public is allowed to watch as several people are invited to drink water made bitter by *awa*, a Polynesian root that's consumed socially and during special gatherings like this one. "It's said the deity *Kāne* provided us with *awa* to show our dedication to strive for the best," Clifford explains. "Drinking *awa* is a sign of sacrifice and commitment."

Signaling the beginning of *Ka Wai A Kāne*, a conch shell is blown, followed by a chant. A gentleman holding an *ohe*, or long bamboo pole, tilts it towards two large wooden bowls. Ever so slowly, water fills the vessels. Clifford says, "When you listen to the sound of water that pours from the *ohe* spout into the *Tanoa*, or sacred bowl, the sound is akin to the voice of *Kāne*."

Assisting the *kupuna*, or elders, a boy passes a shell to be filled from the bowl. Waiting in the wings are several young men serving as *Kakoo*, also performing the honor of helping. One by one, they approach, kneel before



Labrynth on property of The Ritz-Carlton Kapalua. Photo by Don Riddle Images

the elders to accept the shell, then deliver it to individuals sitting on a sacred mat or *kapa moe*. “Do you pledge your support to all things Hawaiian?” Hokulani Holt, the presiding *Kumu*, or teacher, asks them. “Always,” responds the first participant, drinking the *awa*.

As this ceremony concludes, the hushed participants depart the room. The next ritual is “To see Hawaiians being Hawaiian.” This is the final ceremony of the day, *Wehe ka ipuka... Open the Doorway*, or as Clifford puts it, Hawai‘i’s version of “Knock, knock, who’s there.”

Holding sway in the resort lobby, a *ku-puna* opens with a chant. His “Who’s there” response is emitted from the breezeway entrance. Hula *halaus*, or schools, ‘*ohana* and spiritual leaders take turns in a very deliberate procession, answering with traditional chants passed down over the centuries. Their query: “Do we have permission to join the Celebration of the Arts?”



The rest of the COA goes by in a flash. There’s time for visiting the Medicinal Garden to munch on produce from local farms and sip coconut water straight from a machete-sliced coconut.

At various places throughout the building,

artisans are busy performing their crafts: drum carving, Hawaiian patchwork quilting, or shell lei making. Elsewhere, hula is performed and ukulele lessons proffered. Facing down at rows of tables are competitors in games of *Konane*. “It’s similar to checkers,” Clifford says of the centuries-old game of strategy. “Warriors would play it to think about battle scenarios.”

Another art in which COA attendees can be found immersing themselves is one of the healing variety -- treatments at the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua’s Waihua Spa. Myriad elements from COA come to mind here. A pathway lined by tall bamboo poles recalls the *ohe*. There’s a grotto where a hot tub beckons for respite. This is, of course, where one immerses in *Waihua*, known in ancient Hawai‘i for waters with healing powers. I close my eyes and listen closely. Might I hear the voice of *Kāne*?

Instead, it’s the memory of Clifford’s voice I hear. The one of him chanting on the beach that always follows me:

*E ala ē, ka lā i ka hikina,
Awaken/Arise, the sun in the east,
I ka moana, ka moana hohonu,
From the ocean, the deep ocean,
Pi‘i ka lewa, ka lewa nu‘u,
Climbing to heaven, the highest heaven,
I ka hikina, aia ka lā, e ala ē!
In the east, there is the sun, arise!
My whispered response, “Mahalo.”*

CELEBRATION OF THE ARTS 411

Ready to chant? The 2018 Celebration of the Arts Festival will be held March 30-31. For more information, phone 808-665-7089 or visit: kapaluacelebrationofthearts.com.

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