Grand Wailea
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Sharing Hawaii's People, Culture and Nature

E Ola Pono: Wellness through Balance and Harmony

Underlying all indigenous myths is the idea that spiritual forces can be understood and experienced through the natural world. Native Hawaiians believe that plants and animals are the embodiment of their older sibling, Haloa Naka, who is responsible to feed, heal, and bring wisdom to the younger and more vulnerable sibling named Haloa.

Haloa, (who represents humankind), is unable to feed, shelter, heal, or teach itself, so Haloa Naka (who represents nature), sacrifices its body as food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and wisdom, as long as the younger sibling protects and cares for the elder. In this way each sibling shares kuleana (responsibility) to care for one other. If both honor their commitments, all will remain pono (in balance). Hawaiian medicine grew from this understanding that wellness is achieved through balance and harmony.

La'au Lapa'au is a form of traditional herbal healing as ancient as the Hawaiian people. The literal English translation is "plant medicine," however it includes use of every part of nature including ocean and fresh running water, rain, rocks, sun, moon, stars and more. Masters of herbal Hawaiian healing (Kahuna La'au Lapa'au) know that illness is not always caused by physical problems, like other native peoples, they believe spirituality is integral to healing.

The ceremonies and rituals necessary to gather and prepare medicines not only connect the patient and healer with nature, but with spiritual powers beyond physical existence. Acknowledging a connection with the ancestors and future generations is an integral part of all ceremonies. Diagnosis, gathering and preparation of plants, and administration of herbal medicines is done with pule (prayer).

In old Hawaiʻi, each family knew a healer who tended to his or her own family group, but healers did not sell their services. Despite a dark period when traditional Hawaiian healing was illegal, the Native Hawaiian Health Care Act passed by Congress in 1988, allowed for the resurgence of these practices and teaching. Kahuna, or masters, typically mentored young relatives specially chosen to serve as apprentices to pass down traditional healing wisdom orally and experientially. Many of today's students are not Native Hawaiian, but regardless of ethnic background, serious students of La'au Lapa'au must commit to several years of rigorous training before hoping to achieve Kahuna status.

Today traditional Hawaiian healing is in great demand by those seeking alternative, more natural, treatments. Do not be fooled by self-proclaimed "internet kahuna" who advertise these services. Legitimate Hawaiian healers are awarded Hawaiʻi state certification only after rigorous review by a committee of traditional healing masters.

Note: Hawaiian cultural information courtesy of Kahu Lyons Kapiʻioho'okalani Naone, first president and founding member of Papa Laʻau Lapaʻau, statewide organization of traditional healers. He was instrumental in research that led to the passage of the Native Hawaiian Health Care Act passed by Congress in 1988. He is the 1996 recipient of the Alexander F. Kaonohi Award, presented every two years by the Governor for significant contributions to Hawaiian health. As a respected Kahuna La'au Lapa'au, he chairs a committee of Hawaiian traditional healing masters responsible for state certification.

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