

LUA, A WAY OF LIFE: A CONVERSATION WITH FIVE ‘ŌLOHE LUA

Richard Kekumuikawaiokeola Paglinawan, Moses E. Kalauokalani, Nelson Kamilo Lara, Rodney Kahakauila Toledo, and Gordon ‘Umialiloalahanaauokalakaua Kai

The recent revival of lua can be traced to the efforts of a handful of Hawaiian men who decades ago sought out the knowledge of this ancient philosophy and fighting art. Trained by Charles Kenn (1907–1988), the last known surviving ‘ōlohe (lua master), these modern warriors later established schools to carry on the traditions of lua. This essay is based on a group interview held in October 2011 in Kalihi with senior ‘ōlohe from Pā Ku‘i a Lua. For these practitioners, lua is more than a fighting style; it is a way of life deeply connected to Hawaiian culture and spirituality.

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On October 26, 2011, Richard “Likeke” Kekumuikawaiiokeola Paglinawan, Moses “Moke” E. Kalauokalani, Nelson Kamilo Lara, Rodney Kahakauila “Kaha” Toledo, and Gordon ‘Umialiloalahanaauokalakaua “‘Umi” Kai gathered together at the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center to share their experiences with lua, a Hawaiian fighting art. Brandon C. Ledward moderated the discussion. The comments have been edited with the approval of the authors.

BRANDON: Mahalo for making time to talk story today. How did you each become involved in lua?

RICHARD: I come from a martial arts background. I taught karate for 15 years—Moke was my student—but we got disenchanted by its commercialization. Because I’m Hawaiian, I knew about lua and mokomoko (Hawaiian boxing), but we couldn’t find any teachers. Then Moke and I met Jerry Walker. He had made a connection with Charles Kenn, who agreed to teach us. There were five of us, originally. Then we each hustled and brought another person in. So the first lua class had 10 students.

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BRANDON: What was it like to train with Charles Kenn?

RICHARD: For the first 6 months he only taught us culture. That was hard for us to take because we wanted to learn the fighting part. But what Charles Kenn was saying through his actions was that you cannot practice lua in isolation. You have to practice it in relationship to the culture. We carry this tradition on in our pā (lua group). We teach students the cultural and spiritual context of lua; they learn and practice the rituals and ceremonies, not only the fighting techniques.

MOKE: That’s right. It’s not only about fighting. And I get upset when people call lua the “Hawaiian martial art.” It’s much more than that. Yes, we teach the fighting arts, but we also teach our students how to live pono (right). Lua really is a way of life. I find myself telling my wife and grandchildren, “I’m sorry,” because lua teaches me to be humble and to see the bigger picture.

‘UMI: I got involved with lua through my desire to make Hawaiian implements. I learned how to make kōnane (ancient game) boards, poi pounders, simple weapons, and ‘ulu maika (stone used in maika game), but I really wanted to learn how to make functional traditional Hawaiian weapons. I was encouraged by Noelani Mahoe to join the second O‘ahu class, the third lua class overall. Lua helped fill a puka (hole) I had with regards to learning more about Hawaiian culture. A lot of generations grew up doing the necessities of life like fishing, making imu (earth oven), and gathering and cleaning limu (seaweed). These were things that our ancestors did in kahiko (ancient) times. But it was so common that you didn’t really label it Hawaiian. Later generations have more of the spiritual and ‘ōlelo (language) portion of culture but maybe not so much the physical parts. So this is where the older and younger generations can kōkua (help) each other. So, I’m striving to live a Hawaiian way of life, of which lua is a strong part. For some people it’s hula. For me, lua is all encompassing.

KAMILO: My connection to Hawaiian culture goes back beyond my involvement in lua. Likeke (Richard) and I are first cousins. In the 1970s, I started digging deep into our genealogy. I got a lot of guidance from my cousin and his wife (Lynette), who nurtured me in different aspects of Hawaiian culture. In 1993, Likeke and three other ‘ōlohe (lua masters) of Charles Kenn started a lua workshop through the Bishop Museum. I attended the first O‘ahu class and it was a real eye opener for me because I didn’t know what lua was all about. But it was a fantastic learning process and I thank my cousin and the ‘ōlohe who did the training for furthering my knowledge about lua and the culture that comes with it. The rituals, protocols, and ceremonies really impacted me. These days I try to share that information with anyone who is interested in hearing it.

KAHA: Of everyone here, I’m probably the least steeped in Hawaiian culture. In many ways, I was brought up in anything but the Hawaiian way. In 1995, a friend who I grew up with in Kalihi asked me to join the pā. It was an incredible immersion into a cultural learning process. I’ve learned a lot over the years, about Hawaiian culture and about myself. I’ve come to love it and like Kamilo, I want to pass on as much as I can to others.



Nā 'ōlohe lua, Pā Ku'i a Lua (L–R: Hinano Rosa, Kaha Toledo, Kili Rosa, 'Umi Kai, Richard Paglinawan, Kamilo Lara, Noelani Mahoe, Keani Kaleimamahu, Moke Kalauokalani)

DAVID FRANZEN, COURTESY OF BISHOP MUSEUM

BRANDON: Over the last decade, more and more Hawaiians are practicing lua. Why do you think it has become so popular?

RICHARD: Lynette and I travel a lot and one thing we've picked up is that outsiders often perceive Hawaiian men as effeminate. This is because hula is what gets associated with Hawai'i; it's all they see. When we went to the Cook Islands for an art festival a group of young Hawaiian male students performed a hula. The first thing the other Polynesians said was, "Look how soft the men are." Same thing with the Māori from Aotearoa, they said, "Hawaiian men only do hula." You see, the Māori have *taiaha* (fighting art). We learned taiaha from the Māori folks. Maybe Moke can explain more.

MOKE: Taiaha is the Māori fighting art. I was told that a Māori never leaves his home without his taiaha (a staff weapon). In 1995, when we had a gathering of canoes at Ke'ehi Lagoon, the Māori who were there expected to be greeted by hula dancers. But unbeknownst to them, Pā Ku'i a Lua was there to challenge them

outright. Oh, they had to back up quick. Another example was in 2002. The pā traveled to Aotearoa. We participated in *powhiri* (cultural protocol) on their *marae* (tribal gathering grounds). There is a point at the *kahua* (ceremonial ground) of the *marae* where visitors cannot cross without permission. What we did was we raised our weapons, made an offensive formation, and charged the warriors defending the *marae*. But we stopped right at the *kapu* (taboo) area. As you can imagine that was quite a shock for them. They told us later that it forced them to rethink their perception of Hawaiians. You see, we understood their protocol, we knew where we could go and where we could not, but we also showed them what Hawaiian warriors are capable of doing. They had never seen that before.

‘UMI: I believe the rise in lua practitioners that we’ve seen over the past 10 years is tied to the growth of the *kāne’s* (man’s) role among Hawaiians. In *kahiko* times, the Hawaiian community was a warrior community. The warriors were the first ones fed, the first ones taken care of, because they were responsible for protecting the group. Once the islands were unified and the *kapu* was lifted there wasn’t a great need for the warrior community anymore. It vanished very quickly, so quickly that a lot of knowledge about the physical aspects of lua and the *kuleana* that went with it was lost altogether. And that’s a shame.

BRANDON: What does the lua movement offer Hawaiians today?

RICHARD: Like I said before, lua cannot be practiced in isolation from culture. Many of the old practices that addressed problems for Hawaiians are no longer available because the knowledge was lost or forgotten. That’s why we devote so much time to practicing lua ceremonies and rituals as well as teaching chants and herbal remedies. We also perform community service and help perpetuate Hawaiian culture wherever we can. For example, we went to Hālawa (O’ahu) to help with the reforestation efforts and to help restore *heiau* (places of worship). This comes back to the concept of duality. What you take out, you gotta put back. What has been destroyed needs to be replenished. In that sense, I feel the pā has done a lot to impact the Hawaiian community.

‘UMI: Like other cultural practices, lua offers our people a chance to reclaim who we are as Hawaiians. More than anything I’ve learned through my lua training that the identity of Hawaiian males today needs to change. The men need to identify what their *kuleana* (responsibilities) are. In *kahiko* times, men were the providers; they

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built the hale (house), they provided the food, took care of religion, and provided their 'ohana (family) and community with security. Today, a lot of these things are taken care of by wāhine (women). This is fine but the kāne really need to step up and become leaders of their families and their communities. Lua and the philosophy of balance can help kāne achieve these goals.

BRANDON: More than once I've heard you say, "Lua is a way of life." What are some principles you've found particularly helpful in your kāne roles as husbands, fathers, mentors, and leaders?

KAHA: For me, lua really drove me into genealogy. You can't overestimate the value of knowing who you are and where you come from and this is for both the Hawaiian side and the haole (White) side. Knowing your family history five, six, seven generations back really grounds you and helps you to make better sense of this world. Like I said, I grew up in a very haole household. So my lua training really got me interested in learning more about Hawaiian history and culture. That is a principle we try to pass on to our haumāna (students). We encourage them to understand their connectivity to Hawaiian culture, which can make a big difference in people's lives. We also address the importance of duality, of balancing the Kū and Hina aspects of ourselves. (Kū and Hina are Hawaiian deities associated with masculine and feminine traits.) For example, we see it where the wahine

(wife) is a doormat to her husband. She needs to bring up her Kū and if the kāne (husband) is walking all over his wahine, he needs to lower his Kū and raise up his Hina. That way they can live in better harmony together.

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MOKE: What Kaha is talking about, Kū and Hina, in our lua program we learn through rituals and ceremonies. We cover a lot of ground; we go

through the kinds of food we eat, we talk about our behaviors and choices. Then we have a speakers' forum where members share with each other. I tell you that's when you begin to see Kū and Hina. I end up crying. It's powerful when you see these buff guys turn around and tell their wives, "I love you." But this is what lua teaches them. That they can put down their pride and share how they feel. It happens all the time. You see a guy built like a buffalo with tears running down from his eyes. If you get big Kū, you better learn about your Hina and vice versa.

RICHARD: Let me share a story with you about the duality of Kū and Hina. Hina can also be a strong position to take. It doesn't necessarily mean submissiveness. For example, my father was a boxer. He had 31 fights and lost only one by TKO (technical knockout). One day, when I was in the fourth grade, we were walking to the bus stop near Vick's Bar in Liliha and there was this guy pounding his fists on another guy. He had him up against the wall and he was just nailing him until he slithered down. So my dad went over, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "He's had enough." The guy turned toward my dad, all pissed off, and wanted to fight him too. Of course, my father didn't want to fight, but the guy started throwing punches. All my father did was weave and dodge until the guy couldn't throw anymore. He was exhausted. Then my father said, "You had enough?" In hindsight I realize that my dad was using his Hina. He didn't touch him. In fact he didn't have to touch him to subdue him. So like I say, Hina can be a strong position too.

The two principles that 'ōlohe lua teach in our pā are ho'omau (perseverance) and nalu (flexibility).

KAMILO: Coming into lua, learning lua and learning culture, gives you a solid groundwork for understanding humility and perspective. It reinforced in me the reasons why our kūpuna (ancestors) did what they did. Our kūpuna are so wise. I always tell our haumāna, if you have questions seek the advice of your elders. You can also research it. Being Hawaiian is living on islands and each one is different so cultural practices often vary from island to island. So the idea of being pono (balanced) means finding out what's right for the context. Learning and accepting that different perspectives exist gives you a broader understanding of culture.

'UMI: The two principles that 'ōlohe lua teach in our pā are ho'omau (perseverance) and nalu (flexibility). To ho'omau and not quit in the face of adversity is a big life lesson for some of our kāne. But it's one that will surely take them farther in life. Regarding nalu, it is important to be both physically flexible, for better strength, and mentally flexible when problems or issues are thrown at you. Being able to sidestep them or let them flow off you is very important for the practice of lua but also for other areas of life, like business. Flexibility is one of the key elements in maintaining your job these days.

BRANDON: We've talked about the cultural aspects of lua but there's also a strong spiritual side to it. Can you share a little about the role spirituality plays in lua?

RICHARD: To really progress in lua you have to understand the Hawaiian worldview, which covers both seen and unseen entities. You have to recognize the balance between ao (the human realm) and pō (the spiritual realm). Recently, the pā has become experts in dealing with spirits because spirituality is central to lua teachings. For example, we were called by an organization to their records office. Their workers, Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians, were experiencing strange things like moving chairs with no one present, the elevator going up and down without anybody pushing the buttons, people seeing ghostly figures, feeling strange feelings and so forth. We went in and we swept through the building, all three stories. When we went upstairs a couple of our people started sensing a strong spiritual presence. Eventually we led the spirits out and said, “Go, go and join Pō.” What we didn’t know at the time was that during World War II, the building was used as a hospital and many soldiers had died there. In fact, the upstairs was the morgue. So we told the spirits, “Go and join your ancestors, we give you permission.” And they never had problems after that.

KAMILO: Looking back, I think that in any walk of life some have the ability to sense the spiritual, others don’t. We find that some of our haumāna are much more prone to see and understand things of a spiritual nature. Some are seers and can identify spirits. Others have the ability to interpret dreams or hō’ailona (signs in nature). In lua, acknowledging the spiritual side helps you to really understand what’s happening around you. We are blessed with a wide variety of skill sets in our lua ‘ohana and we always try to put our knowledge to use in the community.

‘UMI: I just want to add that we don’t trample on anyone else’s spiritual beliefs. You have to remember that there are members with different upbringings and religious beliefs in our pā. What we teach are practices from kahiko times that are applicable today and it is not meant in any way to do away with their own belief system. All we ask from our students is that they remain open to the spiritual processes associated with lua because in the end these teachings are meant to guide and protect them.

RICHARD: That’s right. And in that process, if they choose to participate, the ‘ōlohe will always watch over them. We let them know that it’s alright to make mistakes in the course of their training. You see, we teach specific protocols and oli (chants) for pikai (spiritual cleansings) and mahiki (exorcisms). And we never put our haumāna in situations that could harm them spiritually. It comes back to kuleana, of knowing your place, your abilities, and your limitations. If you only take account of the human side of things and not the spiritual part, you end up missing a lot.

BRANDON: Any final comments you'd like to share with our readers?

RICHARD: When you spend as much time as we have in the lua lifestyle you become 'ohana. That is something our pā provides, 'ohana that supports each other. And 'ohana is important because that's where knowledge is gained. Let me use an example, there are a lot of practices that our families used to do, like kālúa pig (cooking a pig in an earth oven). A lot of kids today don't know how to kālúa pig because families have moved on to catering. So if they cater the lū'au (feast) then the kids don't get the opportunity to learn the Hawaiian tradition. The thought behind the decision to cater is reasonable, "I don't want my family to work hard. I want them to enjoy themselves." But this misses the whole point. "Kālúa-ing" the pig, the time spent preparing in the kitchen, everyone "kōkua-ing" each other, that's how the 'ohana spirit is reinforced. Therefore, these kinds of activities are important for the perpetuation of culture. That's why we focus so much on traditions and values in our lua training.

It's about nurturing the lives we come into contact with.

KAMILO: One of the things we've come to understand more fully as lua instructors is our different kuleana. We talk about our kuleana as teachers, as role models, as kūpuna, as mākua (parents) and so on. Everyone has their responsibilities and it's important to know where each one resides. At the same time, it's about nurturing the lives we come into contact with. For me, it is so impactful to see the positive changes made in our haumāna.

'UMI: I just want to touch upon something I said earlier about kāne. They need to identify as being a leader within their own family and their community and the islands at large. The lua movement was one that really brought this issue to light back in 1993. That's when the call to arms spread, and it's still spreading. What we have to be careful of today is who's spreading it because there are lua-'ōlohe-wannabes and there are 'ōlohe lua. So we have to be careful of what's being taught out there. Even to the simple point of the honi (touch noses in greeting). A lot of people still don't understand the honi, what it's really for, and a lot of butting heads goes on, which shouldn't. First of all, it's a ceremonial greeting where you're exchanging hā (breath, life) or exchanging 'ike (knowledge) with each other. It's a touching of the noses and not the foreheads. The foreheads may come in as a light touch after the noses. But so many people do the honi incorrectly. And they do it unceremoniously. You don't have to do it every time you meet someone. It should be done calmly and with purpose, not a fast bump and run.

KAHA: I think one of the great lessons in lua is to look at something with a critical eye and to listen with a critical ear. Take in and evaluate what you are being told and go back to the cultural practices and our kūpuna to see if the teachings match.

I enjoy sharing my experience with other people because in the process I learn new things about myself and my fellow ‘ōlohe.

I say this because there are a lot of people today who are putting out their understanding of what is right and wrong and it’s up to us as ‘ōlohe to know the difference.

MOKE: I just want to mahalo (thank) you for inviting us here today. Lua has been my life for the last 40 years. I enjoy sharing my experience with other people because in the process I learn new things about myself and my fellow ‘ōlohe. I really learned a lot today.

BRANDON: Well this has been an illuminating discussion for us all. I appreciate each of you taking the time to talk story with me today. Mahalo a nui loa.



L–R: Kaha Toledo, ‘Umi Kai, Moke Kalauokalani, Richard Paglinawan, and Kamilo Lara
2011, BRANDON C. LEDWARD

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard Kekumuikawaiokeola Paglinawan is a founding member of Pā Ku'i a Lua and an original student of Charles Kenn. He served in the Hawai'i Air National Guard and obtained a master's degree in social work from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Paglinawan was employed as a social worker with the Salvation Army and Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center before holding several state offices including Deputy Director for the Department of Hawaiian Homelands (1968–1975). In addition to training lua students, Paglinawan shares his expertise as a cultural consultant to Hawaiian organizations and often makes public presentations with his wife, Lynette, on lua and ho'oponopono.

Moses E. Kalauokalani, the son of Maynard and Caroline Kalauokalani, was raised in the Kalihi and Kapālama districts on O'ahu and graduated from Farrington High School in 1959. He then joined the Hawai'i Army National Guard and had a 27-year career serving in Bravo Battery 1st Missile Battalion, Charlie Battery 487th Battalion, and later Headquarters Company, 29th Infantry Brigade. Kalauokalani worked and retired from the Hawaiian Electric Company after 33 years and was also active in the community, including the Hui Kukākuā, a Hawaiian cultural organization, which compiled the Hawaiian Boy Scout Handbook in 1973. He was also a student of Richard Paglinawan for 4 years learning the art of karate and is one of five students who trained under Hawai'i's last known Hawaiian fighting arts master, Charles Kenn.

Nelson Kamilo Lara, born March 1953 in Honolulu, comes from the kū'auhau (genealogy) of Naleieha, Kapule, Makepa, and Mahawela (Davis). He is the son of Betty Lou Kauionalani Makepa and Faustino Vertido and was adopted by his maternal aunt Margaret Kamila Kapule and uncle Felimon Lara (Margaret Kamila and Betty Lou were the daughters of Margaret Mehawela Davis). Lara graduated from Damien Memorial High School in 1971 and then attended Honolulu Business College. In 1976, Lara was trained in researching and documenting family genealogical records by his cousin Richard Paglinawan and aunt Bernice Ha'o Hokoana, and in 1993 he was invited by Paglinawan to participate in a cultural workshop on lua funded by the Bishop Museum's Native Hawaiian Culture and Arts program, which established the foundation of Pā Ku'i a Lua.

Rodney Kahakauila Toledo is a descendant of Poupou and Kaiwimawaho of Kula through their daughter Napali o Ko'olau, through her daughter Elizabeth Cooke of Hilea (Ka'ū), through her son Henry Peters of Laupāhoehoe, and then through his daughter Laura Toledo of Hilo. He was born at Pūowaina (Punchbowl) on O'ahu in August 1947 to Emilio Broto Toledo and Laura Theolinda Peters, grew up in Kalihi, and graduated from the Kamehameha School for Boys in 1965. He attended Oklahoma State University and then served with the 100th Battalion, 442d Infantry during the Vietnam War and finished his reserve duty as a 2nd Lt. He joined Pā Ku'i a Lua in July 1995.

Gordon 'Umialilohalanauokalakaua Kai is a cultural practitioner who specializes in crafting Hawaiian implements, including nā mea kaua (things of war, weapons). He and his wife Janice Leinaala Noweo Kai, who is a skilled weaver, are part of a small group of Native Hawaiian artists perpetuating the craft of making tools and weapons that were once essential to survival. Kai, an 'ōlohe lua, frequently leads workshops to pass on his knowledge of nā mea Hawai'i. Kai is also a manager at Avis Budget Group.