

ANDRE PEREZ and J. KĒHAULANI KAUANUI “Our Gallery is the Heiau”: A Discussion of the Revitalization of Hawaiian Wood Carving

Abstract

This dialogue between Andre Perez and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui explores the recent revitalization of Hawaiian wood carving through two recent projects Perez had a leadership role in. Perez is founder and project director of Hui Kālai Kiʻi o Kūpāʻaikaʻe, a carving apprenticeship program based in Waiawa, Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi. In 2025, he co-curated, with Hawaiian artist Kaili Chun, the exhibition Hoʻokāhi ka ʻIlau Like Ana—Wield the Paddles Together at Gallery ʻIolani at Windward Community College. For the show, Perez and Chun selected canoe paddles made in the Pacific carving village that Perez organized for the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FestPAC) in 2024. In the FestPAC carving village, hosted by Bishop Museum, master carvers from various Pacific nations created large wooden canoe-steering paddles (hoe uli). In this discussion, Perez and Kauanui cover a range of issues related to the traditional Hawaiian practice of carving, including the cultural politics of Indigenous revitalization.

Keywords: *Hawaiʻi, contemporary art, carving, kiʻi, tiki, art activism, voyaging culture, Pacific Islands, sculpture*

In March 2025, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui interviewed cultural practitioner and activist Andre Perez, sparked by Kauanui’s experience at the opening of *Hoʻokāhi ka ʻIlau Like Ana—Wield the Paddles Together* (January 18–March 7, 2025), an exhibition Perez co-curated at Gallery ʻIolani at Windward Community College with Hawaiian artist Kaili Chun. For the exhibition, Perez and Chun selected canoe paddles made in the Pacific carving village at the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FestPAC) during the summer of 2024. In the carving village, hosted by Bishop Museum, carvers from various Pacific nations created large wooden canoe-steering paddles (hoe uli). The Gallery ʻIolani exhibition featured work by carvers from Hawaiʻi, Aotearoa, American Sāmoa, Sāmoa, Tonga, Fiji, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, French Polynesia, Guam, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Rapa Nui, Solomon Islands, Taiwan, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

Kauanui spoke with Perez about how both the FestPAC project and the exhibition emerged from his work as founder and project director of Hui Kālai Kiʻi o Kūpāʻaikeʻe, a carving apprenticeship program inspired by his master’s degree work in Hawaiian studies at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa.

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (JKK): *I’d like to start by asking how Hui Kālai Kiʻi o Kūpāʻaikeʻe, the carving revitalization project you founded, and the exhibition at Gallery ʻIolani fit within the broader field of your work?*

Andre Perez (AP): Even before I went to college, Hawaiian activist and scholar Kaleikoa Kaʻeo gave me a lot of books about liberation politics to read, so by the time I started my graduate program, I was becoming acutely aware of cultural appropriation and issues of race and power.

I focused my master’s studies on Hawaiian carving traditions because I recognized that Hawaiian kiʻi (tiki) were greatly appropriated. For instance, the tiki movement of the 1960s yielded many tiki bars in California and many other parts of the United States. Tiki are ubiquitous even here in Hawaiʻi—at hotels, Sea Life Park (in Waimānalo, Oʻahu), the Kauaʻi Airport, and elsewhere. They are made of a variety of materials including fiberglass, and some are crudely carved. I wanted to help reclaim the knowledge of kiʻi-making, use, and function.

In the process of my graduate research, I met one of the most famous, accomplished, skilled, and respected Māori carvers of our time—Lyonel Grant—and in our first conversation about carving he offered to teach if I rounded up some students. I took him up on his offer because (and I use this analogy a lot) it was like Bruce Lee offering to teach you martial arts. I recognized that it was a huge opportunity, and I took it seriously.

Part of my theory around what is necessary in order for things to change, for ideas to take hold, is grounded in the ceremonial concept of hānaipū, meaning everyone is fed (it’s not individualistic), which is a Hawaiian value. I don’t want to just feed myself because that would be kind of egocentric and selfish—if I wanted to learn carving, and I just taught myself, there’d only be one more carver. As part of my theory of change, my [carving] practice aims to be inclusive—hānaipū—to feed everyone and create opportunities for more than just myself.

JKK: *What drew you to kiʻi?*

AP: Traditionally the ki'i is an image of a Hawaiian ancestral god. If you pay attention, you will see poorly carved ki'i in many places across the United States. It is based on popular (non-Indigenous) and commodified renditions of different Hawaiian gods. I wanted to address this appropriation, and I knew, from surveying the community, that carving was an at-risk practice. I figured we should do something about that. Elder Sam Ka'ai had been my mentor and teacher when I lived on Maui (I used to live down the road from him). He's been a big influence on my understanding of the importance of reclaiming carving knowledge while dispelling the fear of ki'i in our communities. By reclaiming that knowledge and embracing it, we dispel that Christian colonial effect and enhance the relationship between kānaka (people), akua (deities), and 'āina (land).

I've learned from kumu Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'ole¹ that ki'i are representations of the elements, which help us understand the relationship between the forest and the water, the wind and the rain, and the ocean. We don't have many traditional Hawaiian carvers practicing, and back then, while I was in graduate school (2014–2018) there were no venues to go and learn. If you looked hard enough, you could find kapa (cloth typically made from the inner bast of wauke, paper mulberry) and places to learn how to weave hala (pandanus leaves), but it was very difficult to find ki'i carving-learning opportunities. My impetus [to learn] was based on creating opportunity for my community to learn and reclaim this knowledge, and, of course, it helped to have a community of cultural practitioners and activists for more than twenty years. All of this contributed to my wanting to safeguard what I saw as a practice at risk of disappearing entirely.

I was also inspired by a quote, articulated by Romanian philosopher Emil M. Cioran: when a people's gods are destroyed, their civilization is destroyed. By this measure, colonialism can be understood as successful when colonizers achieve total dominance by eliminating Indigenous spiritual traditions.² This idea resonated with me; I want my work to be disruptive of colonialism and challenge the colonial imposition of Christianity. We have our own gods and our own understandings. Because of this, in the past I have tried to include ki'i into activism. For instance, at Red Hill (a military fuel-storage unit on the island of O'ahu), a group of us activists, educators, attorneys, culture keepers and youth who organized into a group called Ka'ohewai put the ki'i Kaneikawaiola, the god of water and all forms of life, in front of the US Pacific Fleet command in response to the Navy's contamination of the aquifer there (Figs. 1–2).³ I think it's important and meaningful to community to have a visual representation of the gods present. That way, we can have that spiritual, emotional support and courage through our ancestral connections.



Figure 1. The ki'i Kaneikawaiola (center) is included in community activism and resistance against the United States Navy's contamination of an aquifer at the Red Hill Underground Fuel Storage Facility, Halawa, O'ahu, December 2021. Photograph courtesy of Andre Perez



Figure 2. A ko'a (shrine) dedicated to the Hawaiian god Kāne (god of fresh water, sunlight, and all forms of life) erected at the entrance to Pacific Fleet Command Headquarters, Halawa, O'ahu, December 2021. This Hawaiian-constructed ko'a catalyzed community resistance and opposition to the US Navy's leaking Red Hill Underground Fuel Storage Facility at Halawa, O'ahu. Photograph courtesy of Andre Perez

JKK: *That's powerful. Tell me more about the formation of the carving apprenticeship Hui Kālai Kī'i o Kūpa'aikē'e.*

AP: I organized a carving hui (group) to learn and, in doing so, help revitalize the practice and took a bunch of Hawaiian brothers along with me for the ride. We created Hui Kālai Kī'i o Kūpa'aikē'e in 2016 on the north shore of Kaua'i in Waipā. Kūpa'aikē'e is the god of carving canoes, but ultimately, he's the god of the adze. I chose to include his name to really ground us in the practice by highlighting the tool. During our first gathering, we camped and held a workshop. In the evenings, I facilitated discussions about not letting this gathering just be a one-off but creating a hui with the goal of making it an ongoing practice. I've always taken a very careful approach—asserting that we want to contribute to revitalization but knowing that we're not going to revitalize it all by ourselves. It's going to take generations, but my hope is that our contribution will help to establish a good or strong starting point and a foundation for revitalization.

I have also worked toward that goal with my written research. At the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, my master's program included the option of producing a thesis. My research methodology was centered on ethnography as well as archival research, oral interviews, and eventually participatory action research (also known in Hawai'i as *ma ka hana ka 'ike*). When I formed the hui, we started having training workshops. One of the important things for me was that all the guys that I selected were outside the same old circle of Hawaiian artists who already had access to resources, venues and teachers. I wanted to get the grassroots brothers who didn't have access, because they were a whole new demographic. I wanted to expand the circle and get new folks—particularly those who are marginalized—involved.

When I recruited our first round of participants, about three-quarters of our guys were unemployed from rural areas. A lot of our students didn't have jobs or were struggling and would likely not be able to afford the required tools. My number one principle for the hui was that we are revitalizing and safeguarding a sacred practice, and I took issue with charging people money for that. Our community shouldn't have to pay money to buy back and relearn a sacred practice. I stepped into the *kuleana* (responsibility) of finding the resources and funds so that our students don't have to pay. It's now my job to find funding for travel, for tools, for the training, for the teachers that we pay, for the venue, for the food—for everything. I didn't want my community to have to pay money to relearn our sacred practices.

We're really building out, toward a legitimate institution of learning. We've been carving under tents for nine years, and we're now working with an architect to build a dedicated carving space at the farm here at Hanakēhau. We're in the process of fundraising to build a real home—a place to keep all our tools and equipment and to do training.

Because we have an organized team and resources, we were asked to host the carving village for the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture (FestPAC). We have a good supply of tools and a tool trailer, etc., so we had the capacity.

***JKK:** Would you share more about the process of establishing the carving village for FestPAC?*

AP: Back in 2020, Aunty Vicky Holt Takamine asked if I would help host the carving workshops and demonstrations at FestPAC, and I said, of course, I'd love to—that's my kuleana as an organizer and a guy who has stepped into uplifting carving. The 2020 FestPAC was impacted by COVID-19 and delayed four years. In a way, that alleviated a budget problem; it gave the festival organizers extra time to organize and fundraise. I learned that if you're going to host the carvers, you must provide the wood, and the delay also gave me time to round up the wood.

My team and I wanted the FestPAC carving component to be completely different. We wanted to center the carvers *as practitioners*, to give them space and visibility, and to acknowledge them as the high-level artists that they are. Also, I wanted to organize the FestPAC carving component in a different way than how it had been done in the past. I wanted all the carvers to be together, not doing short two-hour demonstrations in their respective hale (houses): the Sāmoan hale, the Hawaiian hale, the Māori hale, the Tongan hale, for instance. I know carving—it takes time, it's labor intensive, it's a long process. I wanted the carvers to keep carving throughout the whole festival. I was successful in getting the festival organizers to support my vision of having all participating artists work continuously together for the full ten days at Bishop Museum. The festival organizers trusted me to do it the way I wanted. I asked Bishop Museum if we could host it there because they had security (it's fenced off with a gate, which would provide greater security for our tools). We had access to the museum so we could look at older carvings from across the Pacific for inspiration. And there was an additional little hale, a little cottage, where we could accommodate kupuna (elders) like Sam Ka'ai, who I mentioned earlier. Bishop Museum was very gracious; I didn't encounter a single barrier. They supported everything that the

carvers needed. When we ran into logistical problems that the FestPAC organizers couldn't solve, museum staff stepped in to help solve them. I should note that at the time, the museum was under Hawaiian leadership, and it was noticeable; I had an easy time working with Bishop and we created a carving village. Out of the twenty-eight nations invited to FestPAC, eighteen came with carvers. And from those eighteen nations, we hosted about seventy carvers.

For me, the most important thing about FestPAC was the pilina (relationship-building). We can always carve, but when are we going to ever be around seventy other carvers? Because I wanted to take advantage of that opportunity, we created a space for carvers to sleep at the venue so we could have evening programming, which had never been done. Every evening during FestPAC, we had an agenda where we had presentations, videos, discussions, tool-sharing, and demonstrations of different kinds of tools. We considered the innovations of carving today and the tensions around authenticity, tradition, and innovation. And we carved for ten days. It was great.

JKK: *How did you decide on paddles as the center of the carving project for the festival?*

AP: The FestPAC organizers asked me to come up with a theme. It was a bit of a struggle to think of a common carving theme for twenty-eight nations and took me a few days to process. I had to ask, what do we have in common? Then the light went on: *We're all from Moananuiākea. We're all sea people, we're all canoe people, people of the ocean.* In my thought process, the paddles represent our collective agency and self-determination—that as people of the Pacific, sea-going people, we are navigating our collective futures together. That's what that paddle means, our self-determination in this crazy colonial world. We've still got the paddle in the water, and we're choosing our destinations—that's the symbolism behind the paddle. It is tied to the scholarship in Epele Hau'ofa's pathbreaking essay "Our Sea of Islands." The ocean is not a barrier for us; the ocean is a bridge. The ocean is what connects us. The ocean is how we get to where we need to go.

I think it was the first time in FestPAC history that there was a collection of carved cultural material going on exhibit, so I wanted to give it context and meaning. I thought of the hoe uli, the large-scale steering paddle—the kind of paddle that you would use to steer Hōkūle'a (a double-hulled voyaging canoe launched in 1975 by the Polynesian Voyaging Society as part of the Hawaiian renaissance movement). A hoe uli would be a carving theme that people would

understand. Also, the large-scale steering paddle could be more decorative and enable more storytelling than a solely functional paddle (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Members of Hui Kālai Kī'i O Kūpā'aikē'e carving a hoe uli (canoe-steering paddle) at the Festival of Pacific Arts, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, June 2024. Photo courtesy of Andre Perez

Because this was such a large-scale project, we had to provide large pieces of wood that were difficult to come by. In our group, we don't cut down trees for carving; we only use repurposed recycled trees. It's our principle. For me, it's tied to my history working in conservation on the island of Kaho'olawe, where I helped to plant about 100,000 native plants and trees over the course of seven years. I'm not into chopping down native trees. Luckily, with the metro being built, I was able

to negotiate with Honolulu Area Rail Transit for some large logs that they were already going to remove. These logs ended up being one-hundred-year-old kamani (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) that we milled into slabs for the blades of the paddles. And then, from another wood miller friend on the Big Island, I ordered 4 x 4 x 12-inch blanks of 'ōhi'a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) for the shafts of the paddles. When the carving teams arrived at Bishop Museum, each delegation got a slab that was four inches thick and about 24 x 40 inches, along with the 4 x 4 x 12-inch piece for the paddle shaft. We then created a diagram—a spec sheet that showed the dimensions of the paddle. The challenge was to join the shaft to the blade and carve it in your own cultural aesthetic. The carvers immediately understood the task and loved it. They hit the ground running: chainsaws, power tools, chisels, adzes—chips were flying! It was organized chaos.

JKK: *What sort of responses did you encounter regarding the festival village?*

AP: What mattered most was the feedback from the carvers themselves, some of whom have been going to festivals since the late 1970s and early 1980s. They said that at the end of the day it was the best FestPAC they had ever been to. One carver said it was the first time they felt centered as a practitioner in their own space and their own time; this was the first time they had gotten to carve for the entire duration of the festival. And, because the amount of wood we were able to provide was ample, some carvers made three or four carvings beyond the paddle. It was awesome.

JKK: *If I can circle back to your choice of having the artisans carve paddles, I think that idea was ingenious, especially because so many Pacific nations are Christianized. Paddles are secular, so they can serve as a unifying force across Oceania in a way that ki'i carving can't.*

AP: Right, plus, there are some Pacific nations that don't carve ki'i and others that don't carve ki'i anymore. When I was talking with one of the carvers from Sāmoa, with whom I built a strong relationship, he said, "Oh, we don't have three-dimensional images. I wish we had images of these kinds of ancestral gods." What they do have in terms of visual forms is often labeled as "handicraft," such as the carving of utensils, bowls, and other functional items used for food, or the Tokotoko, the talking sticks. With the paddles, they had a lot of leeway in terms

of creating cultural aesthetics, motifs, and patterns, along with the shape of the blade (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Hui Kālai Kī'i O Kūpā'aikē'e, Hoe Uli (canoe-steering paddle) carved for the Festival of Pacific Arts, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 2024. Ohi'a wood (shaft) and kamani wood (blade); 15 x 2 ft (at widest part of the blade). Installation view in *Ho'okāhi ka 'Ilau Like Ana—Wield the Paddles Together*, 'Iolani Gallery, Windward Community College, O'ahu, 2025. Photograph courtesy of Andre Perez

JKK: *It's powerful that you were able to marshal the carvings from the festival to the exhibition at Gallery 'Iolani at Windward Community College. The works are beautiful, and I think you and Kaili Chun did an excellent job curating the show. The pieces were effectively complemented with the photographs by Kapulani Landgraf of them in the carving village. How was the show received?*

AP: I think a lot of people appreciated it. The exhibition was great—I went five or six times and did some talks. My sense is that people were amazed. The community had never seen a carving collection like that before in Hawai‘i. But honestly, art exhibits aren’t that important to us. I started the hui for us to be a traditional carving hui of practitioners in service to community needs. Our gallery is the heiau (temple mount), and our exhibition is in the hands of the practitioners. And, of course, ki‘i don’t belong in art galleries. They have no place in there. Although, we may do our own hui sharing ki‘i on our terms, in our space.

JKK: *What’s next for the carvings?*

AP: Well, the paddles are big and heavy—they are fifteen- to sixteen-foot paddles that weigh anywhere from fifty to seventy pounds. I didn’t want to be responsible for managing them since we have no place to put them, so we gave them to Kamehameha Schools Kapālama for their Ka‘iwakīloumoku building. It functions as a Moananuiākea (Great Oceania) gathering center, for when Pacific guests come to Hawai‘i, and is a much better placement option than putting them in storage where no one will see them. Hundreds of Hawaiian students will be able to view the paddles and hopefully be inspired by them.

* J. Kēhaulani Kauanui wishes to thank the peer-reviewers and journal editors for their detailed feedback. Mahalo also to both Julia Noriega and Katie Meyer for assistance with transcription.

Andre Perez is a community organizer, activist, and cultural practitioner from Koloa, Kaua‘i, whose work focuses on Hawaiian sovereignty, self-determination, and land and water defense. From 1998 to 2005 he assisted with the implementation of Kaho‘olawe’s environmental restoration plan, which incorporated Hawaiian cultural-healing approaches. In 2010, he co-founded Hanakēhau Learning Farm, and in 2016, he founded Hui Kālai Ki‘i o Kūpā‘aike‘e, a Hawaiian carving practitioner apprenticeship for which he serves as project director. In 2017, he co-founded Hawai‘i Unity and Liberation Institute (HULI). Additionally, Perez was an organizer and leader for Pu‘uhonua o Pu‘uhuluhulu, the occupation camp on Maunakea. He is co-founder of Ko‘ihonua, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to reclaiming and restoring Hawaiian lands, providing the means and resources for Hawaiians to engage in traditional practices by creating

Hawaiian cultural space. In 2021, he was named a Changemaker Fellow by the NDN Collective, recognizing his work toward cultural preservation and social and environmental justice.

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui is a budding art curator, seasoned radio producer, and established activist-scholar who situates her work in the fields of critical Indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, critical race studies, and anarchist studies. She is the Eric and Wendy Schmidt Professor of Indigenous Studies and professor of anthropology at the Efron Center for the Study of America, Princeton University. Kauanui is the author of two monographs: Hawaiian Blood (Duke University Press, 2008) and Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalism (Duke University Press, 2018). She also edited Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders (University of Minnesota Press, 2018) and numerous guest-edited journals. She is one of the six co-founders of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (founded in 2008) and is the recipient of the 2022 American Indian/Indigenous History Lifetime Achievement Award by the Western History Association.

Notes

¹ Kekuhi Kealiʻikanakaʻole was trained in the tradition of Hula ʻAihāʻa and Hula Pele and named for her grandmother—renowned dancer, chanter, teacher, and kumu hula Edith Kekuhi Kanakaʻole.

² Emile M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, trans. Richard Howard (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.

³ The focus of our activist campaign was to shut down the Redhill fuel facility that was leaking and contaminating the Oʻahu aquifer making hundreds of people sick with carbon poisoning. The community eventually won, and the fuel facility was shut down.