Traditional behaviors and kūpuna

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Early Hawaiians were often characterized as gentle, gracious, generous and polite. And that is because chiefs and commoners alike were taught the traditional values of humility, kindness and generosity. Kūpuna taught children of all social strata the courtesies and behaviors required with their elders, particularly, with their chiefs. Good breeding was demonstrated by acting and speaking with courtesy and walking with dignity. By the mid-1800s, Hawaiian historian Kepelino lamented, “But, today these good teachings are lost and replaced.”

Courtesies expected for ali‘i were strictly enforced. The punishment for misbehavior was severe and immediate. Whenever a chief traveled among the people, an announcer preceded the chief and his many attendants to call out the chief’s kapu. The announcer would call out, “Kapu! Lie down!” Immediate compliance was expected of everyone, including children. And, the position was to be held until all of the chief’s entourage had passed. The executioner was the last person in the procession, and he would loudly call out infractions and indicate the punishment was death. If the chief wanted to spare the life of the offending person, he would call out instructions to allow the person to live. Sometimes, in order to save the offender, a chief would place his hand on the person and ask the executioner to release him. It was the chief’s humility, kindness and generosity that staid the executioner’s hand. One can appreciate why such great care was taken in teaching and learning appropriate behavior.

Interestingly, Kepelino saw the traditionally taught courtesies and behaviors being lost and replaced 150 years ago. Admittedly, today courtesy is no longer a demonstrated norm. And, speaking with respect for elders has also waned. Walking and sitting with the dignity of a traditional chief is no longer practiced by our youth today.

Traditionally, kūpuna held an enviable position in the Hawaiian family. Kūpuna were considered wise and accomplished. Kūpuna were the constant, steadying and positive influence for both makua and mo‘opuna. Kūpuna observed and continued to gently guide their own children as they settled into the role of family providers. Kūpuna also focused on teaching mo‘opuna the family history, values, behaviors and courtesies taught to them by their kūpuna. The 21st century has brought more challenges and changes to the Hawaiian family system and many are not desirable.

Facts show we have fewer kūpuna in our lāhui today. Native Hawaiians over 50 years of age make up fewer than 15 percent (13 percent or 47,869) of the nearly 400,000 Hawaiian adults in Hawai‘i who are 50 or older. That is fewer than is found in other ethnic groups in Hawai‘i. Recent surveys of Native Hawaiian adults over 50 years of age show about a third (34 percent) of Hawaiian elderly feel relatively positive about their lives, while nearly a fourth (24 percent) of this group feel they are in fair or poor health. Health challenges for the older Hawaiian adult include severe overweight, diabetes, asthma, hypertension and physical disabilities that keep them at home. Many of our kūpuna live in rural areas, either alone or with their families, where a lack of public transportation makes it difficult to take care of daily tasks, like getting to medical appointments, pharmacies and the grocery store. And, many senior programs are available only within the city limits.

The survey identified some urgent needs of our kūpuna such as, finding housing, caring for and repairing their homes, needing companionship, and help with shopping, cleaning and meals. Kūpuna living in rural areas face the greatest challenges. Let us give voice to the needs of our kūpuna and seek solutions for them. Our kūpuna need help and our lāhui needs the wisdom of kūpuna.