

# Hula—Hawai`i's Own Dance

The *hula* is probably the most internationally recognized art form from Polynesia. In the words of Kawena Pukui, the *hula* is “Hawai`i’s own dance.”<sup>1</sup> The role of *hula* in ancient Hawai`i remains a matter of speculation. However, it is very likely *hula*, or some form of it, was originally performed in both sacred and secular contexts. In her text on *Hula Pahu*, Adrienne Kaeppler proposes that there were two forms of movement systems in old Hawai`i, *ha`a* and *hula*. *Ha`a* was the sacred form, performed in the ceremonial complexes of the *heiau*. Kaeppler believes *hula pahu* to be an evolved secularized form of the traditionally sacred dances. In Kaeppler’s model, *hula* was distinguished by public performances in secular contexts, such as in royal courts. The confusion occurred in translating the different movement systems into English, which uses the term “dance” to designate different types of movement systems. Information about *hula* in old Hawai`i is derived from chants, the journals and art of early visitors,<sup>2</sup> Hawaiian historian documents,<sup>3</sup> Hawaiian newspapers, and oral traditions. Probably the most famous legend associated with *hula* are the adventures of Pele and Hi`iaka. Pele is the Hawaiian volcano goddess and Hi`iaka, short for Hi`iaka-ika-poli-o-Pele, is her younger sister. In the legend, Pele travels to Kaua`i and falls in love with a beautiful *hula* dancer named Lohiau. After returning to Puna, Pele entreats Hi`iaka to go fetch her lover, and bring him back. Hi`iaka agrees and many adventures ensue, including Lohiau dying and coming back from the dead—thanks to Hi`iaka’s sacred *pa`u hula* skirt. This tale is most closely associated with the ancient ceremonial complex or *heiau* at Ke`e on the north shore of Kaua`i. Hawaiians believe this *heiau* is dedicated to Laka, one of the primary *hula* gods, and, thus, is a proper repository for articles disposed of after a performance.

In the first half of the 19th century, Hawaiian culture came under increasing pressure from acculturation as more outsiders and missionaries arrived on the islands. *Hula* was targeted and persecuted by missionaries because of the subject matter of the chants which glorified the Hawaiian gods, the physical motions of the movements such as the hip rotations, and the absence of full body covering characteristic of the traditional costume. In 1830

*hula* was banned by Queen Kaahumanu, wife of Kamehameha I, when she converted to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Although reinstated two years after her death, it was discouraged by missionaries who, not recognizing its cultural and symbolic value, labeled it “obscene.”

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, *hula* became the subject of early photographers who capitalized on young Hawaiian women, often producing revealing photographs under the guise of “*hula*.”<sup>5</sup> This trend continued, with more tasteful photographs made into postcards by the turn of the century. These photographs marketed images of “exotic,” if not “erotic,” island women. It was this image of the *hula* girl that caught the eye of Hollywood who marketed the stereotypical image of a sensuous woman, half-clad in a grass skirt.<sup>6</sup>

Despite all of the erroneous publicity, *hula* managed to retain its traditions and dignity. However, it was not until the end of the century when King David Kalakaua was crowned king that the *hula* again flourished. Major *hula* celebrations occurred in 1883 with the coronation of King Kalakaua and Queen Kapi`olani, and again in 1887 when the king arrived safely home from his trip around the world. In 1886, for the King’s Jubilee on

Early depiction of *hula* dancers published as a postcard in 1903. Desoto Brown collection.



his 50th birthday, *hula* events were held throughout the duration of the celebration which lasted two weeks.<sup>7</sup> The contributions of Kalakaua to preserve Hawaiian culture and *hula* are memorialized in the Merrie Monarch Festival, which is held annually in Hilo and is named after the former king's nickname.

*Hula* is now, and has always been, an integral part of Hawaiian culture. The most important components of the *hula* are the chants, *mele*, words or songs which accompany the dance movements. *Mele hula* contain milled meanings, *kaona*, which simultaneously speak of topics such as the beauty of a flower to symbolize a lover, a love affair, a child, a community, and so on. Another example taken from a contemporary song, *Ka Leo O Ka Mamo*, speaks of endangered birds as metaphors for the indigenous language and culture which is likewise threatened.<sup>8</sup> The term *kahiko*, ancient or old style (as in *hula*), is used to refer to all dances accompanied by chants. Sometimes the dancers chant, but often independent musicians chant while using drums to keep rhythm. *Kahiko* is recognized as a separate genre of *hula*, most closely associated with the ancient traditions and the style of *hula* performed in the courts of King Kalakaua. The other category of *hula* is *'auana* which is the style of *hula* most often performed in night clubs in Waikīkī, at weddings, and for fun and entertainment. Most *hula* competitions require dancers to be able to perform both *kahiko* and *'auana* dances.

Hawaiians dance *hula* informally, for fun at private parties, birthdays, or on special occasions to honor individuals. Organized *hula* performances are large scale events, with the most important being the annual competition of the Merrie Monarch. In Hawai'i, students can learn from family or friends, in universities or in *halau*. The traditional context for dancers to learn *hula* is the *halau*, or *hula* academy. That in ancient times each *halau* carried on a unique tradition is suggested by the proverb, "all knowledge is not found in one *halau*." Today *halau* exist all over the world.

*Hula* remains the trademark of island culture for outsiders who visit Waikīkī or attend staged "luau" in order to see their first live *hula* performance. For Hawaiians in a contemporary context, *hula* functions as an indicator of a shared cultural identity and a source of ethnic pride in the modern pluralistic society. In spite of acculturation, modernization, and the passage of time, for Hawaiians the sentiment is most clearly expressed in the words of the 19th Governor Boki, when he said, "Dance we will—no taboo!"<sup>9</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mary Kawena Pukui, "The Hula: Hawai'i's Own Dance," in *Thrum's Hawaiian Annual and Standard*

*Guide*, combined with *All About Hawai'i*, 1942, pp. 107-112.

<sup>2</sup> For early accounts see journals of Captain James Cook and James King (*A Voyage to the Pacific Oceans... 3 vols.*, London, 1784); Captain George Vancouver (*A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean... 5 vols.*, London: Stockdale, 1801); Captain Otto von Kotzebue (Glynn Barrat, *The Russian View of Honolulu from 1809-1826*, Ontario: Carlton University Press, 1988); and Missionary William Ellis (*Journey of William Ellis: A Narrative Tour... Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1979*). For early artistic renditions of *hula* see John Webber (accompanied Cook). Louis Choris (accompanied Kotzebue), Jacques Arago (French artist on vessel *Uranie*, captained by Louis Claude Freycinet, arrived at Honolulu in 1819) and missionary William Ellis. Photographic copies of these images are available through the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Archives.

<sup>3</sup> See John Papa I'i, *Fragments of Hawaiian History* (trans. by Mary Kawena Pukui, Honolulu: B.P. Bishop Press, 1993); Samuel Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992); and David Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities* (trans. N.B. Emerson, Honolulu: B.P. Bishop Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992), p. 299.

<sup>5</sup> Examples of such photographers are H.L. Chase, A.A. Montano, J.A. Gonsalves, and J.J. Williams.

<sup>6</sup> The grass skirt originates from the Gilbert Islands in Micronesia. For a history of Hawai'i and *hula* in films, see Luis I. Reyes, *Made in Paradise: Hollywood's Films of Hawai'i and the South Seas* (Honolulu, Mutual Publishing, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Barrere, Mary K. Pukui and Marion Kelly, "Hula: Historical Perspectives," *Pacific Anthropological Records*, No. 30 (Honolulu: B.P. Bishop Museum Press, 1991), pp. 50-52.

<sup>8</sup> Pandanus Club, *Ka Leo O Ka Mamo* from *E Huli Mai*, Bluewater Records and Pandanus Records, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Hopkins, *The Hula* (Hong Kong: Apa Productions, 1982), p.17.

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