

Beyond the Borders of Hula

by Michael Pili Pang

In 1881, King David Kalākaua (r. 1874-1891) circumnavigated the globe, a feat never achieved by any previous ruling monarch. Kalākaua's goal was to present to the world a civilized independent Kingdom interested in creating diplomatic relationships and goodwill. The eight-month voyage allowed Kalākaua to experience the cultural life of each nation he visited. Upon his return, he worked to strengthen the visibility of his own people and to support their rich heritage. This included a revival of hula, which he described as "the life-blood of his people."

Because hula is a living art form it reflects the place and time in which it exists. While certain distinguishing characteristics cut across the borders of time and place, hula has been influenced by changes in nature, religion, political leaders, economy, and daily life within Hawai'i, as well as by migrations within and beyond the islands' shores. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while some forms of hula we see today are considered "traditional," these were once creative innovations of practitioners who simply lived long ago. To better understand all of these factors we can look at classifications of hula over time to see how our *nā kupuna* (elders/generation(s) before us) shaped the hula we know today.

In pre-contact times (prior to 1778—before contact with the western world beyond the Pacific Islands) hula was used primarily in ritual ceremonies, particularly the dances known as *hula pahu* (drum dances), which were meant to attract the favor of the gods. These kinds of dances were often repetitive, were accompanied by through-composed chants (chants without repetition), and included movements that only referred to the text of the accompanying chants rather than interpreting them in a literal or pantomimic way. Because women generally were barred from entering the inner sanctuary of a *heiau* (temple), where these dances were originally performed, men were probably the primary performers. The rituals at which *hula pahu* were performed were first introduced to the islands through the migration of La'amaikahiki, who is said to have brought *pahu heiau* (temple drums), *pahu hula* (hula drums), and *ka'eke'eke* (bamboo organ-like pipes) to Hawai'i from the Islands of Tahiti around 950 AD.

A style of hula that arose after the arrival of missionaries in 1820 was called *hula ku'i*. This label poetically describes something sewn (*ku'i*) together like a patchwork quilt, a reference here to the mixing of non-Hawaiian and Hawaiian music and movements. The accompanying chant was influenced by missionary hymns, with two-line verses often repeated with the same melodic pattern. This strophic poetic style was reflected in gestural nuances that alluded to the poetic text and that were frequently performed symmetrically, with both the right and left sides of the body. Facial expressions and a kind of body language that accompanied the poetic text differed only subtly since the text was of primary importance and audiences spoke and understood the Hawaiian language.

Hula ku'i are sometimes further classified on the basis of the content of the poetry or song (*mele*) to which they are performed. These sub-classifications relate to the times and places in which the specific chants and dances were created. Hawaiian community leaders were highly educated—they were honored and their actions and deeds recorded in *mele inoa*, or name chants. As the local landscape began to conform to outside economic pursuits, places and people associated with them were honored and documented in *mele pana*, or place chants. When the declining health of native Hawaiians contributed to mortality rates outnumbering live births, procreation became increasingly important and gave rise to *mele ma'i*, chants and dances honoring the genital (*ma'i*) organs, particularly of the ruling class.

Missionaries who had arrived on the islands frowned upon cultural practices that were unfamiliar to them, particularly hula, since they considered dance, in general, immoral. To evade this issue many dances were performed as *hula noho*, dances done in a kneeling position commonly referred to today as "seated" dances. In *hula noho* the dancer often used a percussive musical instrument, described today as an "implement," and performed a dual role of musician and dancer. The seated position contradicted the standing-while-singing practice the missionaries had taught, and may have created a perception of something that was not dance, and hence was not immoral.

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Nevertheless, after much encouragement by clergymen and with support from second-generation missionaries who had become plantation owners, in 1851 the Minister of the Interior enacted a law restricting public performances of hula. To “preserve order and public peace” a fine of \$500 or imprisonment with hard labor for six months was imposed on any type of public performances or exhibitions undertaken without a proper license. Furthermore, no licenses were issued outside the city borders of Honolulu or the busy port of Lahaina, Maui. This prevented public performances in rural areas, particularly near the plantations where owners did not want laborers distracted from daily tasks. Although public performance of hula was outlawed, we do know that hula was still supported in areas outside the city such as Moanalua Valley, Wailua on O’ahu and other places on neighboring islands.

When King Kalākaua returned from his world voyage in 1881, he changed the restrictive laws and created opportunities for cultural practitioners to pursue their arts without fear or persecution. This was the first Hawaiian Renaissance, and large public performances of hula were created to celebrate the opening of Kalākaua’s newly built ‘Iolani Palace and his staging of a European-style coronation in 1883, nine years after being appointed king. Despite ridicule in the newspapers by his opponents, he continued to support the arts. Three years later, in 1886, he again invited performers to the palace to celebrate his 50th birthday jubilee. Today, Kalākaua’s support for the arts, especially hula, is remembered each year through the Merrie Monarch Festival in Hilo on the Island of Hawai’i.

Also during the mid-1800s trans-Pacific voyaging ships made stops in Hawai’i. Aboard these ships socialites were entertained by large bands and participated in social dancing. These activities spilled over to the islands and Hawaiians embraced both the occidental form of music and the movements of the then-popular social dances. Inspired by the orchestrated music, in 1836 King Kamehameha III (r. 1825-1854) created the Royal Hawaiian Band. Hawaiians easily mastered the playing of western instruments and began to combine traditional chant techniques and Hawaiian hymns with the new instruments. This combination eventually formed the basis of a unique style of Hawaiian music that became widely known beyond the islands.

In 1893, American businessmen, fearing the loss of their economic foothold in the islands, over-threw the Hawaiian Kingdom and imprisoned Queen Lili’uokalani (r. 1891-1893). The arts and culture that gained strength during the Kalākaua era lost their royal patronage, and hula’s primary task of documenting and honoring the deeds of Hawaiian leaders became obsolete. No longer did chants and older instruments accompany the dance. At the turn of the 20th century, hula was accompanied by non-indigenous string instruments, including guitar, bass, and the Portuguese instrument now known as the ukulele, all of which contributed to a new style of hula termed *hula ‘auwana*.



Ka Pā Hula o Kauanoē o Wa’ahila

‘Auwana literally means “wander,” and references both wandering away from older forms and purposes, and an emphasis on the four-count movement sequence created during the *hula ku’i* period in which the dancer moved from place to place, as opposed to the older dances that appeared to be more spatially static. In addition, movements became literally descriptive of the lyrics, which were now written in English, rather than simply alluding to them. As Hawaiian music became popular around the world many composers of the time were not residents of Hawai’i, had not even visited the Islands, and did not know the Hawaiian language. Native Hawaiians called the emerging musical style *hapa haole*, *hapa* meaning “half” and *haole* meaning “foreign,” referencing the fact that it was only partially Hawaiian, and employed English lyrics that focused on pseudo-Hawaiian themes.

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This was the beginning of three periods within a *hapa haole* era that shaped the hula we know today: Tin Pan Alley/Hollywood, 1915–1941; the War years, 1941-1953; and Statehood, 1954-1970. While many traditionalists shun this era because of its cultural appropriations, music and hula of these periods contributed to the global establishment of Hawaiian music and the evolution of hula.

A major event that popularized Hawaiian music was the 1915 three-week Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Hawai'i's participation was meant to market products, tourism, and business in the islands through an idyllic image of a Hawaiian village, foods, music, and hula dancers. The music played by a quartet from the Royal Hawaiian Band and hula performed by dancers who once danced for Hawaiian royalty left lasting impressions. Composers from New York's Tin Pan Alley cashed in on the popularity of the paradisaical Hawai'i theme in their compositions, and Hollywood embraced *hapa haole* music, adding its own visual images and hula appropriations.

The global eye on Hawai'i increased with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 when Island residents felt it their duty to support the military. Using traditional techniques, Hawaiian weavers and other artisans assisted with making camouflage nets, hula masters began to teach hula to military wives, and local business establishments catered to the influx of soldiers. Many soldiers had a stereotypical impression of Hawai'i from Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley music, and hula shifted to emphasize entertainment. Costuming followed the Hollywood image of cellophane skirts and bra tops, sarongs, and other revealing costumes that promoted sexuality rather than the poetic text that was once the primary feature.

After WWII, military presence in the Pacific resumed with the Korean (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1945-1975) wars, and Hawai'i continued as a major military base. Designated a place for rest and relaxation, the military were catered to, particularly during the Vietnam war when, in 1959, Hawai'i became the 50th State of the US. Known as the Golden Era of Waikīkī, businesses created venues for Hawaiian entertainment, with hopes of luring military personnel with vouchers that brought monetary compensation for services provided.



Ka Pā Hula o Kauanoē o Wa'ahila

The booming tourism industry that began in the 1960s used hula as a primary marketing image. Attracted by a description of the islands as a “melting pot of the Pacific,” visitors were greeted with hula upon arrival, and hula and Hawaiian music were part of cocktail hours and dinner shows at beaches in Waikīkī and destinations around the islands. Hula was showcased as part of the “melting pot” during *luau* shows, intermixed with Polynesian dances from Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, and New Zealand. Particularly in large hotels and restaurants in Waikīkī, the presentation of hula became much like a vaudeville show, where a vocalist served as the host/master of ceremonies and a chorus of dancers used gestures to literally describe the music's lyrics. This descriptive style was further highlighted in music titles such as: “Lovely Hula Hands,” “Keep your Eyes on the Hands,” “Hula Town,” and “Hawaiian Hula Eyes,” all of which promoted the exotic lure of hula. The world beyond Hawai'i embraced this romanticized version of hula *'auwana*, while the older form of hula was almost lost to antiquity.

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In the mid-1970s, less than 15 years after Hawai'i became the 50th State of the US, the older Hawaiian arts, particularly hula, once again took center stage. Hawaiians turned to their island culture to seek their own roots, creating a second Hawaiian Renaissance. Hula once again became an important part of celebrations. In Honolulu, The King Kamehameha Hula Competition was established to honor the King who consolidated all the Hawaiian Islands under one rule. With the popularity of this event other competitions were formed. The Merrie Monarch Festival, named after King David Kalākaua, is now the largest and most popular competition, one that became the nucleus of a movement to put forward Hawaiian pride. Hula became the poster child of this movement because of the vast amount of culture that is taught, and learned, through this art form.

It is from the judging categories used at competitions that the term *hula kahiko* arose to differentiate between traditional and modern hula, the latter described as *hula 'auwana*. However, these terms, particularly *hula kahiko*, can be misleading. Many of the *hula kahiko* seen today were choreographed within the past fifty years, and some of the *'auwana* are over fifty years old. These classifications represent styles of hula rather than the age of the dance or the chant to which they are performed.

In the early years of competitions, choreographers and *kumu hula* (hula teachers) pushed the boundaries of hula to a point where the desire to win often compromised differentiating between style, tradition, innovation, and creativity. To impress judges or the audience, presentations became highly staged, emphasizing linear group formations with synchronized movements, and included such things as complex floor patterns, movements borrowed from foreign dance techniques, and even, sometimes, calisthenics. Frequently kinesthetic innovations became more important than poetic text, as choreography moved to the forefront. Luckily, before hula became unrecognizable the trend shifted so that reconstruction of traditional hula and the use of older characteristics became the formula for winning.

Today, we are in a period of post-Hawaiian Renaissance in which practitioners are students of masters who were trained by court dancers of Kalākaua's time. These practitioners have opened schools and conduct weekly classes for those interested in learning hula and who may meet

3-5 times a week when preparing for competitions. The once rarely used word *hālau*, originally referencing the long house where hula was practiced prior to western arrival in the islands, is now commonly used to refer to these schools. Many hula students today remain with a *hālau* through their adult lives; prior to the renaissance dancers learned several dances from a master and then moved on to other things. Hula has become an important part of the everyday life of many modern-day people, reinforcing the words of hula master Maiki Aiu Lake (1925-1984) that "Hula is life!"

The phrase *kumu hula* today has taken on a double meaning: at a simple level *kumu* means teacher, and there are many who teach hula and identify themselves as *kumu hula*. What many fail to realize is that at a deeper level the word means "source," like the trunk of a tree that is the *kumu*, or source, of all the branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits that it produces. Thus, at a deeper level *kumu hula* are the practitioners whose roots are firmly planted in the past, and who understand how to move between the past and present, often with one eye on the future. One such person is this year's Asia Pacific Dance Festival *kumu hula* Maelia Loebenstein Carter. In the presentation by her students you will see a cross-section of hula rooted in traditional movements, an expressive style that is reminiscent of the post-war years, a technique and style formulated during the renaissance of the 1970s, and staging that crosses over between ritual, entertainment, and cultural identity.

Today, as in the early 1900s, we see the popularity of hula around the world. Teachers from Hawai'i travel across the globe to teach, students from abroad visit the islands to learn hula, and hula schools and performances can be found in such places as Japan, Mexico, and many countries of Europe. Today there are more hula dancers beyond Hawai'i's shores than in our own islands. Just as the various classifications of hula reflect changes in the way hula is performed and shifting borders between various styles, the resurgence and spread of hula directly reflect Kalākaua's journey beyond the shores of Hawai'i.