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| Hula |
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| Hula, as Native Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui notes, is a general name for Hawaiʻi’s folk dances. While it is impossible to point to one origin story for hula, multiple origin stories for the dances are included in various Hawaiian myths. In addition to hula’s beginnings, these myths also explain the creation of the island chain and its indigenous inhabitants, revealing an interconnected relationship between hula, the land, and its people. With the establishment of the tourist industry in Hawaiʻi at the turn of the twentieth century, hula became commodified and gendered as female for vacationing tourists. New performance contexts established in the late twentieth century, however, challenged this commodification of hula, as Native Hawaiian practitioners sought to reclaim the ancient hula traditions that seemed to be erased through the ‘hula girl’s’ acculturated dance. Hula competitions and concert hula productions set alternative parameters for defining and performing traditional hula styles. Both draw on hula’s established history of incorporating hybrid musical, compositional, bodily, choreographic, and narrative influences into its traditional performance. Such hybridization encapsulates hula’s various encounters with modernity and its influences, becoming a flash point for producing cosmopolitan Native identities and for capitalizing on tradition. |
| Summary  Hula, as Native Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui notes, is a general name for Hawaiʻi’s folk dances. While it is impossible to point to one origin story for hula, multiple origin stories for the dances are included in various Hawaiian myths. In addition to hula’s beginnings, these myths also explain the creation of the island chain and its indigenous inhabitants, revealing an interconnected relationship between hula, the land, and its people. With the establishment of the tourist industry in Hawaiʻi at the turn of the twentieth century, hula became commodified and gendered as female for vacationing tourists. New performance contexts established in the late twentieth century, however, challenged this commodification of hula, as Native Hawaiian practitioners sought to reclaim the ancient hula traditions that seemed to be erased through the ‘hula girl’s’ acculturated dance. Hula competitions and concert hula productions set alternative parameters for defining and performing traditional hula styles. Both draw on hula’s established history of incorporating hybrid musical, compositional, bodily, choreographic, and narrative influences into its traditional performance. Such hybridization encapsulates hula’s various encounters with modernity and its influences, becoming a flash point for producing cosmopolitan Native identities and for capitalizing on tradition. Importance to Modernism and Modernization Hula is defined in part through its combination of poetic lyrics and movement. In the best-known origin myth of hula, the goddess Hiʻiaka dances at her sister, the volcano goddess Pele’s request, before embarking on a journey that will take her across the entire island chain. First published in Hawaiian newspapers in the nineteenth century, the story, which has been considered to be sacred to *hula poʻe* (hula people), arguably dates to the twelfth or thirteenth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Philosopher and hula dancer Sharon Rowe evocatively defines hula in the following manner: ‘[h]ula is a moving encyclopedia inscribed into the sinews and postures of dancers’ bodies. It carries forward the social and natural history, the religious beliefs, the philosophy, the literature, and the scientific knowledge of the Hawaiian people’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rowe’s definition also highlights the importance of hula for keeping Native Hawaiian cultural knowledge.  It is the ‘hula girl’ image and her touristic performance, however, which has defined hula for much of the world since the mid-twentieth century. Part of Native Hawaiians’ cultural heritage, in pre-colonial Hawaiian society hula effectively functioned as a religious and political praxis.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hula’s repertoire of chants and *mele* (songs) draws upon an extensive body of Native historiography, cosmogony, and genealogies, which have been guarded across the generations by *hula po’e* (hula people). These *hula ʻōlapa* (hula dancers), *hoʻopaʻa* (chanters), and *kumu hula* (master teachers) attained their venerated status by undergoing extensive ritual training performed under the auspices of *Laka*, the god/goddess of hula.[[4]](#footnote-4) Traditionally, recognized *hula poʻe* were responsible for protecting and transmitting hula’s sacred knowledge for high-ranking chiefs.[[5]](#footnote-5) They accomplished this by using hula’s meaningful and sacred imagery, movement motifs, and choreographic sequences to connect Hawaiian chiefs with the sacred world. In Hawaiʻi’s highly stratified society such knowledge united the divine, human, and natural realms together, while emphasizing chiefly *mana* (spiritual power) as the right to rule.  The 1820 arrival of American Christian missionaries in Hawaiʻi began a process of colonization with hula as the effective focal point for colonial control. Reacting to the systematic erosion of Native rights and monarchical power, Hawaiʻi’s penultimate monarch, King David Kalakaua (r.1874-1891), also known as the ‘Merrie Monarch’, famously reinstated hula’s public performance in his court, thereby realigning hula once again with the cultivation of chiefly power.[[6]](#footnote-6) Kalakaua’s action signalled to his beleaguered subjects that hula, ‘the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people’, continued to provide necessary links to Hawaiians’ gods, nobility, land, and sacred stories.[[7]](#footnote-7) Hula’s practitioners have often repeated Kalakaua’s famous words after finding themselves and their art form under attack, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for being indecent and an affront to Christianity. During the mid-twentieth century, however, practitioners invoked Kalakaua’s words as a means of responding to the imperialist commodification of their bodies and performance practices. Rather than having to defend their art from accusations of immorality, in the 1930s hula dancers found themselves cast as Hawaiian ‘ambassadors’, producing *aloha* (Hawaiʻi’s welcoming hospitality) in commercial performances and advertisements on the continental U.S. As ambassadors, they were instrumental in brokering the process of national integration,which successfully culminated with Hawaiʻi’s U.S. statehood in 1959. Their mainland performances exposed Americans to Hawaiʻi before jet planes made travel easier and more affordable, and seemingly established an ‘imagined intimacy’, or ‘fantasy of reciprocal attachment’ between the U.S. and Hawaiʻi that was pivotal in making Hawaiian statehood desirable.[[8]](#footnote-8)  Hula was modernized in Kalakaua’s court with the popularization of *hula ku’i,* hula performed to Western musical compositions in Hawaiian language. Many consider Kalakaua’s fiercely opposed, late nineteenth-century revitalization of hula the first Hawaiian cultural renaissance. His efforts to return hula to the court asserted a modern Native subject in response to colonial discourses that consistently configured the native as ahistorical and incapable of entering modernity. In the late 1960s, Native activists reactivated Kalakaua’s renaissance by shifting focus away from the modern toward a return to tradition as a means of challenging the deleterious conditions enabled through modernizing processes.  One result of this late twentieth-century return to tradition was the advent of the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival and Competition. The festival is affectionately referred to as the ‘Olympics of hula’. Each spring the small bay town of Hilo on Hawaiʻi Island is transformed as invited *hālau* (hula schools) converge to prove themselves on the hula stage, accumulating cultural capital by placing first, second, third, or overall in front of audiences of Indigenous and settler residents, in addition to tourists. Merrie Monarch contestants emphasise traditional hula and chant—hula performed with Native instrumentation that is also associated with pre-contact dance styles and subsequently glossed as *kahiko* (ancient) hula—or the Kalakaua era’s *hula kuʻi* styles commonly understood as *‘auana* (i.e. modern) hula.  A week-long cultural festival culminating in a rigorous hula and chant competition, the festival has become the accepted site for competitively reproducing and transmitting hula’s essential relationship between Native Hawaiians, their gods, chiefs, and their land—and for challenging the hula girls’ touristic hula dance. In these hula performances, female *and* male dancers disrupt notions of a stable ‘hula girl’ imaginary through their engagements with pre-contact and Kalakaua era hula traditions.  In the beginning of the twenty-first century another performance venue has emerged for hula as well. Concert stage hula productions present tradition and innovation in spectacular fashion. These spectacles, which are choreographed by kumu hula in Hawaiʻi and the mainland diaspora for proscenium stages, translate hula’s sacred traditions in a non-touristic context while embracing theatricality and individual creativity. Concert stage hulas make use of the Western theatrical apparatus, asserting a variety of modern and indigenous subjectivities while refuting colonial stereotypes of hula’s unruliness and touristic exoticization. In addition to continuing to showcase male hula dancing (as initiated in Merrie Monarch Festival), these productions portray the modern Native Hawaiian subject according to a range of gendered, national, religious, and historical possibilities.  A constant negotiation between tradition and innovation characterize twenty-first century hula projects. Indeed, negotiation has always characterized hula’s relationship with colonization. Practitioners have consistently used hula to produce an embodied connection to their past. And as modern performers and audiences become further geographically and temporally removed from pre-contact hula, these tensions between tradition, innovation, and hybridization promise to remain relevant in defining hula practices.  Files: Daughters.jpg  Figure 1 *Daughters of Haumea*  Source: Photo courtesy of Patrick Makuakane.  Patrick Makuakane  Director, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu  153 Bradford Street San Francisco, CA 94110-5703  [pmakuakane@earthlink.net](mailto:pmakuakane@earthlink.net)  File: Restless.jpg  Figure 2 *The Natives are Restless*  Source: Photo courtesy of Patrick Makuakane.  Patrick Makuakane  Director, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu  153 Bradford Street San Francisco, CA 94110-5703  [pmakuakane@earthlink.net](mailto:pmakuakane@earthlink.net) Selected List of Works: The following is a list of recent concert hula productions in chronological order:  *Holo Mai Pele: An Epic Hula Myth*. (1995) Pualani Kanakaʻole Kanahele and Nālani Kanakaʻole, Hālau O Kekuhi, Hilo, HI.    *The Natives Are Restless: Ke Akua*.(1998) Patrick Makuakāne, Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu, San Francisco, CA.  *Daughters of Haumea: Nā Kaikamāhine O Haumea*.(2006) Patrick Makuakāne, Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu, San Francisco, CA.  *Kahekili: A Hula Drama of Māui’s Paramount Chief*. (2008) Hōkūlani Holt, Hālau Paʻu O Hiʻiaka, Maui, HI.  *Waikiki: The Enchantment.* (2008) Mark Kealiʻi Hoʻomalu, Academy of Hawaiian Arts, Oakland, CA.  *Kingdom Denied: Between the Lines*. (2012) Mark Kealiʻi Hoʻomalu, Academy of Hawaiian Arts, Oakland, CA. Moving Image Material: *American Aloha: Hula Beyond Hawaii*. (2003). Directed and Produced by Lisette Marie Flanary and Evann Siebens. Bluestocking Films. DVD.  *Holo Mai Pele: The Epic Hula Myth*. (2004). Directed by Catherine Tatge. Honolulu, HI: Pacific Islanders in Communication. DVD.  *Kumu Hula: Keepers of a Culture.* (1999). Directed by Robert Mugge. Honolulu, HI: Mug-Shot Productions. DVD.  *Nā Kamalei The Men of Hula.* (2007). Directed and Produced by Lisette Marie Flanary. New York, NY :Independent Lens & Lehua Films. DVD.  The copyright holder for the attached images is as follows:  Patrick Makuakane  Director, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu  153 Bradford Street San Francisco, CA 94110-5703 |
| Further reading:  (Barrère, Kawena Pukui and Kelly)  (Desmond)  (Imada)  (Kaeppler)  (Silva) |

1. Dorothy Barrère (1980) traces hula’s origins through Hawaiian legends, including the Pele and Hiʻiaka myth cycle and several others as well. She credits folklorist Abraham Fornander with dating Pele and Hiʻiaka to the twelfth or thirteenth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sharon Māhealani Rowe, ‘We Dance For Knowledge’, *Dance Research Journal*, 40(1) Summer (2008): 31-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Adria Imada, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adrienne Kaeppler, 5. Also, Adria Imada, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A prime example of the erosion of monarchical power is the ‘Bayonet Constitution’ (1887), which effectively stripped Kalakaua of his executive powers. It gave unprecedented power to the legislature constituted largely by American-sympathetic businessmen. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kalakaua earned the nickname the ‘Merry Monarch’ in part because of this actions reinstating public hula performance. See Noenoe Silva, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See especially Adria Imada, ‘‘Hula Queens’ and ‘Cinderellas’: Imagined Intimacy in the Empire’, 153-212. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)