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M-Auana | Moana Means More: From Hula Auana to Cultural Authenticity

Section I: Introduction

In a world that strives to be better than yesterday, day-to-day changes may be unnoticed, yet over decades, improvements can be jarring. When rewatching *Moana* (2016), the feeling of childhood captivation soaked in as I was enveloped by the stories, myths, songs, and dance that it presented. On the other hand, *Blue Hawaii* (1961) had a different feeling; there was no intrigue – the songs were nice, but the focus was on the appearances of Hawaii rather than the traditions and culture. The important difference between these two movies is the era in which they were released: the prior, in the 2010s, while the latter, in the 1960s. During the 50-year gap a Hawaiian cultural revolution happened, shifting the outward appearance of Hawaii from a marketing scheme focused on entertainment to an embrace of traditional culture. This is reflected in the two films: *Blue Hawaii* emphasizes lighthearted elements such as cheerful instruments, vibrant costumes (mise-en-scène), and a plot designed to showcase the entertaining and picturesque aspects of Hawaii. In contrast, *Moana* highlights traditional instruments and incorporates hula as a meaningful form of cultural expression. Additionally, *Moana*

employs exposition to develop myths and stories that parallel those from the Hawaiian Kingdom. The Hawaiian Cultural Revolution shaped the outward appearance of Hawaiian culture in almost every aspect, including films such as *Blue Hawaii* and *Moana*, where a change in mise-en-scène, plot, and other aspects of cinematography shifted the focus from the “fun” aspects of Hawaii to the cultural aspects of Polynesian culture.

Section II: A History of Hawaiian/Polynesian Culture

The Hawaiian/Polynesian culture developed independently for hundreds of years, centering around the traditional dance of hula. As a result, the Hawaiian Kingdom did not establish a written language; all the stories were passed down in two methods: oral tradition and hula. This is similar to Ancient Greece, where vase art and paintings, along with oral traditions, were used to pass down stories (Morris). Unlike, Ancient Greece where the art and stories are held static, hula is a constantly evolving form of communication because it is performative. As Rowe puts it, “hula is a moving encyclopedia inscribed into the sinews and postures of dancers’ bodies” (Rowe). Because the people of Hawai’i originated from the same people as all the Polynesians, their stories, myths, and legends that are encapsulated through hula follow the normative gods that control most aspects of life (Denning). There are stories that tell history, a famous one being the overthrowing of a famous chief; besides storytelling, hula is also a ritual dance for their gods: asking for rain, appeasing the volcano gods and other era typical prayers (Tatge). During the Hawaiian Kingdom, hula was widely practiced because it is so fundamental to passing down stories through its movement, and because of that it became deeply engrained into the culture.

Hula continued to be practiced up until the early 1800s when, “Calvinist missionaries arrived in the Hawaiian Islands” (Hale). As they came, they slowly converted the natives to Christian; the most important native that was converted was Queen Ka'ahumanu. She governed the people of Hawai'i and, viewing hula as contrary to Christian ideals, imposed a ban on its practice (Joesting). This ban was massively detrimental to the hula tradition because it was never written down and must be practiced staying alive. The ban Queen Ka'ahumanu instilled lasted for about fifty years, until “hula was finally welcomed back into mainstream Hawaiian culture during King David Kalakaua's reign” (Chen). King Kalakaua put an emphasis on bringing it back. He saw the importance of hula, saying: “hula is the heartbeat of the Hawaiian. You stop the hula, you stop the Hawaiian, therefore killing our Hawaiian people” (Chen). Although the ban has never been officially lifted, his coronation signified the end of the ban because he encouraged hula at his coronation, his birthday, and other public performances. However, his efforts were stunted due to the hula already being so faded in people's perception and the culture of the Hawaiian people.

The first sign of hope for hula was 1898 when Hawai'i was annexed; the annexation brought a heavy influence of mainland America to Hawai'i. Although the islands were in contact with the outside nations, the annexation marked a heavy increase in tourism. The droves people attracted to Hawai'i became infatuated with the Hawaiian culture, including Congressmen (Kim). The people of Hawai'i recognized this and began to market their culture, like hula, to the tourists. Due to the precision of traditional hula, the challenges it presents for foreign audiences, and the fifty-year period during which it was not regularly

practiced, “hula—along with traditional methods of fishing, the slack-key guitar, and the Hawaiian language—was on the wane” (Hale). As a result, Hawaiians developed a simpler version of the dance. This modern version of hula, hula auana, focuses on the more visually pleasing aspects of hula, it shifts from a dance dominated by men to one that is dominated by women becoming more, “gendered and sexualized” (Imada). Included with this shift is a change in rhythmic music and instruments from the tradition drum to the ukuleles and guitars; chants are replaced with songs that are often in English (Imada). Subtleties in wrist flicks, postures and other cues are left behind to incorporated more flared movement and visually pleasing dances. This caused a loss in the intricacy of stories the movements were able to communicate. As hula auana gained in popularity, the ancient form of hula, hula kahiko, kept fading because of the irrelevance it now served. Yet, without the tourism, hula kahiko would have been fading even faster. As Hawai’i gained popularity within mainland culture, hula dances were showcased through tours, competitions, and appearances in films, quickly bringing widespread recognition to the art form (Imada).

Section III: Blue Hawaii and the Problem of Cultural Appropriation

The peak of the Hawaiian craze is characterized by intense cultural appropriation, this is encapsulated by the Elvis Presley Film, *Blue Hawaii* (1961). The film follows Chad Gates performed by Elvis, and his time becoming a tour guide for the island of Hawaii. The first two-thirds of the movie begins slowly, as Chad shows off the picturesque and fun parts of Hawaii, such as the beautiful beaches or the delicious pineapple (1). The movie-watcher

is stuck almost watching a tourism ad for Hawai'i.

However, the plot does build to a climatic fight scene at a hula bar lounge which the scene prior puts a capstone to the tour of Hawaii. The scene opens with a wide shot of the hula stage, with the chairs and spectators in the foreground; Elvis is on stage



Figure 1

with a ukelele in the mid ground and the hula dancers are in the background (2). The lighting is dim, except for the stage which brings the focus to the performance. For the costumes, everyone is wearing a lei and Hawaiian shirt, with dancers wearing floral or grass Hawaiian skirts. These costumes are not indicative of the culture of Hawaii which follows



Figure 2

cloth and tapestry wear, just the oversaturated stereotypes during this period. The instruments during the opening song include, the ukelele, a steel

drum, a guitar and a xylophone. These instruments are reflected in the score as well and are consistent with the music throughout the film. This goes against traditional hula where the instruments are only percussive and typically gourd ipu hulas.

The camera then pans around the crowd to focus on the actual hula dancers. The scene becomes a medium distance shot focusing on the two dancers and Elvis (3). The dancers are in-sync as they are doing what is normative hula movements, this includes a lot of swaying, light movements. This is very beautiful to look at but does not have any deeper meaning that hula should hold. The dance ends and a man come up exuding, “you girls really shake that grass” which lends to the over sexual mode that hula has become in the eyes of the mainland (Blue Hawaii).

Overall, from the setup of the scene, hula was put into focus as a form of entertainment and amusement for the tourists rather than the dialogue and



Figure 3

record of histories myths and stories. This theme is consistent with the whole film, because the plot is set up to show tourists around Hawaii leading to the extreme romanticized version of Hawaiian culture that is current in the pre-cultural revolution era.

As hula auana, the modern form, gained in popularity, the ancient form of hula, hula kahiko, kept fading because of the irrelevance it now served. Yet, without the tourism, hula kahiko would have been fading even faster. As Hawai'i became a sensation with the mainland culture hula dances went on tours, competition was being performed and soon everyone knew about hula (Imada). The intense cultural appropriation continued for about seventy years until the Hawaiians began to reclaim their history and culture. A massive shift began in the later twentieth century where the tradition Hawaiian culture and hula began to revive.

Section IV: Reclaiming Tradition—The Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance in Moana

An influential name in the traditional hula revival is Edith Kanaka'ole: described as “an esteemed chanter and Hawaiian-language professor,” she promoted the art form to her daughters that went on and, “perpetuat[ed] the ancient art of hula through their school, Halau O Kekuhi. [Her Daughters] have also written, choreographed, and performed in the first hula opera, Holo Mai Ikle which brought traditional hula to a national audience” (Hale). These efforts created a “celebrated Hawaiian cultural renaissance [that] swept the islands, fueled by a potent combination of anti-development anger and fierce ethnic pride” (Hale). The renaissance shifted public perspectives on the cultural appropriation of Hawaiian traditions, which had been widespread at the time. Although the movement took time, the impact is everlasting; the renaissance also fueled “international and local hula competitions, along with art exhibits, dance shows and Hawaiian storytelling workshops” (Ross) This put tradition hula kahiko on a national stage while also encouraging others to learn and practice the art form, rather than the ever-popular hula auana.

As time continued from this point, a growing shift occurred that cause a revolt in the cultural appropriation. This caused the media to present Hawaiian and Polynesian culture in a way that more aligns with the ancient traditions. One clear example of this is Moana. Moana follows an epic tale of a girl as she fights to return her island to health. This tale follows the goddess Ta ka/Ta fete. The goddess of lava, destruction, creation and life. This goddess along with the epic is like the tales of Pele in traditional Hawaiian culture.

In the opening of *Moana*, there is scene that takes place in a hula studio. In this studio, the walls are covered in images of mythic beasts and stories (4). Then the grandmother recounts the story of Maui stealing the stone, using exposition to establish the foundation for the epic narrative. This leads to the opening song of “Where You Are.” Within the song, the scene cuts to Moana and her grandma



Figure 4

dancing at the ocean break. It is a wide sweeping cut to include, the wave break, the volcanic rock beneath their feet, the sand and the jungle behind the two characters (5). The action continues to show the two performing hula, this hula is much more like the traditional form of hula because, the



Figure 5

moves are less flashy, the feet are always firm to the ground and the dance is conveying a message. The two dance to the words of the song, having flowy hand movements for to show the currents water

and wave, then points to for their location under the stars. This included with their traditional wardrobe of Hawaiian dancer aligns themselves closer with ancient hula and separates themselves from the extreme cultural appropriation that was current with the times. As the movie continues, there is a noticeable lack in the over-sexualized and fabricated portrayal of Polynesian culture that is so apparent in *Blue Hawaii*; the movie

instead focuses on the myths that the culture traditionally held. This is due to the epic nature of the film with the gods and goddess closely related with the gods and goddess of ancient Polynesia. This includes Ta Ka/Te Fiti, the volcanic god of destruction and the goddess of life. In myth they are Pele, the goddess of volcano, is the one who created the island of Hawaii, which reinforces the idea of destruction but also creation, in a beautiful synergy of life. This is the beauty that *Moana* can create; unlike *Blue Hawaii* which does it through flashy dances, stunning scenery or calming music, *Moana*, uses the myths and story tell that is true to ancient Polynesian culture which is already so deep and beautiful.

Section V: Conclusion

The difference between the two movies is stark. For *Blue Hawaii* the focus is on what is fun about Hawaii, from the grass skirts to the swaying songs and the beautiful shots of the beaches, there is never a break of the surface level beauty that Hawaii holds. When the Hawaiian Cultural Revolution happened, there was a shift away from the surface and to the deeper level meaning, of why things existed in Polynesian culture. This changed the movie and media landscape as a result. As a product of the Hawaiian Cultural Revolution's influence, *Moana* stands in stark contrast to *Blue Hawaii*, shifting away from a hyper-fixation on the fun or visually appealing aspects of Polynesian culture to instead grounding its portrayal in traditional myths and cultural authenticity. The entire movie follows the arc of a traditional Polynesian myth, and in doing so, incorporates smaller details that adhere to the traditional aspects of the culture, such as the use of drums, authentic costumes, and hula as a meaningful form of communication. Polynesian Culture has gone through a wide array of different stages, from thriving before the annexation then to becoming a

product for tourism up until the Cultural revolution where the tradition began to bounce back. The resulting Cultural Revolution had sweeping impacts, including transforming the representation of Hawaiian culture in films—shifting from a focus on surface-level entertainment, as seen in *Blue Hawaii*, to a deeper exploration of traditions and cultural authenticity, as exemplified by *Moana*. Through a near loss of Hawaiian culture to being proudly displayed in a movie made for children, the culture made a turn around and is still strengthening its roots to ancient Hawaii.

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