William and Mary

Hula, a Dance Worth a Thousand Words

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DANC 100

30 October 2024

In a contemporary setting hula is seen as a form of entertainment, a simple past time for tourists to go to while on vacation. While this is perpetuated and fuel by mainland America, it is simply not the original purpose of hula. Going back hundreds of years, before Hawai'i was colonized, it was a ritual event; hula was used to tell myths, stories, or prayers to the gods. Unfortunately, when Christian missionaries came to the island, they converted the then Queen, and hula was banned. With this ban and with an increase in Mainland presence led to a loss of widespread traditional hula practice and an increase in modern hula. This change led to the loss of many stories preserved in hula, as well as a decline in the precision of its performance. Hula's ability to communicate stories through movement, makes it a remarkable artform and worth maintaining even in the modern era.

At its core, hula is the dance of Polynesian people of Hawai'i; it has elements of music, dialogue, chants and attire that all support hula and can affect its meaning. Going against the typical pop-culture schema, there are "no guitars or ukuleles only percussive instruments like sharkskin drums, feather-decorated gourds, bamboo stamping tubes, split-bamboo rattles, and stone castanets" (Hale). Alongside the rhythmic beats of the percussive instruments, other supportive elements include chanted poetry, stylized wardrobe like leis and Pā'ū skirts, and occasionally props. In addition, men typically preformed traditional hula rather than the mix seen today. These elements formed the basis of hula, which allowed it to thrive as a form of communication for many years.

Hula originated during the Hawaiian Kingdom era, developing independently without influence from European or Mainland cultures. 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 (Dening). They have stories about creation of the island, goddess Pele, and the story of Laka who gave the people hula. 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). As one observes hula, there are very few hops with most movement involving two feet on the ground to signify the connection between the nature and the dancers (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, “Calvinis 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 oversaw the people of Hawai’i and, because hula went against Christian ideals, she banned hula (Rowe). This ban was massively detrimental to the hula tradition because it was never written down and must be practiced staying alive. With the missionaries came the bible, and with the bible—alongside the ban of hula—brought a transition of purely oral language to one that is recorded in text. This further pushed the hula tradition to the side because of the impracticality and preciseness that hula needs to be perform with. This is how the Hawai’i developed under Queen Ka'ahumanu; hula was forced underground to simply survive.

Hula was taught behind closed doors, small traditions were passed down from within the family, but without master teachers’ subtleties are lost. It was on the threat if extinction because “if no-one knows how to dance hula or know the chants then (the) stories and histories will all be

lost" (Chen). 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 so faded in people's perception and the culture of the Hawaiian people.

As a living art and communication form it needs to be practiced in any form to survive. The first sign of hope for hula was 1998 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 ʻauana, 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 became a sensation with the main land 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.

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.

While the current state of hula kahiko has bounced back from the almost nonexistent history, the damage to the stories and history held within hula's movement were severe. Yet the most prevalent stories still exist and practiced. One of which is the story of Holo Mai Pele:

> Holo Mai Pele is the epic saga of Pele, goddess of the volcano, and her youngest sister Hi'iaka. It is also the myth of the volcanic nature of the Hawaiian Islands. After Pele

> erupts and new land is formed, Hi'iaka heals the land with new vegetation. Both are necessary in the cycle of destruction and regeneration that gives life to the Hawaiian Islands. (Tatge)

The full Saga of Pele is about an hour of dance, reenactment, and chanting. The story is told through movement, with wind and currents being represented in circular patterns of the hips and arms. That is how the story opens, with a dance telling the setting before being introduced to Pele. In the first part of the story, Pele is on a journey of self-determination; Pele needs to make sense of her role in the world. Aspects of chanting along with miming of characters gives the audience visual and audio queues of what is happening. For example, during the performance deities “encounter the pathetic sight of a limbless woman struggling to gather food at the seashore, lamenting her hardships” (Tatge). This is expressed through a woman physically struggling on the ground with her limbs tucked close to her body while chanting, “while the sea lies calmly I crawl along the sea edge pounding shellfish picking seaweed. I am the limbless woman” (Tatge). As the hula dance progresses more movements are incorporated, some associated with the stylized hula auana while others are more traditional and focused on story telling. The performance ends in with the dancers on the ground to communicate the ties to nature and earth. This performance in all its complexity might have not been able to tell its story if it weren’t for the resilience of the dance and the pursuit of people to reclaim the beautiful tradition.

Hula has transformed through many forms to reach its current state; it was designed this way—as an evolving art that is not written down, allowing strict rules to fade over time and new ones to emerge. Hula is also extremely resilient, not many art forms, ways of communicating, can withstand a fifty-year ban followed by another seventy years of severe cultural appropriation. The history of hula shows how much people care about the art form, willing to make it their life’s mission to bring back the traditional story telling form like, Edith Kanaka'ole

and her daughters. They paved the role for the Hawaiian renaissance which led the way to competitions that relayed it to the world and inspired more people learn hula and the stories it tells. The simple idea that a few movements in organized ways can hold stories, myths, legends, prayer and simple communicate ideas of nature is fascinating. And to do it without the help of a written language—only using the hula as the backbone to record—will always be one of the most impressive displays of human history. Although close to extinction, the artful communicative dance form hula, is on the rise in a meaningful, beautiful, way.

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