

Hula as Resistance

by Momi Kamahele

Aloha mai. Aloha kakou. I greet you in the manner of my ancestors and as a genealogical descendent of Hawai'i Island, Maui and O'ahu; as an American-subjugated Native Hawaiian woman; as a citizen of Ka Lāhui Hawai'i, a Native initiative for self-determination; as a member of Make'e Pono Lāhui Hawai'i, a Hawaiian Student Liberation Organization; and as a practitioner of a dynamic art form known to you as the hula.¹

The Hula's Dynamic History

The present predicament of the hula is a result of historical situation.² The hula and its predicament cannot be understood outside the context of social forces which cast it on the fringes of Hawaiian society. On the one hand is the voracious colonizer promising benefits for and pressing his demands on the indigenous people. The colonizer—in this case America—controls the politics, economy and culture of the Hawaiian people and presents one aspect of my culture—the hula—as cosmetic dressing for gaping, rapacious tourists. On the other hand, the Hawaiian people ceaselessly struggle to free their economy, politics and culture from American subjugation and to move toward a new era of self-termination. It is a tremendous and ongoing effort to reclaim our "creative initiative" in history by real control through attainment of Hawaiian sovereignty thereby defining ourselves among ourselves in our homeland.³

Before those carriers of American colonialism known to history as Calvinist missionaries arrived in 1820, Hawaiian practitioners of the hula were held in high esteem and the dance form revered from the *Mō'i* (king) to the *maka'āinana* (general population). One 19th century Hawaiian historian, Davida Malo, instructs us that the hula conferred distinction upon the *Ali'i* (Hawaiian aristocracy) while at the same time the hula dancers were lavished with gifts and property, a wonderful custom from a dancer's point of view.⁴ As a form of expression of a people's identity, a kind of collective consciousness externalized, the hula expressed a visual panorama, a human story of struggle with nature, of struggle with human beings. Sometimes this drama extolled life and death; sometimes the story described the people's environment; many times it en-

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Dancers of Nā 'Ohana 'o Kealoha observing the 140th birthday of Queen Lili'uokalani in Honolulu in 1978.

tertaind the past genealogical exploits of the movers and shakers of Hawaiian society with the current audience.⁵ The hula held the attention of its viewer so as to bring about mutual and involved pleasure and enjoyment in life. And often the story explicated the complex and sacred sexual desires and practices of the Natives. The message instructed, entertained and was part of the cultural rhythm of daily and seasonal life. But it was also fun and amusing. Thus, for my people, the hula carried the dramatic message of life: human affairs and their surroundings and the intimate, reciprocal relationship between the two.

American colonization destroyed that perception of the hula. The missionaries saw the hula and Hawaiian traditions as works of the devil. For these Calvinists, the hula conveyed the image of promiscuity, licentiousness and just down-right evil. This demonic dance form could not carry the moral message of the bible, they thought. The hula's nuances and, in some dances, its explicit sex-

ual depictions, were executed through specific bodily movements. Such actions were viewed by the emotionally austere Calvinists as following a lascivious path befitting the heathen. The Calvinists were going "to save" my people from themselves. One way to ensure Christian success was to suppress the evil dance.

For a time the hula seemed to disappear. In reality it only went deeper into the country under a cloud of secrecy. Two Christian-trained Hawaiian kings, Alexander Liholiho and Lota Kapuaiwa, who were to become Kamehameha IV and V respectively, often provided amusements at their estates in Moanalua and elsewhere. Defying the then national ban on public performances of this Native dance, these kings demonstrated that the hula was an integral part of their lives, royal ceremonies and festivities. Finally, during the reign of the "Merrie Monarch" King David Kalakaua, the hula emerged in full bloom and greatly transformed, six decades later. The new dance form was called the



An early impression of hula, by Louis Choris, 1816 *hula ku'i* which embraced old and new dance steps as one.⁶ This Hawaiian dance form refused to be crushed by American colonialism's oppressive values and customs.

Nineteenth-century Hawaiian practitioners of the hula were taught that this dance form was a "savage," lewd Polynesian institution that appealed to their baser instincts and exhibited a corrupting influence on their thinking and behavior. Formerly depicted as

a "relic of heathenism,"⁷ the hula slipped from the realm of distinction into a "cave" of clandestine activity, only to be increasingly channeled into the Waikiki arena of mere nightclub amusement. And the dancers, as symbols of the times, took a similar historical tumble from sanctity to commercial product.

During the early decades of this century, the hula transmogrified into the "little brown gal" mythology complete with grass skirt,⁸ ukelele in hand, under a coconut tree with Diamond Head strategically placed in the background. Increasingly this vision became the stereotype of Hawaiian women.

By the middle of this century, that "little brown gal" image was made the poster child of the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau. The "little brown gal" appeared in outlandish "Polynesian" revues and commercial ads, all to sell the magical allure of Hawai'i. Images of brown-skinned women with soft, dark eyes, teasing smiles and supple hips, stimulated within the tourist the sexual attraction of the female Hawai'i. This image has become the definition of Hawaiian women in general, and of Hawaiian hula dancers in particular.⁹

Missionaries taught the Hawaiians that hula was a "relic of heathenism." Here, unidentified dancers are dressed from head to toe to accommodate Haole mores.



Hawai'i State Archives

The Haole Dance of Annihilation

Despite early American Calvinists' sanctions to suppress my Native dance, and the more recent callous bastardization of it in Waikiki hotel showrooms, the hula has survived and transformed through time and space. In a cultural sense the hula has been depicted in the 1970's as part of an Hawaiian Renaissance, a born-again image resurrected from its own cultural ashes. But what that picture has failed to acknowledge is that the hula as practiced then and now is a form of resistance against an oppression imposed upon my people by an all-*haole*, English-speaking American government and economic power base.¹⁰ To assert that things Hawaiian have great significance is to politicize them. And that is what the Renaissance idea did not always acknowledge. The resurgence of the Hawaiian culture was a political act that signalled to everyone in Hawai'i that the hula and its cultural wardrobe would no longer strut solely before gaping tourists.

Nineteenth century American compatriots demanded that my ancestors convert to a *haole* Christian god, tread at the heels of a

haole capitalist system, and adapt to *haole* patterns of behavior. *Ho'ohaole*—to behave and ape the white person—meant repudiation of Native customs from the hula, to Hawaiian sexual practices, to forms of dress. At the same time, those who instructed us on the "good life" (the missionaries) began appropriating vast tracts of Hawaiian land for their personal profit in a violent display of greed.

Colonization brought physical, psychological and cultural pain to my ancient islands. The physical degradation of my people's way of life began with the 1778 arrival of European exploiters and their virulent microorganisms. European pathogens and their human vessels let terrible diseases loose upon a virgin soil. These opportunistic pathogens mounted their prey, smashing over two millennia of Hawaiian civilization in which the concept of *malama 'āina*—or caring for and loving of the land—was paramount. In just over one hundred years, syphilis, influenza, smallpox, measles, chicken pox, tuberculosis, and leprosy killed hundreds of thousands of Native Hawaiians and decreased the Native



Meanwhile, colonizers exploited the hula in Waikiki nightclubs—and in California, where this dancer and others "entertained" male-only crowds.

N. Fred Myers Collection

Hawaiian population by 95 percent. By one researcher's estimate, there were close to one million Hawaiians at the time of contact with the West and less than 40,000 at the time of annexation.¹¹

The psychological anxiety and demoralization that followed this massive loss of life transformed Hawaiian land tenure from communal use to private property by the middle of the 19th century. The foreign dance of a money economy destroyed much. The dispossession of Hawaiian birthright, called the Mahele of 1848, was a complex issue.¹² Perhaps the ruling Mo'i Kauikeaouli's motivations to sanction the Mahele involved one way to seek *pono* (or cosmic and societal harmony) in the chaos of 19th century depopulated and demoralized Hawaiians. But the new land tenure actually separated my people from their land, their thoughts, themselves and each other. By the late 19th century, three-quarters of all arable land was controlled by *haole*.

However, the death blow that was dealt to my people was the 1893 illegal overthrow of my government. With guns pointed at 'Iolani Palace, armed U.S. marines from the ship *Boston* descended upon the Kingdom of Hawai'i and forcibly overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani and her Native citizens, thereby subjecting Native Hawaiians to Western colonial rule. The justification given to our Queen was "for the safety of American citizens and the protection of their interests."¹³ In actuality, it was *haole* business interests linked intrinsically to missionary desires that

ignited the overthrow.

The interim government, called the Republic of Hawai'i, headed by an all-*haole* faction, dismembered any Native Hawaiian resistance. Forced annexation to America followed in 1898 and throughout the territorial area, Hawai'i and its Native people were governed by an oligarchy of the descendants of missionary planters. Yet in a few remote places, the hula survived to resist. In 1959, Hawai'i became a part of the Union and the Native population and their trust lands were transferred to the State, resulting in perpetual wardship status.

Made to feel inferior when our sovereignty was abducted by American military power, we Hawaiians continue to suffer the effects of a ravenous Americanization. Currently Hawai'i is a colony of the United States *not* because we chose that status, but because we were so depleted in numbers that armed resistance would have proved suicidal. If there were 500,000 Hawaiians instead of less than 50,000 in 1893, things would certainly be much different. For one, we might all be speaking in Hawaiian rather than in English, and perhaps I would have a host of gods from which to choose rather than relying on just one (the very one who my ancestors were told despised the hula).

The purpose of Americanization was not to acculturate or assimilate (famous anthropological terms), but to annihilate. The annihilation was aimed at the Natives' beliefs in their names, language, environment, heritage of struggle, unity (as a people) and ultimately,



The author with her Hālau Hula dance school, Pua ali'i Ilima at Volcano National Park.

Joe 'Bea' Carlin



In 1893 Queen Lili'uokalani was overthrown by armed U.S. marines, ending Hawaiian national sovereignty and subjecting Native Hawaiians to *haole* rule.

in themselves. Americanization brought death, disease, de-population and carried off Hawaiians before they had the time or the psychological will to adapt to their radically changed environment; the *haole* dance of annihilation went on and on and on.

Survival and Transformation

Since 1970, with the revival of the Hawaiian language has come the growth of Hawaiian dance, particularly the ancient form known today as the *hula kahiko*. Dance schools called *halau hula* have seen a remarkable growth, both here in my homeland and on the West Coast of America, as have *kumu hula* or dancemasters. Formal competitions, such as the spring presentation of the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival and the summer Kamehameha Day Hula and Chant Competition are examples of all-night demonstrations

lasting for two to four days, before an audience of thousands of viewers.

The hula is again revered and respected in wide circles, as it was in the time of my ancestors. No more can the missionary or like-minded critics rebuke my dance without feeling my ire and the collective force of my sisters and brothers. No more can corporate tourism commodify the hula without hearing from Natives why we believe detestable profit motives only show blatant disrespect for our ways. And no more will the "little brown gal" stereotype strut in my homeland, or worse, become the self-definition of the Hawaiian woman. For me, the hula will continue to express political resistance in the context of cultural nationalism. This is my new vision, my commitment. This is my ancestry. And this will forever be who I am. ■

footnotes

1. I capitalize "Native" as a specific, socially constructed category and after the fashion posited by Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask: "To emphasize the political distance between that which is Western and that which is Native." (In *Amerasia* 16:1 [1990], 1-19). Moreover, the use of the term "Native" with an initial cap underscores the growing consciousness that we are not immigrants to Hawai'i, as Trask writes, but that we are an ancient people whose direct tie to the land is a cultural value of caring for the land and its Native people.

2. The predicament of the hula from a practitioner's point of view means that it was taken out of its cultural arena by non-Hawaiians and placed into the capitalist ring of commercialization and commodified. The predicament is the twin identities that the hula must possess: culturally correct and profit-making for the benefit of the travel industry. In the process, the hula is relegated to a position of theatrical amusement and practiced solely for that purpose.

3. Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Decolonizing the Mind*. (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1986). Ngugi emphasizes that the process of decolonization must make use of one's own Native language because cultural values and how we perceive ourselves and our world ties directly to language. In this decolonization, the idea of "creative initiative" means that the Native culture is not static, but dynamic and ever-changing by the Native people.

4. Davida Malo, *Hawaiian Antiquities*. (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1951) p. 231.

5. I use the term entertained, not in its frivolous or amusing sense, but in its active and defining quality. To entertain the genealogical exploits of the rulers of Hawaiian society means to engage the onlooker or hold the attention of an audience, and to make them become participants in the drama, if not physically, then psychologically and spiritually.

6. *Hula lu'i* literally means "joined hula." In the time of King David Kalakaua who reigned in the 1880's, there appears to have been a convergence of older dance techniques with newer ones. This was probably due to Western influences in poetry, writing techniques, as well as music popular from the 1870's to 1880's.

7. Malo, p. 231.

8. The popular belief, one I'm sure was propagandized by the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau, held that luscious island girls ran around the Hawaiian Islands naked with only skirts made of grass. If anyone has ever rolled around in the grass for any length of time, they would come to know rather quickly that the skin can become very itchy. Wearing that itchy thing around the waist with nothing between the skin and skirt all day long can create severe skin problems. Hawaiians who possessed intimate knowledge about their environment and

the flora within it, realized the unhealthy quality of a grass skirt. Instead, the Hawaiians used the *ti* leaf for their hula skirts, as well as for a variety of other uses, from house thatching to cooking. The old tourist posters which depict a female dancer wearing a "grass skirt" actually show a raffia skirt (a Gilbertese Island introduction) made from the fibers of the raffia palm. Hawaiian dancers then and now use the more versatile (and non-itchy) leaves of the *ti* plant.

9. This is about as good a place as any to dispel a rather absurd myth about who originally performed the hula in "ancient times." In the local tourist Lu'au in Waikiki and elsewhere, a visitor will probably hear the claim that "only the men were allowed to perform this sacred dance in ancient Hawai'i." There is no conclusive proof anywhere of only men dancing the hula before the arrival of Captain Cook in 1778. If men were the ones who were allowed to dance this sacred art form in ancient times, then perhaps they did so within the context of a religious ceremony or in a particular place of worship where in most cases only men were allowed to enter anyway. Furthermore, the journals of Cook's voyages to the Hawaiian islands clearly indicate that several hundred men and women danced upon his arrival to the islands. Moreover, other Western accounts of explorers and visitors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century describe similar circumstances: men and women dancing.

10. In this paper, I use the Hawaiian word for white person which is *hoole*. It refers to American, English and other white people. It is a term used quite frequently among local people in Hawai'i when making distinctions among Asians, Black or whites. The term *hoole* can also mean a foreigner and has an old past. References in traditional Hawaiian literature depict the pig demigod, Kamapua'a, as a big foreigner with bright eyes, a sort of interloper.

11. David Stannard's *Before the Horror: The Population of Hawai'i On the Eve of Western Contact*. (Honolulu: Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawai'i, 1989) is an excellent comprehensive re-evaluation of previously held Western population estimates which numbered the Hawaiian population at 350,000 to as little as 100,000. Stannard conservatively estimates the number of Hawaiians living at contact at 800,000.

12. An excellent forthcoming publication entitled *Native Land and Foreign Desires or Peha La E Pono Ai?* written by Dr. Lili'ikalani Kame'eleihiwa will be available in the spring of 1992. From a Native Hawaiian point of view with a fresh and engaging analysis, this text discusses the land tenure debacle of the Mahele of 1848.

13. Lili'okalani, *Hawai'i's Story by Hawai'i's Queen*. (Rutland: Charles E Tuttle Company, 1964), 386.