

# **The Hula Experience**

**by Serge Kahili King**

(excerpt from *Glimpses of Hawaiian Culture*)

As an avid observer of life, I find it very interesting to watch people watching hula. Typically, the locals are completely focused on every part of every performance, and the eyes of the *malihinis*, the visitors, glaze over after three or four dances.

In researching the whys and wherefores (by asking a lot of questions) I have finally concluded that the real problem is one of understanding. Most all visitors, and a surprisingly large number of residents, simply don't understand what the hula is all about. So, this article is designed to inform all those who wonder what the fuss is about... what the fuss is about.

First, the word, hula, means "dance" (sorry, guys, it doesn't mean "shake those hips"). Since it's a Hawaiian word, it refers to Hawaiian style dancing, which is usually divided into three types: *kahiko*, which refers to a more traditional style of dancing with traditional costuming; *'auana*, which is a flowing style of dance generally using modern Hawaiian costuming and instruments; and *hapa haole* style, also affectionately called "hotel hula," which may feature coconut bras and blue-spangled faux grass skirts made of plastic as well as both traditional and modern instruments.

Let's continue with just a little bit of legend. This is a very simplistic overview to show that not all Hawaiians agree on how the hula started.

On Molokai the story is that hula came to these islands a very long time ago from Tahiti, brought by a man named Laka, assumed to be related to the male god/hero Rata in the South Pacific.

On Kauai the story is that hula came to these islands a very long time ago also from Tahiti, but one version says it was a woman named Laka who brought it, and another version says it was brought by a set of twins, male and female, both named Laka.

On the Big Island, the most popular story says that hula was invented right there by a human woman named Hopoe, who taught it to her goddess friend, Hi'iaka, who

taught it to her elder sister, Pele. I like this one in particular, because it is a rare legend of a human teaching something to the gods.

Hula as a dance consists of a relatively small number of steps, each with its own name. The dancer also uses a kind of sign language to illustrate the meaning or purpose of the dance. Kahiko hula is typically accompanied by chanting and traditional instruments, like skin and gourd drums, bamboo rattles, and sometimes castanets made of stones. 'Auana hula is usually accompanied by singing and a band playing guitars and ukuleles.

The locals who focus so intently are probably doing so for one of two reasons—or maybe both. First is the skill of the dancers, chanters or singers, and the musicians. The dancers especially are subject to intense scrutiny for the way they place their feet, how they move their bodies, the positioning of their hands, and the direction followed by their eyes. The second reason is the content, and how well it is expressed. The content of kahiko dancing is mostly concerned with legends, ancient gods and goddesses, chiefs, and royalty. That of 'auana can be virtually anything, from romance, to gossip, to praise of people and places, to simply telling about a great party, picnic, or adventure someone had. For those who understand Hawaiian, hula is a special treat, because the chanting or singing will most likely include word-play, innuendo, and hidden meanings.

At competitive events like the Merrie Monarch Festival, held annually in Hilo, Hawaii, the dancing follows a strict pattern for the benefit of the judges. First, there is the entrance, called *ka'i*, which is usually chanted by the dancers; next is the dance itself, and finally there is the exit off stage, called *ho'i*, which is a kind of procession accompanied by chanting or singing.

If you have an opportunity to see the Merrie Monarch Festival, in person, on television, or on a DVD, don't miss it. There is nothing else like it in the entire world.