

Hula to Huli: Foreign Influences and the Evolution of the Hula Tradition from Pre-Contact to Hawai‘i’s Annexation

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There are many complex aspects that come together to create a culture. Each aspect has layers and is so profound that losing one creates a domino effect that damages all other parts. The hula tradition in Hawai‘i is one of these cultural aspects that has seen large amounts of damage as foreign influences continued to appear and affect the islands, from missionary contact in 1820 to Hawai‘i’s annexation to the U.S. in 1898. Prior to foreign influences, the hula was used not only for entertainment but for religious ceremonies and was extremely important in showcasing Hawaiian culture as deep as it can be. Ishmael Stagner says that “it is culture, ultimately, that gives a people its uniqueness, and when we speak of the hula, we most certainly are speaking of something distinctively and exclusively Hawaiian” (Stagner 6). In Hawai‘i, the hula tradition allowed Hawai‘i’s culture to have a voice and become something tangible; however, as foreign influence continued to dominate Hawai‘i, Hawaiians were introduced and forced into new ways of lifestyle, which evidently influenced the way cultural traditions, including hula, were executed. Amy Stillman adds that “much hula performed currently has lost its subtlety and allusion, qualities formerly valued but now lost on dancers and audiences who do not understand the poetry” (Stillman 4). Because of the major events involving foreign influence prior to the 1900s, hula’s purpose has become watered down from being a sacred and meaningful entity into an entertaining tourist attraction, and this change affects the hula to this present day.

Historical accounts allow us to delve deeper into what the hula tradition was like prior to foreign contact. Although this is harder to make note of because there is little documentation of these times, it is still obvious just how important the hula was for everyday life, both for entertainment

and for religious purposes. *Hula, Historical Perspectives* by Barrère et al. includes many historical accounts showcasing prehistoric hula. Hula was seen as great entertainment, especially for ali‘i, as well as a sacred practice during religious rites. Both Kamakau and ‘Ī‘ī noted that hula was performed to entertain the ali‘i Kalani‘ōpu‘u, who especially loved watching the hula (Barrère et al. 14-15). It is also noted that hula performed to entertain sailors had more sexual themes (Barrère et al. 17). Hopkins et al. add onto this statement explaining that this biased showcasing of culture is another way that the hula began to degrade, saying “another possible blow was dealt the hula by the Hawaiians themselves...they apparently did not show these short, pale visitors the religious aspects of their native dance. There was no reason why they should have, of course, but this could only have contributed to the impression these outsiders got” (Hopkins et al. 28). Aside from being performed for visitors, hula was also performed in grand concerts during important events, such as the birth of ali‘i, and religious rites mourning the death of ali‘i (Barrère et al. 22).

Hula performed during religious rites were called ha‘a. These were performed as part of a ceremony in heiau and were specific to the type of ceremony being done. *Nā Hulu Kūpuna o Hula* by Stagner et al. adds that Kamehameha I’s death in 1819 also ended many traditional practices, particularly Hawaiian religious practices. This marks the first major blow to the hula tradition as it becomes evident that before, “the hula was in honor of the gods or in praise of the chiefs...later its purpose was changed and it became corrupt” (*The Hula in Hawai‘i* 3). This was enhanced when the ‘ai kapu was broken in 1819 as well (Stagner et al. 25). The ‘ai kapu was the basis of regulation and law in Hawaiian society, allowing everyone to have their hierarchical place and purpose. Although it was known and translated as “sacred eating,” restrictions on eating was not the only thing the ‘ai kapu encompassed. Liholiho, Kamehameha II, broke the ‘ai kapu after sitting down to eat with Ka‘ahumanu and Keōpūolani, and it was made official during the Battle of Kuamo‘o between Liholiho and Kekuaokalani. The fall of the ‘ai kapu meant losing all known regulation in Hawaiian society, leaving the people confused and weary in what their

past beliefs meant, and where to put their beliefs in the future. Once the 'ai kapu fell in 1819, missionary influence came to Hawai'i. The mourning of Kamehameha I's death and the fall of the 'ai kapu left Hawaiians questioning their beliefs in their gods, leaving them vulnerable to these outside influences.

The first Christian missionaries entered Hawai'i in 1820; however, Stagner states that "their initial influence on the hula was only minimal until Queen Ka'ahumanu's baptism in 1825" (Stagner 12). As missionaries continued to preach against the hula, and ali'i continued to convert to Christianity, the hula was no longer favored by the high chiefs (Barrère et al. 33). Stagner notes that "as Christianity began to dominate the Hawaiian scene, the ha'a forms of dance began to disappear, along with the gods whose power and virtues they extolled" (Stagner 2-3). Major changes to the hula included near disappearance of dancing for religious aspects as well as hula kapu dancers, and an increased number of women dancers in dances that were before restricted to only men (Stagner 12). Missionary accounts of hula performances show their distaste for the cultural tradition. In *Changes in the Form and Function of Hawaiian Hulas*, anthropologist Philippa Pollenz states that "most writers were not as broad minded, for they all saw erotic movements in the dances of this period" and "associated them with exhibitions of licentiousness and abomination which must forever remain untold" (Pollenz 228). Hula began to morph from being able to vent emotions and tell stories while continuing to be seen as sacred, into something erotic, hedonistic, and sexual. Nathaniel Emerson in *Unwritten Literature of Hawai'i* adds that "an institution of divine, that is, religious, origin, the hula has in modern times wandered so far and fallen so low that foreign and critical esteem has come to associate it with the righteous and passionate ebullitions of Polynesian kings..." (Emerson 272). Hula was then seen to be entertainment in a wrong and sinful way, pushing it further away from what it once was. This will continue to be a catalyst for misuse of the hula tradition by foreigners.

As Hawai'i slowly continued becoming Westernized and the hula was disapproved by the Hawaiian Monarchy and the American government, it survived in secluded places away from

areas of urbanization. Practitioners "could practice hula in isolated villages far from Honolulu because American business owners believed rural areas useless to profiteering...this dissonance sustained the public practice and performance of hula in 1850" (Stagner et al. 27). The Lā'ie 'ahupua'a is an example of an area that continued to practice traditional Hawaiian cultural aspects because of its isolation. "Traditional gathering rights...allowed for free access to the open lands, shoreline, and beaches" (Stagner et al. 28). Because of this, the hūkilau was formed to "allow for fair accessibility and usage of ocean resources, and assured material, as well as cultural survival and prosperity" (Stagner et al. 28). Through the hūkilau, the hula was able to survive and prosper, sheltered from the influences of Western culture that has taken hold of Hawai'i's more urban areas.

Also, during this period, Kamehameha V was persuaded to pass a bill prohibiting all hula performances unless the person possessed a special license (Pollenz 229). Adria Imada's *Transnational Hula as Colonial Culture* adds that hula was already being prohibited in ali'i nui courts since 1823, a few years after first missionary arrival. A few decades later, "hula was strictly regulated by civil codes that were passed by the Hawaiian legislature in 1851 and 1859 under pressure from missionaries" (Imada 155). When Kalākaua came to the throne in 1874, many specific types of hula had already died out. Because of protests by the people, he tried to preserve what few hulas were left. Unfortunately, since the time of his rule, "dancers never again had the security of state-support, and without that they could never regain their former position" (Pollenz 229). After Kalākaua's death in 1891, hula no longer had the support of the court (Imada 157). This foundational support being lost worsened hula's vulnerability to influences.

By 1900, when the United States annexed Hawai'i, hula had become extremely influenced by foreign elements. New implements introduced by sailors like the Spanish guitar and Portuguese 'ukulele replaced the traditional ipu and pahu. Introduced clothing including the mu'umu'u and holokū—long dresses—covered the dancers' bodies, and a tī leaf or hau fiber (grass) skirt was worn over the dress. The hula's movements were also influenced, an example being the hula

kui, where “the dancer used her arms in graceful gestures, but pointed her toes in a manner more reminiscent of the Spanish fandango...” (Pollenz 229-230). The hula finally began to emerge from its underground hiding when Hawai‘i became a territory of the United States. Tourism became an important source of economy for Hawai‘i, and hula started being showcased to tourists because it “seemed to exemplify island life” (Pollenz 230). Rather than being used to entertain Hawai‘i’s ali‘i or honor akua, hula was now used to stereotype the Hawaiian culture and bring in more foreigners who wanted to experience their own idea Hawai‘i. In 1893, as Hawai‘i was being annexed to the United States, hula performances began to be showcased on the continent in large hula tours. Imada explains that through “performing the ‘national dance’ of Hawai‘i, these dancers illustrated the ‘barbaric’ customs of Hawaiian life for American viewers and thus became representatives of their nation at large” (Imada 150). Once the hula hit the U.S. continent with this big a force, hula could now be sexualized, exoticized, and further turned into enjoyment for foreigners. In turn, they absorbed a now extremely shallow version of what once was a very sacred and purposeful aspect of the Hawaiian culture.

Hula was completely vulnerable and up for manipulation by other foreigners. Hula started in the hands it belonged to—sacred and full of purpose even when used for fun and entertainment—and later turned into a sexual and exotic dance of the mysterious savages of Hawai‘i; it was used to entertain and show foreigners the beautiful, feminine movements that come from this tropical island paradise. It can be argued that this change the hula experienced was for its own good. Had it not undergone these changes, hula may not have survived the influences it faced. Pollenz agrees when saying, “if hula remained an essentially religious rite, it probably would have gone the way of the chieftain, the priest, and the tabu. By shifting its emphasis from the ceremonial to theatrical, the dance has managed to flourish” (Pollenz 231). Hula’s survival also meant sacrificing its deeper meaning and purpose that made it foundational in Hawaiian society.

Today, the hula continues to shift with the newer changes in society. Due to the exponential

increase of human population, more and more people perpetuating hula in hula hālau also means increased harvesting of hula plants needed for making costumes, implements, and adornments. Already, Hawai‘i’s native biodiversity has plummeted due to foreign introductions, making it more prone to over-harvesting. Hula is based on the environment that its ‘oli and mele were composed in. Without that same environment, hula needs to continue changing and adapting. Hula hālau in the United States already face the need to adapt because the U.S. does not have the same environment as Hawai‘i, where the hula originated. In the study “Traditional Gathering of Native Hula Plants in Alien-invaded Hawaiian Forests,” Ticktin et al. found that upon harvesting native understory hula plants like pala‘ā and palapalai ferns, open areas left the forest floor vulnerable for alien plant species to take over (Ticktin et al. 192). Conscious harvesting, especially in this modern time, is important to remember in order to preserve hula plants and keep what little traditional aspects of hula are left. When conducting interviews with cultural practitioners, Ticktin et al. agreed saying “while the cultural practitioners all felt strongly that gathering was not harmful if traditional protocols were followed, they all also commented that many gatherers did not know how to gather correctly and that this could cause damage” (Ticktin et al. 189). By implementing traditional protocols when harvesting native plants can aid today’s conventional management in preserving native biodiversity by allowing people to connect to the environment in a more personal way, making conservation relatable and, therefore, easier to share with younger generations. This change is different from previous changes hula has experienced. On top of continuing to find authenticity in its movement and expression, hula now faces a risk of change because the environment it is in does not have the rhetoric it once had when hula was created.

Throughout the years, hula experienced the struggle of change while being exploited in the process. In its very essence, “the hula was and is designed to do three things: instruct, inspire, and entertain” (Stagner 2). It was able to tell stories, honor those of importance, and express emotion. Hula’s purpose and the way it is executed is

different from where it started; change was necessary in order for the tradition to survive. Stagner states that “the hula, if it is to survive at all, will not only change but change dramatically” (Stagner 23). Major events that affected Hawai‘i during the 19th century, including missionary influence and the annexation of Hawai‘i, made the hula vulnerable to further influence and set the stage for hula’s struggle to survive. Hula will continue facing changes depending on the environment it is set in, and these changes are necessary for this tradition to continue into the future. The hula continues to be perpetuated in its traditional ways, though it will never have the same significance it once did; however, it has also developed newer layers and ways of being expressed. Constant development will continue to create more layers that can be analyzed, built upon, and learned from. These older traditions will continue to ground the hula, but time and changes in society will always shift cultural aspects like hula into forms people are not used to. Although these changes may sway cultural aspects away from what they once were, it is important to remember that survival is still crucial, and people will continue to educate and perpetuate these cultural practices, having the older traditions live on through those who practice them. The origin of the hula will always live on as long as there are people to dance.

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