

# Keeping Hula Alive

Leinaala Pavao Jardin

*Leinaala Pavao Jardin began dancing hula when she was three years old, continuing through high school and college, earning titles along the way including Miss Keiki (Child) Hula of Kauai, and winning the coveted Hawaiian Language Award at the Merrie Monarch Festival, the world's most prestigious hula celebration. Leinaala became a kumu (teacher) and started her own hula halau (school) on Kauai in 1997 named Halau Ka Lei Mokihana o Leinaala. Her students continue to win numerous titles.*

*Leinaala's dark eyes shine brightly as she speaks enthusiastically and joyfully about hula, laughing heartily and often, hands intuitively forming hula movements as she illustrates stories. She shares her journey to becoming a kumu, hula history on Kauai and the responsibility of keeping Hawaii's traditional dance alive.*

## **Hula Became Real**

Hula is my passion. When I dance, I feel humbled but filled with pride. We are fortunate to be able to dance the hula because it was lost for so long.

I studied hula growing up on Kauai and that was my foundation, but when I went to the Big Island for college at the Universi-

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ty of Hawaii at Hilo and joined Kumu Rae Fonseca's halau (*school*), that's when I really learned about hula. When he gave you your mele (*song*), he didn't give you the English to it. It was in Hawaiian and you translated it together as a group, everybody dictionary in hand.

We learned how mele were composed. Normally if you're writing a song about a loved one, you don't even make mention of that loved one. You compare that person to a special flower or a special bird. Composers use the blossom as a metaphor for a loved one or a relationship. If a song is about surfing, the surfboard going in and out of the waves could be a metaphor for making love. That's why when teaching hula, I've got to research the mele. I can't just pick a song and teach it. If it's a surfing song, I have no idea what's behind it, and here I'm going to send out 12 little boys dancing this song!



*Leinaala Pavao Jardin dancing hula auana as a nine-year-old.  
(Photo courtesy Leinaala Pavao Jardin)*

When I studied with Kumu Rae, we made all our implements; we made all our leis. When I had been with his halau for only about three or four months, there were probably about 100 ladies trying out for the Merrie Monarch Festival and I got selected! Rae said,

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“Everybody has to sew their dresses.” So I called my mom and said, “You have to find me a seamstress.” Little did I know that he meant that we were going to sew our *own* dresses. That is when hula became real to me. It wasn’t store-bought.

### **How About You Start Teaching?**

I studied under Rae for four years. When I graduated from college, I came home to Kauai to take care of my mom, Mary Ann Pavao, who was battling cancer at that time. I said, “Please, this can’t be the end of hula for me.” I called up my kumu and said, “I’m so torn. I want to dance but I want to take care of my mom.”

He said, “How about you start teaching? Find the closest senior center. Ask if you can teach the kupuna (*grandparent’s generation*). That’s where you start and you’re going to learn from them, too.” Guess where I live? Right next door to the senior center!

My first class was so much fun, but they taught me! I called my kumu and said, “This is not going well.” He said, “That’s why you start there, because they don’t want someone younger teaching them because they’re really the teachers.” I took them to the Kupuna Hula Festival in Kona on the Big Island, it’s like the Merrie Monarch for kupuna, and we won first place!

My kumu said, “I think you’re ready to start your own halau (*school*). Hold a registration and see how many people show up.”

On registration day, I was so nervous. I was inside the house and I asked my mom, who was sitting outside, “Is there anyone out there?” I thought there might be maybe two students. My mom said, “Uh, yeah, you may want to hurry and come out.” I came out and the line was going all the way around the house! I’ve been teaching hula ever since then.

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My kumu passed away unexpectedly when he was only 56 years old. He only uniki (*graduated*) six of us to become kumu in his lifetime. Usually it's a dozen or more. So when I dance and when I teach, it is to keep his name alive.

In hula, the genealogy is very important. My goal is when you see my students come out on stage, you can say, "that's Rae's girl." And because it's Rae's girl, it's Uncle George Naope's style, and Auntie Iolani Luahine's style. As much as I want to get creative, I've got to make sure that when I step up on that stage, that when my dancers dance, 30, 40 years from now, that people can say, "That came from Kumu Rae, that came from Uncle George, from Auntie Io." In the hula world, that's how it is done.

### **Feel the Mist**

I want my students to feel love for our Hawaiian culture, love for the hula because you are sharing our culture, and to dance with the utmost respect for the composer who took the time to write that mele. That song means a lot to the person who wrote it; you're delivering their story.

You have to put yourself in the location that the song is written about. If you're dancing about Kokee, you better feel the chill of that mountain climate when you're dancing so your audience can feel it.

When my niece, Jaedyn, was nine years old, I entered her in the Miss Keiki Hula competition. She was dancing to "Manowaiopuna," named after the waterfalls in Hanapepe Valley that were featured in the Jurassic Park movie. Jaedyn's grandparents used to live in that valley. I wanted her to see the falls, to feel the mist on her skin.

*Leinaala Pavao Jardin performing hula kahiko in the 1993  
Merrie Monarch Festival Miss Aloha Hula Competition.  
(Photo courtesy Leinaala Pavao Jardin)*



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A week before the competition, we chartered a helicopter and landed there. Jaedyn danced at the base of the waterfall and we cried and we all got wet from the spray of the falls. The next week, she won Miss Keiki Hula.

### **Hula Started on Kauai**

Hula is an important part of the Hawaiian culture. It was always much more than entertainment. It was the only form of communication for Hawaiians for centuries because we didn't have a written language until the early 1800s. It kept stories alive about Pele (*volcano goddess*) and other gods, about the different aumakua (*spiritual guardians*) and the genealogy of all our ancestors.

In ancient times, women were totally forbidden from doing the hula. It was done only by men who would do it to prepare for battle. It was the best, finest form of training that they knew. So a lot of the ancient hula, it's very vigorous, like if you put a spear in their hands they could hurt someone! Eventually the men started to go off to war and that is when the women took a liking to hula. I always joke that it's like everything in life: men started it, women learned how, we got better at it and we took over.

The beliefs and traditions of hula can slightly differ from halau to halau. What I share is what was taught to me. I believe that hula started on Kauai because we are the oldest island. A lot of songs are written about Kauai, so people on other islands are dancing to songs about our island!

In early years, hula was danced only to chanting, not to instrumental music. The first beat that hula was set to was to the pahu drum from Tahiti, traditionally made from the coconut tree with sharkskin as the head or cover. Records show that the first place the pahu drum arrived in Hawaii was on Kauai. When you study to become a kumu,

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you have to carve your own pahu drum. I carved my own; it stayed at my kumu's halau on the Big Island when I graduated.

A song has verses and you do every verse twice. Most hulas used to be done with all movements beginning to the right, but Kauai hula teachers developed a style to create more balance. Now, the first verse you start moving to the right; the second time you start to the left. Everybody knows that style of hula originated on Kauai.

There are two types of hula: kahiko, the ancient, and auana, which is more modern and was developed after the missionaries arrived in Hawaii. Kahiko is very traditional; these are very old mele talking about the birth of the islands, gods and restating history.

Kahiko hula danced to the pahu drum is the most sacred form of hula. When you learn a hula pahu, the idea is to deliver it almost exactly as it was taught to you; there's no room for innovation. You shouldn't be smiling, it's somber, you stay very humble. The pahu is where the attention is placed, and not on the dancer.

As you move along time and history, there's more room for creativity, so if you're doing a kahiko mele about Queen Liliuokalani or King Kalaukaua, who are contemporary, you can put a smile in there.

It's hard for me to not smile, so I prefer to dance auana. But I prefer teaching the ancient kahiko. I love seeing what was taught to me in front of me, to see it living on. To watch 40 or 50 of my women students do a traditional hula is very powerful.

### **Hula is in Your Heart: Teaching in Japan**

I am now also teaching hula in Japan, picking up a relationship my kumu started when he trained a Japanese man's daughter to dance. When my kumu passed away, I said, "I'll go."

There are more hula dancers in Japan than there are in Hawaii.

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I have taught groups of 100 women but there are some kumus who go to Japan whose halaus average 500 or 1,000 students. There are competitions and huge concerts there.

When my daughter, Breeze, the 2009 Miss Keiki Hula in Hawaii, was hired to dance in Japan, they had security for her. To them, Miss Keiki Hula is a big star. It was so funny: they ran up and were yelling “Kawaii! Kawaii!” I was thinking, “They really love our island.” I found out later that kawaii means cute or precious in Japanese.

Some Hawaiians think in order to dance hula, you have to be on the aina (*land*) in Hawaii, so I never thought I would teach hula in Japan. But my belief now is, how do we perpetuate it? Why not go there and share?

Hawaiian culture has been extremely popular in Japan for a long time. I finally figured out why. Their culture is so serious. In their lifestyle, they’re not allowed to show the kind of joy as we have in hula. They can’t play, and in their traditional dances, the women don’t smile. Hula is totally opposite; it’s joyful. I teach my Japanese classes that hula is not about what you see in the mirror. It’s about what you see inside, in your heart.

### **The Blessings Keep Coming**

I’m probably known as one of the strictest hula teachers on Kauai. My students know I love them dearly and there is a time to have fun and play, but when it’s hula time, we do tough training. Sometimes the kids and even my adult students, I see them teary-eyed and it breaks my heart. But I believe, as in anything in life, you have to work hard, you have to be committed.

When we enter the Keiki Hula Festival on Oahu, we train hard. It’s like the Merrie Monarch for kids, you have to be invited. The first

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time we went, I knew the parents were saying, “When this is done, I’m taking my child out of this halau.” We competed and did a clean sweep of all the categories we entered. Then the parents asked when practice was going to start up again! Now the parents say, “Lei, thank you so much because my daughter is so responsible, she’s so respectful in all areas of life.” Hula teaches them about commitment, about working hard and not giving up.

My mom has missed out on a lot of what I have accomplished, because she passed away right after I started my halau and before my children were born. But I truly believe that she is my angel in Heaven. I think there’s a line up there where you ask for special favors and I think my mom keeps on cutting in line, because I’ve received so many blessings over the past few years. And the blessings just keep on coming.