

The History of Hula

My family was given a gift, and this gift is the hula that we do. We've preserved this for many generations, teaching this hula to everybody and all of the many generations of people that has come after us.

Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanachele, who together with her sister Nalani Kanaka'ole created and choreographed *Holo Mai Pele*, trace their lineage to the very beginnings of hula, the Pele clan itself. Their stature in the community, as well as their *mana* (spiritual power), reside in the fact that their family has maintained the cultural grounding that many Hawaiians today seek to recover. Today both sisters are *Kumu Hula* (teachers) at Hālau o Kekuhi, the Kanaka'ole Family dance and chant organization.



Figure 1 Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanachele

Indeed, the ground is both figuratively and literally the source of their inspiration. Stylistically, Hālau o Kekuhi is celebrated for its mastery of the *'aiha'a* style of hula, a low-postured, vigorous style that pay tribute to the eruptive personae of Pele and Hi'iaka. "We hardly leave the ground," explains Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanachele. "We get our energy from the earth. Angular, dynamic and primal, Hālau o Kekuhi's dances counter the stereotypes of hula popularized in Hollywood movies and commercial television.

In the following sections, (excerpted from the companion book to *Holo Mai Pele*, and from interviews conducted for the film), Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanachele speaks with authority on the tradition and meaning of and chants, the training and discipline required to master it, and the creation of the groundbreaking performance *Holo Mai Pele*.

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The Meaning of Hula

Our family is from that area where the caldera [of Kilauea] is, what we call Ka'ū and the Puna area on the Island of Hawai'i, which is the southern-most and eastern-most boundaries of this island. Those people that come from that particular place are very much connected to that crater. Different families take care of different aspects of that particular deity. Our family's connection to that deity has to do with the songs and the dances, and retelling some of the stories that the eruption puts forth. So when there is an eruption, it is our responsibility then to make a song about that eruption, so that particular eruption will be kept and will be remembered and will be sung in honor years from now.

We have inherited a rich tradition of *hula* (dances) and *mele oli* (chants), full of stories of gods and goddesses, ceremonies, prayers, protocol, imagery, wisdom, and intelligence. This tradition teaches how to respect family, appreciate natural phenomena, memorize lengthy chants,

love the land, understand hierarchy, recognize life and death cycles, and acknowledge and honor the presence of life. This gift is matrilineal; however, by adding to it our childhood experiences and paternal influences, we have gained a broader understanding of space and time in connection with cultural history and practices and their evolution.

As my grandson said — who is four years old — hula is the tree, hula is the ocean. And he is totally correct. Hula is a reflection of life. Hula is a way of retelling history. Hula is a way of taking what is thought and what is seen into a movement, and accepting all of these as a way of keeping our history of retelling stories, of remembering births. Hula is many depths of things. It goes from the action of what's going on, to the person who is actually seeing what is going on, and thinking it through, putting it into words. And to the person who comes along, takes the words, and choreographs it so the story is remembered, and put it into movement. And then there is the dancer, who listens to what the choreographer says, who is listening to the story and listening to the words, and reliving the image of what originally happened. And so hula takes many, many steps before it's actually done. It's a way of remembering and it's a very esoteric, sometimes, way of talking about history. It's an art piece of how you express a birth, without actually looking at the literal birth. And so it's a very esoteric form of history.



Figure 2 Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanabele teaching at Hālau o Kekuhi

Hula has gone through many different stages. It went through a stage where we were not allowed to dance it. And where there was a lot of misunderstanding about what hula portrays. It is at this point being more accepted into the social conducts of people, because what hula does is transport us from this world into another. It is that vehicle that makes us feel and think and be very Hawaiian. I don't know of any other vehicle that does that except hula, so more and more people are being very accepting of this particular form. We've always done it because it was a gift to us. And we've always accepted it because that's all we know. And we could not just put away this form that people didn't understand. It was our ancestor, and so we continued it. And for many other people, it's not, and they take it on as a new tradition.



Figure 3 The double-gourd drum, or ipu heke, provides accompaniment for the dancers.

Hula was performed before the Europeans came. It was fun thing to do. It was also a very sacred thing to do. So certain hulas were looked at as being very sacred and you only do it at a certain time, for a certain deity on certain moons, at certain ceremonies. Other hulas were done at the birth of a child — a song was composed and the hula was done for that particular event.

Chants and Instruments

Mele refers to sung poetry, and *oli* to the voice techniques used to deliver the *mele*. This art form is more sophisticated and esoteric than *mo'olelo* (prose narrative). *Mele* are chanted in a rhythmic manner for dancing and at other times in a non-rhythmic manner. They are sometimes

composed to mark an event of immense magnitude, such as an earthquake, volcanic eruption, storm, or tidal wave. Compositions also recall events such as the birth of a high chief or a death in the family, experiences like lovemaking or war, and feelings such as nostalgia for a person or place. The composition process may be quite straightforward or very complex, depending on the composer's mood and training, and other factors, such as the need to veil the identity of the hero or heroine. *Mele* are delivered in diverse voice styles in which performers convey the character and sounds of the natural world, such as the wind, ocean, birds, and volcanic eruptions. One word paints many pictures, blending the mundane with the sacred and referencing gods, rituals, laws, family affairs, love, war, animals, natural phenomena, and voyages.

One of the most traditional instruments used for hula is the sharkskin drum called *pahu*. The *pahu* stands two to three feet high and is made from the trunk of the coconut or breadfruit tree. A small knee drum called *puniu* accompanies the *pahu*. The *puniu* is made from the skin of the *kala* fish, stretched over half a coconut shell. Another drum we often use is the double-gourd drum known as *ipu heke*.

Continuing the Tradition

Hālau o Kekuhi is rooted in a tradition dating back at least seven generations and is the acknowledged guardian of a treasury of Pele chants and dances. In 1993, Hālau o Kekuhi received the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, the most prestigious award granted in the country for the traditional arts.

“The hālau is a school. And it can be a school of paddling canoes, a school of carving. For our family, it’s a school of dance, a school of hula. Another word for dance and hula is *ha’a*. And so all of this, our hula hālau, or dance school, is what we have been given as a gift. And this is where people come in and learn our particular tradition. We have hālau all over the island. But in our particular hālau, we do the dance of Pele, and the dances of the eruptive phases of this island and how things are born out of this land. And it can be the birth of a tree, the birth of a flower, the birth of an *ali’i* or a king or a chief. All of this comes out of this land, and this land is the responsibility of Pele. But that’s a hālau.



Figure 4 Dancers are admitted to the hālau after asking permission through a chant.

Hālau is where you teach people things. And then there is a protocol in the hālau. A very formal protocol before you enter anybody’s hālau, you need to give a chant and ask permission to enter. And we will listen to you if it is at our hālau, and see if you’re very sincere about this. If we find that you’re not sincere in your first chant, we allow you to chant again and chant again until we hear that there is an urgency in your voice to come in and to learn these things, and to complete a particular task. And then we chant back to you and allow you to come in to the school. We have these kinds of chants for almost anything. When we go to the crater, to the caldera of Kilauea, we have a chant. And when we go up to the forest, we have a chant to ask permission to go in the forest and gather different things to make our leis or gather medicine. And all of this is just a sense of asking permission, knowing that there is something there that

guards and protects and takes care of these different things. And it's the same thing with the hālau.

Our particular hālau takes a lot of energy to belong to, and a lot of discipline.

Our particular hālau takes a lot of energy to belong to, and a lot of discipline. There are certain ceremonies that you need to do, certain chants that you need to know, and this becomes all part of the hālau. We have just taken a group of dancers from the beginning of their dancing career to six months. And at this time, we graduate them to another step. And we all come in and we watch them dance, and we tell you whether we like your dancing, whether you have learned anything or whether you have learned nothing, and it's better for you to just go home and work in the garden or come back again to hālau.

It's demanding. And we don't pay you for dancing if you should go out to dance. We don't pay ourselves for teaching. And the money that they pay us is to pay rent for the space. And so this is a huge sacrifice. We come and we teach hula four times a week. And our students — depends on what class they are — will come twice a week. They need to learn how to make their own costumes. They need to learn the different kinds of trees in the forest that will produce certain kinds of dyes. They need to learn how to make the *leis* that they wear around their neck and their head, and the certain kinds of ferns that they need to use, or certain other kinds of flowers that they need to use for particular dances that they do. They need to make their own *hau* skirts (or what looks like grass skirts, but they're not). And so they work hard on being a dancer for us. And we don't expect them to go to a florist shop to get their *leis* done. Everybody makes their own *leis*. And they sweat in their *leis*, and after they're done with using their *leis*, they take them back to that forest, or they have a place in their own yard where they can put the *leis*. So everything becomes very personal to them.”

Creating Holo Mai Pele

Native Hawaiians place such importance on genealogy that traditionally only the most astute minds of trusted friends, relatives, priests, and priestesses were entrusted with recording lineages. The phrase “the Pele family” indicates the gods’ capabilities as lovers who have offspring and siblings. As elemental forms, Hawaiian gods are genealogically, spiritually, and physically interrelated. In *Holo Mai Pele*, both the human family aspect of the story and the relationship of elemental forms are recognized.

Our ancestors understood this phenomenon instinctively because they had a very intimate relationship with their world.

At the core of *Holo Mai Pele* is a basic yet sophisticated understanding of the primary functions and powers of women and the female Earth. The story involves numerous facets of plot, human entanglements, chaos of the creative forces, godly duties, and family responsibilities. *Holo Mai Pele* is an ancient myth that continues to evolve today. Kilauea volcano continues to erupt, extending land and creating new islands. This mythical epic is not



Figure 5 Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahahele directs dancers at Hālau o Kekuhi

about volcano gods existing only in the past. It is about the volcano gods who have prolonged their lives from the past, to the present, to the future. Like other Hawaiian myths, this one was composed over lifetimes by keepers of tradition: wise men and women and prophets, who interjected their wisdom into these myths. The creation of myth must continue as long as Kilauea continues to erupt. The songs and stories of the volcano will continue to affect and profoundly enrich the lives of future generations.

***Holo Mai Pele* was created to remind us, the Native Hawaiians, of our gifts from the past.**

Holo Mai Pele was created to remind us, the Native Hawaiians, of our gifts from the past. The deities that we're talking about and all of those other people related to them all have to do with different parts of nature, and how these different parts of nature interact with each other. In order for us to understand that particular deity and all other things that interact, we are given different manifestations of these deities. And so Pelehonuamea then, is responsible for the eruption. But not only the eruption, the thing that comes out of the earth, but she's responsible for everything else around it — for instance, the earthquake that the eruption causes, the rosy colors in the sky after it has erupted, the steam that comes out of the earth. All of this is part of Pele. And very often when we have an intense eruption, it interacts with the atmosphere above, and we have a big storm.

The dances that we do in the performance are dances that have been passed down to us for many generations. Some of the dances are dances that we choreographed — my sister, my daughters, and myself. The chants, however, are traditional, very old chants. And they've never been put together in this chronological order before, and this is one of the reasons we wanted to do this epic piece. We usually perform just this piece here this time, this piece here this time, so it's never been put together quite the way it's been put together now.

A few years ago we put together this three-hour production on stage about Pele and Hi'iaka. The Hi'iaka part of this particular epic talks about who she is, how she goes about finding those god qualities inside of her, and how she needs to bring them out eventually. And so she is sent on a journey. And it's much like all of us who go on our life journey, and we find out different things about ourselves from experiences. And she does find out about who she is, and the fact that she needs to bring this land back to life, and she also finds out that she can also bring different people back to life. So this becomes Hi'iaka. And at the end of the story, she finds that she is as great a deity, as great a goddess as her sister Pele, who makes land, and they're able to match each other's skill and each other's god-like qualities.

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In the one chant that we're doing [in *Holo Mai Pele*], Kulia Ka Uli, the teacher that Hi'iaka goes off with is responsible for teaching her how to pray to her gods. And this one chant that she does, she's praying to the deities of the atmosphere — she calls them *'Ilio'ula*. And *'Ilio* in our language means dog. But *'Ilio'ula* is also the long, very dark colored, red colored clouds in the sky. These are stormy clouds. And we have all different kinds of clouds that are responsible for different things. So it's this interaction between the atmosphere and the things of the earth that continue. The sky doesn't stand alone and the earth doesn't stand alone. There is

always something going on between the two. And so she teaches Hi'iaka how to call out to the different kinds of clouds. Whether the clouds are stormy or whether the clouds have lightning in them, or whether the clouds are heavy rain clouds, these are the ones that she's asking her to call out to. And these can be very destructive clouds. You need to know what cloud is related to an eruption, or what cloud is related to the farmer, or what cloud is related to just kind of rolling in the sky during the summer. And so poetry takes on all of that. So when we talk about a hālau, hālau is some place where you go to learn. These are some of the things that you learn. Especially when you're doing chants.

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Pelehonuamea, or Pele, is not a dancer. She is the land. And so we don't see her in this portion of the story, because this portion of the story does not have to do with eruptive phase. It has to do with the revegetation of land, so it has to do with Hi'iaka. It's only after Hi'iaka finishes this journey and comes back, and then there is a battle between the two sisters. But Pele then comes up as the form of an eruption. And not as a human form that we're used to looking at, and she doesn't do any of the dances.

Pa'uopalai, and we will call her Palai, is the teacher of Hi'iaka that Pele assigns to her right at the beginning of her journey. And Pa'uopalai's task is to teach Hi'iaka how to pray to her gods, how to call upon them, what different forms she need to call upon to attract their attention and to have them come and help her. But Pa'uopalai is really the name of a fern. And when we look at eruptions, one of the first things that come out of new land is the fern. So this whole idea of the fern being the new greenery out of this new land, starting a new life for this particular land [is] the connection between this teacher and Hi'iaka and the land.

The *kapa* that is being beaten on the Island of Kaua'i, this matron of this particular island beats *kapa*. Beating *kapa* is a very common thing, but it's a very female thing to do. The *kapa* tells you that she is of a particular rank. And usually they pass *kapa* on from one generation to another generation, to another generation. But *kapa* is also another way of talking about birth. And so this new *kapa* or this new cloth that she is making has to do with her rank as the chiefess of this particular island, but it's also a way of passing on this cloth to another generation, possibly to Lohi'au. But it tells you that this is a very female thing to do.

An 'awa ceremony is a way of bringing all together so that they will be of one mind.

An 'awa ceremony is done very often. And it can be very formal and very informal. But an 'awa ceremony is a way of bringing all together so that they will be of one mind. An 'awa ceremony tells you first of all that you want to request for health, new health for the land, you want to request for new health for the chiefs of the land, and for longevity for the land. So it's a way for everybody to get together and be of one mind. In this case of Hi'iaka, when she is about ready to go off to the Island of Kaua'i, it is a way of bringing all of these thoughts and her tasks into focus, and bringing on continued good health for her as well as continued health for this person that she is going to go get for her sister. Sometimes there's an 'awa ceremony for the big journey on the canoe, sometimes there is an 'awa ceremony when all the chiefs get together to

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plan for a war. And so this whole idea of bringing everybody together into one mind [is brought] all together in that particular 'awa bowl.

The scene of the revivication for Lohi'au is a very complex scene, and it's a very long scene and we've brought it down to a few minutes. That particular scene has to do with medicinal herbs. It has to do with prayers, lots and lots of prayers. It has to do with sacred water. And when I say sacred water, it's the water that has come either in rain or

however it falls from the atmosphere and it's not touched the ground. And so you can find it in the long bamboos, in the nodes of the bamboos, or you can find it at the leaf tops that acts like a little cup and catches it and you take that. All of these pure things [are] given to him, all of these herbs that are mixed and given the breath of this person that's doing the chant. And the person calls upon different deities or different forms of nature that are necessary to bring him back to life. And then she puts it in this bowl and she breathes into it. And this breath is that thing that will pull all of these things together, and hopefully giving it to him, it also brings his breath back.

At the end of each of the dances that we do, we give the name of the person that the dance is dedicated to. So it's *He inoa no Hi'iakaikapoliopole*. It's a name song for Hi'iaka. Or *He inoa no Pele*, a name song for Pele. So there is a sense of who this song goes back to. The dance steps that you see are what we call traditional dance step, they've always been done. And they represent different movements in nature, whether it has to do with the wind in a circular movement or the currents of the ocean in a circular movement. Whether it has to do with the tide moving back and forth, and we have those kinds of movements. So all of the movements that we do are movements of nature. And in one of the dances that you see very early in this particular performance is the dance of when [Hi'iaka] is in the *hala* forest and she is doing this dance by herself. This is the very first dance that is done. But this is also the dance that tells you about the movement of nature.

The Kanaka'ole Family: Creators of *Holo Mai Pele*

Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale is an instructor and assistant professor of Hawaiian Studies at Hawai'i Community College, having previously taught at Maui Community College and University of Hawai'i, Hilo. Ms. Kanahale is President of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation, a Hawaiian and western educational organization. Recently she co-chaired the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, and served as a cultural workshop organizer for the DOE and Bishop Museum. Ms. Kanahale also serves on the UNESCO Advisory Committee on Native Cultures.



Figure 6 Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahale and Nalani Kanaka'ole oversee a rehearsal of *Holo Mai Pele*

Nalani Kanaka'ole is a choreographer of Hawaiian dance and consultant/educator of Hawaiian cultural experiences, Coordinator/Director at the Native Hawaiian Art School, and

Artistic Director at the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation. Ms. Kanaka'ole also coordinated the Native Hawaiian Art Exhibit at the Wailoa Art.

Together, the two sisters co-directed *Holo Mai Pele* and *Kamaehameha Pai'ea* (a dance/drama about the Warrior Chief Kamehameha), and co-founded both Hika'alani, a Hawaiian Cultural Protocol Group, and Puana, a Native Hawaiian organization established for script writers of stage, film and video.

Their many awards include: National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Award, Recognition Award for Traditional Dance by State Foundation of Culture and the Arts, Prestigious Award for Preservation of Hawaiian Language, Dance and Chant by State Council of Hawaiian Heritage, Recognition of Excellence of Dance by Dance Hawai'i Council, The Governor's Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Arts, and No Hoku Hanohano Award for Best Hawaiian Language album of the Year for Uwolani in 1999.