

Taking Hula *Out Of The Box*

by Joana Varawa



When you think of Hula, what do you think of? Smiling young girls dancing at hotel luau wearing coconut bras and Ti leaf skirts? Immaculately dressed and coifed young women swaying in the TV lights at the Merry Monarch Festival in Hilo? Adorable local kids doing their stuff at Keiki Hula competitions? You probably don't imagine German ladies dancing hula barefoot in an amphitheater once used by Hitler, or blond Swiss women adorned with flower lei doing traditional hula in Basel. But Maui-born Kumu Hula, (hula teacher) Roselle Keli'ihonipua Bailey, along with other Hawaiians, believes its time to take hula out of the box of performances and carry it to a world hungry for spiritual nourishment.

Roselle considers herself a practitioner of the culture, not a performer, and for her, "Hula is a way of life, a way to pride, love and joy." To transmit this way she has embarked on a journey to export its essence to people in distant lands. Twice a year Roselle travels from Maui to Europe, to teach cultural seminars in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and to present "Reflect Aloha, A History of Hawai'i Through Oli (chant), Mele (songs) and Hula." She also organizes performances and cultural exchanges in New Zealand, Canada, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands, and has participated in cultural exchanges with the Saanich, Salish, and Omaha tribes in British Columbia and the U.S.

Growing up in Lahaina Maui, Roselle started learning hula when she was four years old from Emma Sharp. She then studied with Edith Kanakaole and with Kauai Zutter Meister, all widely respected kumu hula. "I was brought up in hula and love Hawaiian music," she says. "Hawaiian music is soothing to the soul and it inspires the body to move and to create visions. In our seminars I use hula to teach people who they are, to esteem themselves, and often they go back to their original culture." Roselle describes teaching a hula in Germany where the dancers enter with their right arms raised in front of them. It

reminded them of the old Hitler salute, and they were ashamed to do the motion. "It's not that," Roselle told them, "your arm is held higher, you are proudly describing a coconut tree." By dancing the hula her students were able to overcome their bad associations, and the dance became a healing experience.

I first met Roselle many years ago at Ke Ahu a Laka, the altar to Laka on Kauai. Laka is the patron of hula, a deity of the deep woods, who is represented on the altar by an uncarved block of lama wood, which symbolizes enlightenment. Laka loves sweet-smelling plants and vines and her altar was adorned with ferns and maile. Her temple was celebrated throughout the islands as a center for the sacred study of hula. "Laka personifies the qualities mastery of hula demands; discipline of the untamed body, mind, and soul," says Roselle. "She lives in the forest, which Hawaiians considered the quintessence of wilderness and spiritual danger. Each successful haumana hula (hula student) passes from an undisciplined state to one of enlightenment. Often this passage is represented as a journey from the darkness of the forest to the cosmos of the halau hula."

In old Hawai'i, the halau hula was the equivalent of a university, the repository of the knowledge of the culture. Hawaiian history, science, and religion was recounted in chants and described in dance and gesture. The chants praise the many forms of the gods, honor chiefs, and tell of animals, people, and plants exchanging attributes. A person was a rainbow and a lehua blossom, the mist on the mountain, the pinnacled rocks on the ridge. human and shark, owl and tree. Hula masters taught their students to pay attention to nature. Swaying hala and coconut trees, the rolling sea, drifting clouds, modeled the motions of the dance; the booming surf was echoed in the beat of the pahu drum; and sunlight falling on leaves suggested patterns of tattoos and of tapa. "Hula requires a blend of male and female qualities, intense concentration and the integration of body, mind and spirit. Hula is mana - a supernatural power," says Roselle.

Roselle often brought her students and supporters to clean the ancient temple on Kauai, and to renew their commitment to hula. I joined them one year, and we all sat on a mat before the altar and shared a bowl of awa. Roselle chanted as her students, adorned in fern and maile lei, danced to honor Pele, Hi'iaka, and other deities, whose spiritual presence is invoked in the hula. Hi'iaka is the perfect role model. A sister of the volcano

"Hula is a way of life, a way to pride, love and joy."

goddess Pele, she is protected by a magical pa'u (skirt) of fragrant ferns, and possesses the power to heal and restore the dead. She travels from the volcano on the Big Island, through all the islands, overcoming great obstacles to bring her sister's lover back to Pele at Kilauea. This story, the Hawaiian equivalent to Homer's Odyssey, is recounted in great detail in the many chants and hula danced in

Hi'iaka's and Pele's honor.

Now living in a lovely old seaside house near Wailuku, Roselle oversees the work of her non-profit research institute, Ka'imi Na'auao O Hawai'i Nei, (whose website contains information about their work). She travels and conducts intensive seminars overseas, and when at home teaches beginners, who then graduate on to her daughter, Sharon Ioana Balido's halau. Roselle is poised in the way that comes to women who have danced and chanted for many years. Light hearted and happy, yet very serious, she radiates the confidence that mastery of hula bestows. Although when viewed from the outside, hula seems to be about how it looks to the observer - how pretty and graceful are the dancers, how well they move together - it is really from the inside, from the experience of dancing and chanting, that the meaning of hula emerges. Taking hula out of the nicely wrapped box of simple entertainment, and restoring it as a physical/spiritual/cultural practice available to everyone, is Roselle Bailey's goal.



Roselle Bailey takes hula out of the box of simple entertainment.

Photo by Joana Varawa