

Nana I Na Loea Hula  
Kumu Hula: Cecilia Akim  
Interviewer: Lovina LePendur  
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(CAN YOU GIVE ME THE NAME YOU WANT IN THE BOOK?) Cecilia  
Kawaiokawa'awa'a Akim. (ARE YOU TEACHING PRESENTLY?) Yes. (WHERE?)  
I'm teaching with Aunty Hoakalei up at Nu'uano day care center. (WHAT'S  
THE AGE OF YOUR STUDENTS?) She has classes with pre-schoolers, young  
teens, and a class with adults. (HOW MANY DAYS A WEEK?) They all have  
classes once a week. (AND DO YOU TEACH DIRECTLY WITH AUNTY HOAKALEI  
OR BY YOURSELF?) Sometimes with her, sometimes by myself for her,  
depending on how large the class is. (DO YOU TEACH BOTH KAHIKO AND  
AUANA?) Very seldom auana. Mostly the kahiko. (HOW MANY YEARS HAVE  
YOU BEEN TEACHING?) Let's see, over twenty years now. It's probably  
going on 21, 22 years. (AND YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN WITH AUNTY HOAKALEI?)  
Yea.

(AT WHAT AGE DID YOU FIRST LEARN HULA?) I was between three  
and four. (CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FIRST TEACHER?) That was  
Aunty Iolani Luahine. (WHERE DID SHE TEACH YOU?) I think that was the  
King Street studio, or somewhere around there. My mom took me so I'm  
not sure exactly where it was. I remember seeing the building. I was too



young then. (YOU STAYED WITH HER UNTIL WHEN?) I stayed with her until she, that was the first time she retired from teaching and moved back to Kona, so that was somewhere maybe for about 5 or 6 years. (HOW DID YOU LEARN? BY YOURSELF OR WITH OTHERS?) It was with other people. I was in a class with the other girls were anywhere from 8 to 20 years older than me. (SO SHE HAD ALL THE GIRLS MIXED IN AGE?) No. She had them in different age groups, but with me she just had me dance with all of them. (DID YOU LEARN ONLY KAHIKO?) No. I learned kahiko and auana. We learned "Little Brown Gal" and "Hukilau", things like that, and that was more for learning hand motions and just being a little graceful rather than stiff, being softer. (DID YOU LEARN OLI AT THE SAME TIME?) Yes. Because all of the hula noho that we learned, Auntie Io made us learn our chants at the same time. (CAN YOU RECALL HER METHODS?) It was very repetitious. We would go over and over and over. (DID SHE HAVE MEN?) I don't remember being in a class with men but I remember when we did shows there were men that were also part of the show, they did their numbers. So I don't know if she taught them. I don't think so because they were like Uncle George Holokai, Uncle George Na'ope, Tom Hiona; they were also teachers. The shows that we did, they were part of it. (BUT YOUR CLASSES DID NOT INCLUDE MEN?) No.



(CAN YOU RECALL A SPECIAL CHANT THAT YOU LEARNED WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?) I would have to pick on "Aia la 'o Pele". The reason for that is I danced with her and then she retired one time; she came back, I went back to her; she retired again. In between that I danced with other teachers and then I freelanced after that, when I got older. And then when Auntie Hoakalei was with the State Foundation on Culture & the Arts and she started those classes I went back with Auntie Hoakalei. And I shocked myself after having, or not having danced any of those old numbers for, I think I figured out like 12 years I had not done those kahiko numbers. And Auntie Hoakalei started going over all the fundamental hulas, "Kawika", "Lili'u", "Ulu no weo"(?), and I remembered those. Those were all right because I continued dancing those through the years. But the one that I had not danced for a lot of years was "Aia La O Pele", and when she started doing that it was just automatic, it came back. (SO IT WAS ONE THAT STUCK IN YOUR MIND ALL THIS TIME?) It just stuck there, it was there. (IT REMINDED YOU OF HER?) It reminded me of Auntie Io. And then Auntie Hoakalei's method of teaching is the same as Auntie Io's. So for me it was like I was right back to being 8 or 9 years ago. (WHILE YOU WERE WITH AUNTIE IO, DID YOU ENCOUNTER ANY SPECIAL EXPERIENCES?) With her as a teacher I really couldn't say because I was very young and I probably was



one of the few students that I just wanted to dance, so whatever she told me to do I did it. With her as a performer, she was excellent. At a very young age, 7, 8 years old, I don't think I've seen even up to this day anybody that could capture an audience the way she did. (HOW LONG DID YOU STAY WITH HER BEFORE SHE RETIRED?) When she retired the first time I was about 9 years old, because I went to George at 10. So that would be about 7 years I guess. (THEN YOU WENT BACK LATER ON?) Yea, because I went to Auntie Pele Puku'i for about a year and a half. And then because of my age, because I was still young, she suggested that I go into something else or to go with another hula teacher so I went with George Na'ope, and I stayed with him until he moved out of Honolulu and moved back to Hilo. I was with him for about seven or eight years also. (WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM PELE PUKU'I?) Kahiko. (DID YOU LEARN CHANT, DANCE, OR BOTH?) I learned both. It was just me; I was her only student. I guess it would be like maybe a private class or something like that. Because I was the only one my age that she had. All her other dancers or students were, again, 8, 10, 12 years older than me. (HOW WAS THE STYLE FROM IO?) It was different, but not that much. It was just her steps, her fundamental steps, were the same, her motions were just a little bit more, maybe a little bit busier, just slightly different. But her basic feet and her hands



were very similar. (DID YOU LEARN THE SAME SONGS?) No. Aunty Pat went over a lot of the songs that I had learned with Aunty Io so that she knew which ones I knew and then she went into different songs. And with her I learned more numbers with implements. (AND THEN YOU WENT TO GEORGE NA'OPE?) I went to Uncle George and with him we did both kahiko and auana. And eventually I did more auana with him than I did kahiko. (THEN WITH HIM YOU FOUND ANOTHER STYLE?) I found a completely different style. No, again, not completely. Again, the basic foot movements were the same, the hands movements were the same, but then again it was even a little bit busier than Pele. But then too I did more auana with him. (DID YOU GET ANY CERTIFICATES OR UNIKI FROM ANY OF THESE PEOPLE?) George had an uniki. (HOW LONG DID YOU STAY WITH UNCLE GEORGE?) About 7 or 8 years I would say. At the time I was with George I was just turning 13 or 14. (WITH GEORGE, WERE YOU BY YOURSELF OR WITH OTHER PEOPLE?) I think that was the first time that I was actually in a class with dancers that were the same age as me. But then, like I said, I just wanted to dance. When we had a studio in Kalihi I lived right there so it was like, why stay home and help mother clean house when I can go down to the hula studio and help Uncle George do something even though he wasn't doing anything. So I literally hung out at the hula



studio and danced with all his classes. (WAS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DANCING WITH GIRLS YOUR OWN AGE AND DANCING WITH ELDERS?) No. I think the only difference that I felt was that most of the ones that were my age had just started hula or had only been dancing for a couple of years and I found them slow and awkward. But once they learned the dance we all pulled together; it didn't matter what the age was.

(SO YOU DIDN'T UNIKI WITH AUNTY IO?) No. (AND THE SAME THING WITH PELE?) Pele did not uniki me, no. (AFTER GEORGE?) After George I freelanced because George moved to Hilo and I couldn't find anybody that..., well I think at that time too, because by then that was my latter years in High school. And so between school and extracurricular activities and school and stuff like that I really didn't have much time to go to classes. So I just freelanced on my own. I was doing the shows at International Market Place with Uncle Johnny Watkins and Aunty Lydia Wong. (SO YOU DID SHOWS WITH OTHER PEOPLE?) Oh, yes! (THE WHOLE TIME YOU WERE DANCING?) When I was with Uncle George all the shows I did were with Uncle George. After he moved back to Hilo, then I did shows. (SO YOU WERE DOING SHOWS WITH WHO?) Uncle John Pi'ilani Watkins, in fact that's how I met Momi Ho. And with Aunty Vicky I'i I did a couple of them. I did a couple of Kodak hula shows. (IN YOUR TEENS?) I hadn't even graduated



from high school yet. (AND YOU WERE DANCING WITH PEOPLE IN YOUR AGE GROUP?) In the shows that I did most of them were my age group. (FROM THERE YOU WENT TO AUNTY HOAKALEI?) After I graduated from high school, I was up at the U.H. for a couple of years and I dropped out of hula completely. Then I took a group with me to the east coast and we did a show there for a year and a half. Four of us girls went up to the east coast. They had danced with Blossoms mother, what's her name? (ROSE JOSHUA.) Aunty Rose Joshua. I took them up. So we shared amongst each other what we knew, what we learned. We put our own show together and did the east coast. (HOW LONG DID YOU STAY THERE?) I was on the east coast for three years but I only danced for about a year and a half. Then I came back and went back with Aunty Hoakalei. (YOU WERE ALREADY TAKING FROM AUNTY HOAKALEI THEN?) Aunty Hoakalei was teaching with Aunty Io the whole time that I was there. So for me it was just like going back into the same thing that I had started with. (BY THAT TIME AUNTY IO HAD STOPPED ALREADY?) Oh, yes. (DO YOU REMEMBER THE YEAR?) That was 1969, and I've been with her since. (YOU WENT BACK WITH AUNTY HOAKALEI TO START OVER AGAIN OR JUST JOIN THE HALAU?) Actually I went back because I wanted to dance again. I wanted to go back. I went back as a dancer, as a student. And she was with the State Foundation on



Culture and the Arts, and the object then was to train a group of dancers to teach, and that's what I did. (SO YOU WERE JUST A DANCER WITH HER THEN?) Right. (WHEN DID YOU BEGIN TO TEACH WITH HER?) Immediately she started training us to teach. (SO YOU WERE DANCING AND TEACHING AT THE SAME TIME?) Right.

(WITH AUNTY HOAKALEI, DID YOU CONTINUE AUNTY IO'S WORK?) Oh, yea. It's still a continuation. It was then and it still is. Her style of teaching is still the same. (YOU DON'T SEE ANYTHING DIFFERENT BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM?) In their teaching, no. In their style of dancing, no. Even Aunty Hoakalei's modern is very similar; it's simple, it's not busy, it doesn't change. (HOW DO YOU FEEL TEACHING WITH HER? DO YOU WANT TO BREAK ON YOUR OWN?) I am very comfortable with her. (IS IT THE STYLE OF TEACHING THAT YOU LIKE?) Well, I think part of it is style, but in this day and age I've got that choice, and it's my choice to just stay with her. I like the workshops. I like, when we were with State Foundation, being able to go and learn different styles from different teachers, which I enjoyed. Sam Nae'ole had a different style. Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole's, her style is very different. We learned some numbers from her when we went to New Zealand. Aunty Kau'i Zuttermeister's is very different. And going to the workshops and learning these different styles, I've enjoyed it. And



whenever we do any of the numbers that some of them have taught us, even the numbers that Kimo Alama has taught us, Auntie Hoakalei stresses it and I try to make sure that we keep it to the style that we learned it from that particular teacher. But I guess having danced Auntie Io's style which is the same that Auntie Hoakalei is doing, I'm more comfortable with that and it's the style that I prefer.

(DID YOU ENCOUNTER ANY DIFFICULTIES DURING YOUR HULA CAREER?)

Actually, no. I think I've had a good life with my hula. I've enjoyed it. I still enjoy it. (WHAT KIND OF JOY DO YOU FEEL IN TEACHING?) It's very exciting to teach. It can be very frustrating because you will get those in the class with two left feet and don't know their right hand from their left. But I like teaching beginners who don't know anything. Because then it's like a brand new baby. You're teaching them to walk. It's easier. Teaching at the workshops, teaching hula dancers that have been with a different halau, a different style, for three, four, five years or even longer it's very hard because you can't really get them to move the way you want them to, although a lot of them try. And I could see where they were coming from because it was like when I was learning the dances from Auntie Edith; you try to move the way she wanted us to - it's hard! You have to just try to break your mind from it, and it's not that easy. But it's



still, in teaching classes, regardless of whether or not they had any experience, especially in teaching kahiko. Auana you don't see it. In kahiko I see it. The only reason they want to learn kahiko is because they want to learn. It's not like a hula studio that, before you even walk in, you have all this money that you've got to pay out; you've got to have your hula bag with two uliuli's, two pu'ili's and all this stuff, and your mother has already dished out a couple of hundred bucks and you haven't even learned how to pick up your bag of instruments yet. That's not what it is. If they come to learn kahiko, it's because they want to learn. So they're open to anything that I can teach them. And, again, a lot of them are not dancers, but that's all right because in teaching them kahiko they learn dance movements; they learn, at least, there's a difference between the right foot and the left foot. At the same time they can learn language. The traditional chants have history to it. It's place names, geography. It's people. It's music, even though it's three or four or as many as five notes. It's all there. So they can come and learn for six months. They may never be a dancer, but there might be a future for them in going to school and learning Hawaiian history, learning the language. There's so many of them now that are speaking the language almost fluently. They'll never be able to dance, but that's okay. They learned a couple of hulas and found that the



language is a beautiful language, so they took it from there. It opens up a whole life for them. And that's the joy that I get out of teaching.

(WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT?) I think my greatest achievement is having taught a beginners group, from the basics - fundamental steps and fundamental hulas - and watching them "move up the ladder", so to speak, with Aunty Hoakalei, with us, and still with us today and as beginner hula students they are also at the point now where they can help her, they are assisting in teaching classes with her.

(WHAT KIND OF ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE YOUNG HULA TEACHERS OF TODAY?) Be humble. (IS THAT PART OF YOUR TRAINING?) It is. It's part of Aunty Io's style, it's part of Aunty Hoakalei's. We have to be. (\*END OF SIDE I\*) We have to be humble. History has it where the hula was bad, and it came back. And then for a while I think it got abused. We started looking at it from different angles. But there's a lot in hula that can give us a sense of pride. And what I'd like to see with our kumu hulas, our young ones coming up, is a little bit better of an attitude. What I've been seeing recently is, "I danced with so and so," and "I learned from so and so"; "I can do this." And I'm going, "Good". And then I've heard a few that they even topped it off, "Well, that makes me Hawaiian." And I'm going, "No." It makes you you, and if you are proud of what it is you're



doing, if you feel good about yourself and what you're doing, then you don't need anything else. It's okay. (HOW ABOUT THE HAUMANA? CAN YOU GIVE SOME ADVICE?) I would say, especially in the way most of them are being taught today, if they could learn to keep their eyes and ears open and their mouths shut, there's a lot that they could learn from their kumu.

(HULA HAS CHANGED.) Oh yes! (WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HULA KAHIKO TODAY?) Interesting. It's kahiko in style only because of the chanting, not necessarily because of the movements. I see very little kahiko in the dance, in the dance movements. The movements have become very modernized. The simplicity of our old chants is being lost. I've seen some halaus come back with it in the last couple of years.

(WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF HULA KAHIKO?) How do you define hula kahiko? Well, I guess in today's vocabulary it means chant style, but for me it would be more of a traditional. And, actually, when you're talking kahiko you're talking old, I would still have to say anything that is up to the Kalakaua period. (SO FOR YOU IT'S ALSO A PERIOD OF TIME?) Yea.

(DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE CHANT?) I love them all. (A FAVORITE DANCE, HULA?) No. I love them all. (DO YOU PREFER KAHIKO OR AUANA?) Oh, kahiko. Auana is too much hard work! (ha ha) Even Auntie Hoakalei knows it. If we're doing an impromptu show somewhere traveling, and she



tries to do a few kahiko and she starts doing auana and every time she starts an auana she turns around and everybody else is out there except Ceci. "Where's Kawai?" "I'm right here aunty." "So what number are you dancing?" "Oh, I'm not. I'm singing, aunty," and she knows I can't sing.

(DO YOU THINK HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT IN HULA?) For today's students, yes. (CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT?) Most of our old chants are in Hawaiian, and it helps for them to understand what they're dancing about, especially if the motions are very simple. Like with Auntie Io's style, Auntie Hoakalei's style, you have fundamental hula's: "Kawika". To me that is a beautiful chant. "Ulu no weo": those basic hulas are gorgeous, because the language is there, the poetry is there, the history is there, it's all there. But how do you teach somebody who does not know the language? That when you're just standing there [doing the motions], to them that's all they're doing, it's just a routine. But if they understood the language, what the writer says, and as a dancer you're painting a picture. The writer wrote the words and put it on paper, the poet did it. But as a dancer you're painting a picture, you become the artist. So you become Kawika. They don't understand; they misinterpret a lot. I've seen a lot of misinterpretations on dances, especially for Kaua'i. They don't understand the beauty of what they're talking about. (WHEN YOU TOOK



FROM IO, YOU DIDN'T KNOW THE LANGUAGE EITHER.) No. (HOW DID THEY BRING IT ACROSS TO YOU TO PAINT THAT PICTURE?) You have to backtrack a little bit on that because I did know the language. My great-grandmother died when I was a freshman in college, I was already out of high school; in fact that's when I lost my grandparents and my great-grandmother. She did not speak a word of English. My mother's mom, for a while, was teaching Hawaiian kids in Kalihi valley to speak English. She lived with us. And my dad's father... and there was tutu grandma also, that's my mom's grand-aunt. We went to mass in Hawaiian. I learned the mass simultaneously in Hawaiian, Latin, and English. (TODAY, WHEN YOU ARE TEACHING YOUR CHILDREN AND THEY DON'T KNOW THE LANGUAGE, WHAT DO YOU DO?) What I do is I try to do a literal translation for them, but at the same time it's like what I just did. In teaching them it's not "Here is Kawika," it's "Here am I." I paint the picture for them. If they can see it and if they can understand it, they can feel it. I think you pick that up from your kumu. It's part of it. You don't just go through motions. You feel the words of the poet. I think that's why I like "Aia La 'O Pele" and why it always keeps coming back to me. The second verse, "uhi uha"; it's the words "uhi uha". I really have no idea what it says in the dictionary, what the translation of that is. But that doesn't matter to me because the



way I learned it, the understanding that I got, that's the sound that the lava makes when it's going down; were talking the lava flow going to destroy the forest. And that's the sound of the lava. So even though the motion is just one. . . two. . . , you have to picture it; volcano and the lava. (SO YOU THINK THAT THE TEACHERS OF TODAY LACK THAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE AND TRANSLATION BECAUSE OF THE LANGUAGE?) Some of the younger ones do, yes. I've seen where the younger teachers do strictly literal translation. (DO YOU THINK IT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW ANY BETTER? THEY HAVEN'T LEARNED THEIR HISTORY?) A lot of it, I think, is that they just don't know any better, and they jumped into being kumu hulas too soon. I know they mean well and I know they try and a lot of them put up a lot of energy for it, which is excellent. I give them credit for getting out there and doing it. But they move too fast. They're moving ahead of themselves. They do need to slow down a little bit. (IN WHAT WAYS CAN YOU CORRECT THEM?) They need to just slow down. They need to back up a little bit. (GOING BACK TO KUPUNA, BOOKS, HISTORY?) A little bit of all of it. Some of them, from what I understand, that's what they learned, from books.

(WHO DO YOU CONSIDER AS HULA MASTERS TODAY?) Definitely Auntie Kau'i Zuttermeister, the Kanaka'ole's, of course Auntie Hoakalei.



(BESIDE HULA, WHAT DO YOU DO?) What do I do? I work for a living.

(DO YOU DO ANYTHING SPECIAL IN ART AND CULTURE?) Nothing special. I consider myself a jack of all trades, master of none. If I need to go pick my native plants or whatever leis I need, I know where to go, I know how to pick them, I know how to make my leis. If I made my costumes, I need my skirts, I need to tapa print my things, I know what to do. That, again, was all part of Aunty Io's training and Aunty Hoakalei's. It's like, you're going to wear it, you make it, you take care of it. And the odd thing about it is when we were in Jacob's Pillow, it's the first time I ran into a different culture that their attitude was the same thing. We were at Jacob's Pillow on the East coast and there was the Native American Indians performing group. And all of the dancers, the men and the women, they all made their own costumes: the beads, the feathers, whatever else they had on, everything. They make their own costumes, they take care of their own costumes. And one of the boys said his dad taught him. He says, "You learn how to do it because you're wearing it. If you don't take care of it it falls off of you."

(DO YOU THINK WORKSHOPS ARE IMPORTANT?) Oh, yes it is. (SHOULD IT BE FOR THE KUMU, THE STUDENTS?) Of course the ones who benefit from workshops are the students. Oh, Aunty Pat Bacon is another one that



I consider a master. (WHAT ABOUT WORKSHOPS FOR NEW KUMU HULA TO LEARN HOW TO FEEL THEIR BASICS?) I don't know that you can teach somebody how to feel their dances. I think that's something that you acquire. If it's not already in you, it's something you can learn. (IT'S INDIVIDUAL?) It is individual. I think most of our old kumus, Aunty Edith could do it, I've seen her do it; Aunty Kau'i can do it, I've seen her do it; I've seen Aunty Pat do it; I saw them at all the workshops, they can do it. It's the haumana, they don't see it. They don't see this love inside of our kumus, our masters. (DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHEN THE HAUMANA BECOME KUMU IN SUCH SHORT PERIODS?) Yes. (SHOULD HAUMANA BE IN SCHOOL FOR A LONG TIME?) I don't think you can put a time limit on when the haumana is ready to become a kumu. Their own kumu is the only one that can determine that. A good example there would be Aunty Maiki Aiu, because I do know that she had classes set up, she geared them to be kumu hula. And she had a couple of years there where she had excellent students: the Cazimero's, Leilani, and all of them, Mililani. She had a group, she had about two years of dancers there that were ready to get into her program of being kumu hula. They had a grip on it, they just needed that little bit of push and she gave it to them. Beyond that, I don't think you can set a time limit. And I also saw where Aunty Maiki held



back some of her students from an uniki for whatever reason, I don't know. But I do know that she did have some students that she held back from uniki. She didn't feel they were ready, they didn't do their assignments, whatever, I don't know. So you can't really put a time limit; I think it's up to the kumu to decide on that. Like with Auntie Hoakalei, some of the ones that are helping her teach right now, they started with her when she was young. I taught them the basics: "Kawika" and "Lili'u" and "Ulu No Weo". And they've continued dancing with her and they're still dancing with her...

(SHE DOESN'T UNIKI?) No. (FOR HER IS THAT PART OF THE TRAINING THAT GOES ON FOREVER?) It goes on and on. I haven't stopped learning. I'm still learning with her. (YOU'VE BEEN WITH HER ALL THESE YEARS. DOES SHE HAVE A SPECIAL GIFT ALSO?) Yes. She's a different person from Auntie Io but she's just as beautiful a person. And her style of dancing is the same as Auntie Io.