

Nathan Napoka

Nathan Napoka is currently employed by the State of Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources. He has been teaching with his kumu hula, Hoakalei Kama'u, since 1975.

The hula has been in our family for generations. My great great grandmother was Ke'elehiwa Napoka. She was a court dancer and when I mentioned her name to Kawena Puku'i, she said her mother said Ke'elehiwa Napoka was a famous dancer from Maui who went to Ka'u to perform. Manuel Silva who was a relative of my grandmother, took from Ke'elehiwa Napoka. He was a famous hula master and chanter in Honolulu. My grandmother's sister, Elizabeth Kalehuawehe Chun Ling, studied with Kumanaiwa who was a famous hula master on Maui. It is said that my family from that side of the island did what was called the Haleakala dances (dances that were done for Pele because Pele lived in Haleakala up until very recent times). Everyone thinks of the Pele dances as coming from the Big Island but there is a long tradition of Pele dances on that side of Maui where she was still erupting in the 1700's and these dances were danced up until the 1900's.

I was not involved in the hula until I returned to Hawai'i from college in 1972. I was enrolled in the University of Hawaii East West Center when the Renaissance was just starting and there were a number of students that were interested in the hula.

My real formal introduction into the hula was when Aunty Edith McKinzie who was a student with me at the University of Hawaii took me to the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts' classes. Aunty Hoakalei was the overseer but Aunty Edith was teaching the beginner men's class. I was with Aunty Edith for one semester and then I moved into Aunty Hoakalei's classes. I've been with Aunty Hoakalei ever since.

I studied with Aunty Hoakalei with the understanding that she was going to teach me to become a teacher. I taught all the beginner men's classes at those workshops because the hula

masters such as Uncle Henry Pa and Uncle George Holokai wanted to teach the advanced men.

There were other young men teachers but they just stopped and didn't stay around. I think I was kind of chosen by Aunty and she wanted to work with me.

I learned to be a ho'opa'a by sitting in the back of the advanced class and chanted. And then I got up and danced. Aunty was in the front showing us how to dance and I followed. We also had a special class for the teachers to learn to oli.

I travelled with Aunty 'Iolani Luahine and Aunty Hoakalei for about three and a half years with the "Artist in the Schools" program throughout the State. I was very fortunate to have spent time with Aunty 'Io. Aunty Hoakalei said only two men have ever danced professionally with Aunty 'Io. I was one of the two. The other was Joseph Kahaulelio. There was a part of our program where I did male dances so she could change clothes and then there was a part where Aunty 'Io and I danced together. Although Aunty 'Io wasn't actually teaching me, we were doing the same dances because it was all coming from the same source. Aunty 'Io was a generation above. She was Aunty Hoakalei's teacher.

My orientation to the hula had always been to perpetuate culture and to keep the culture alive. Although there's nothing wrong with putting on shows and being an entertainer, I've been very fortunate that my job has kept me financially secure so that I have never had to use my hula to make money. I've been lucky that my hula has been something very special. It's my identity; it's my culture; it's my expressions; but it has not been an occupation that I had to do to survive.

Aunty Hoakalei doesn't 'uniki. Aunty Hoakalei didn't 'uniki from Aunty 'Io. 'Uniki is something for those people who are deep into the Hawaiian gods. In order to go through a formal graduation ceremony, you have to keep the gods in an altar. In order to keep the gods in an altar, you have to, what the Hawaiian say, "feed the gods." In order to "feed the gods", you have to be a

non-Christian. You cannot feed the Hawaiian gods today and forget about them tomorrow. If you dedicate your life to those gods, you have to keep them for your whole life, and not only when you want to dance hula. If you don't keep them, they turn on you. Spiritually, they devour you.

'Uniki today is different than 'uniki yesterday. For people who are in traditional hula, a traditional 'uniki is nearly impossible because of the kapu system that existed when 'uniki was originally practiced. Today, it has taken on a different meaning. Rather than the really strict traditional ceremony, it means a recital or a kind of graduation from one level to another.

I was coaxed into teaching. I was interested but I was afraid to teach. Through Auntie Hoakalei, I learned that there is a whole way that you learn to become a teacher, just like you learn to become a dancer or a chanter. For that reason, I was very fortunate that she was there and she made a very smooth transition between being the teacher and passing the ball to me in the class. She would come in and critique my classes from the back and guide me through my classes. When she knew that I was not doing so well or when I was down emotionally, she'd come in and move me through the class. I had her guidance and her very strong presence in the class. That really gave me the confidence to teach. Otherwise I would have never taught.

I think the hula has changed but I don't think change is necessarily bad. The only thing that I see that's bad is if we confuse our traditional hula with modern hula and if we don't keep the classical hula and the contemporary hula, separate. We have to keep what is traditional, traditional. To me, traditional is what has been passed on from one human being to another human being to another human being and so on. If you ask most kumu hula today what they have in their repertoire that's traditional, most of them don't have much. They find the words in the archives and they make up the motions and the tune. Although it's not bad, everyone should have some exposure in where they have come from as a people, where we have come as Hawaiians over all these millennium of time. We have to look back at our classical traditions and

understand those. To me, hula kahiko is the classics, the motions and the voice that have been passed on from one generation to another; through one human being touching another human being.

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