

Nana I Na Loea Hula
Kumu Hula: Palani Kahala
Interviewer: Lovina LePendu
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My full given name is Frank Kimona Kahala. I'm actually a junior, but I don't list the Jr. as a name. I prefer Palani Kahala. I do teach presently. I work out of the Kamehameha Schools --Keku gym. I also have classes with Palama Settlement and Highlands Intermediate. I have keikis from 6 to 12, and of course, adult women and men. They range from ages 12 to 40-50's. I teach kahiko and auwana as well as oli. I have been teaching ten years come Sept. 1st. I was a late person. I started at the age of 17--16, 17 somewhere around there. My first teachers were Robert Cazimero and Wayne Chang. They were part of the Kamehameha Schools. They came up to instruct for the concert glee. I was a student at that time and at the same time as they began to teach hula for the K.S., they, too, began their own halau and I was one of the first people to belong to the halau. I was there for about two to three years with auwana, kahiko, and oli as well. One of the most distinctive thing about his particular style is--you might want to put it in terms of the phrase "manly grace." I think he also says something to that effect. The movements, the choreography, and the presentation deals with the grace that men can achieve in their dancing. And it's quite different because for most hula halau much of the choreography is very crisp, well defined. The movements are very clear cut and rough; But for Robert, and he did this purposely, the movements can also include things as smoothness, fluidity, and grace. That's probably the best way to describe that particular style and, of course, it should be stated here that he only taught --still does teach--men only. Both Robert and Wayne graduated uniki from Maiki Aiu. I was Robert's--the term would be "Po'o Pua'a." He stated that to me. Which would place me as the head student or head pig. And there's a whole history about the term "Po'o Pua'a" It follows in line with hula tradition. But in many respects I love the hula, and I loved being in the halau. When I left I was pursuing a career in the military. That's the first time I left. I came back for just a short while in 1980. I had no plans to teach hula at that time. I was actually going to go away to the mainland for school to pursue a career in communications, but that never came about. After Robert my Aunt Verna Wilson encouraged me to teach a group of women, and that was the beginning of my halau. I did not uniki, but I have extensive background on Hawaiian culture--five years of Hawaiian language both at Kamehameha and at Windward Community College, exposure to Hawaiian music at Kamehameha, and I'm quite adept and involved with things of cultural nature. I took from Aunt Nona (Beamer), but anyone who's gone to Kamehameha took from Aunt Nona. She's just a part of--an integral part of the school. I did not "want" to become a teacher. I had no great desire. I think circumstances forced me into it. An opportunity presented itself, so I suppose I just fell into it rather than chose it. As far as the term itself, kumu means

teacher, source. And of course with hula meaning hula source. There are those who might argue that a true kumu hula comes from a line of kumu hula or a line of teachers. I say that is correct, but there are some very important in the hula world themselves who don't possess this particular genealogy of hula, but I don't think we should belittle them for their importance in hula, so therefore, I think they also need to be recognized as well. Their contribution to hula far exceeds many people who have had that formal sort of link with the past. I think in many respects these people should be respected and recognized for their works and I think these people have earned the right to be called "Kumu" out of just their share of the amount of work and dedication they had put into it. I was touched greatly by Maiki Aiu. She is well recognized as a person to whom other people refer as the mother because in many respects she gave birth to many of the major kumu hula that have come through Hawaii and in the short time I did get to know Aunty Maiki she epitomized what hula should be. She was a good woman in the sense she foresaw all the kinds of things that was going to happen as far as hula is concern, and the thing that touched me is that she was a very humble person. You look at a person that is a major force in helping to influence a whole art which is hula and yet she can come to us on a very same level than us and come to us as I am not great I am just as human as you are. I think this is a fact that helps influence hula the way I think. Hula should not be a cut throat thing. We should not be out there in competition because we want to be that halau or want to get back at that halau. To me that's not where I am at and I do not think that way and that's the way Maiki Aiu thought, also in fact I know that she was against the use of the hula as a competitive sport and she had voiced that opinion several times in many lectures and series that I have attended when she was alive. I feel very differently about that. I think I have my own style when I teach. I can't pinpoint directly specific things, but there are certain movements and choreography, certain concepts and ideas that sort of evolved through the years and at that point people can really say "oh, that's very "Palani Kahala." I do not believe in originality. Only to the point where you take different concepts or ideas and rearrange them into something that is looked at through a different perspective and if that is originality then I am very guilty of it. I do that all the time. In developing my own style I watch, I listen, I enjoy not only hula, but all kinds of dance forms like ballet, jazz, other ethnic groups and I see the kind of ideas that they come up with. I am very much touched that influence about these as much as hula. My career in hula was relatively easy compared to other kumu hula. There was some conflict basically because when I first started I was young--still am. The art itself was saturated by people who was much older than me. But because I was the "young kid on the block" in many respects I kind of felt I was treated as a young kid. A lot of things was very subtle.

Every time we compete basically Merry Monarch, Kamehameha Day, Prince Lot Hula Festival, every one has very special moments but there's not one particular one I can pinpoint. My students are my greatest accomplishment as a kumu hula. I graduate, uniki, my students. I expect them to

do two things: they must be able to realize that if they want to teach hula or if anything they got anything out of me that they first develop a sense of discipline. Second, and I always said this, that they develop a sense of ha'a ha'a which is humility and compassion for other people. If anything, those are the kinds of things that I try to instill in my teaching. I think many times they are looking for direction, and the kumu hula plays an important role in setting the direction for their students. For me I would like them to know that competition and hula is not an ends in itself, and to begin to open your mind to other kinds of ideas and to question the things that I teach them or the things that they learn or questions about life in general.

There are definately two styles of hula kahiko. There is what I term as the "classical" or traditional hula kahiko, and then what I term as the "contemporary" stylings of ancient hula. And they are very distinct. I define hula and 1) it follows in line with traditional things--things that have been passed down from generation to generation. For myself and the other hula teachers, we should never change or touch things like Kaulilua, Au'a 'Ia, Ko'olau au. We should never try to attempt to redo the whole thing. It is the way it was done a hundred years ago and it is the way it should be done a hundred years from now. But in the same light, I think we are also a source of tradition as well, and we should create in the style of our ancestors and these things a hundred years from now will become traditional.

I think my favorite mele is the one I'm currently working on and so everytime I work on a new one that one becomes my favorite. My favorite chant is Kaulilua, but I don't get much of a chance to chant that. I feel like I am there in that chant.

In many respects there is no set way I compose a mele. I think sometimes I could be driving on the freeway or I can even be sitting on the toilet when things suddenly come to me. And just at those moments the opportunity is provided when I can just sit and compose. Some people have set routines, but for me there is no set way, it just comes.

Some of the greatest moments of composing--and not all the time--have come in times of stress or conflict. There is something that is happening in my life like I am going through some sort of emotional crisis or some physical crisis, and this has led to a lot of creative moments that have just swelled up and I find myself being very creative and wanting to write. It's a means by which I can express the pain or the hurt and even the happiness and joy.

Sometimes the focus of many of my peers is not correctly in the direction it should be. The language is the basis for all that we do and unless they realize that then none can have any significant impact in hula. And their credibility as people who are wise and knowledgable in hula is that much more demeaned by their inability to know and speak the language. There are those people who know the language and unless you know the language you are now going to fool anyone--you cannot. The resources here in Hawaii almost require you to know the language and it's a sad fact that many of my peers do not. I think many of them are dependent on the English

translations of chants and that's how they base a lot of their choreography. The sad part about it is that there's so much more when you know the language--the intimacies of certain words cannot be revealed to you unless you are familiar to the language.

I'm very much into art in the sense of music, drawing, painting, opera. In fact, I took training for two years as an opera singer. I'm very much interested in crafts whether making or learning especially those that deal with the Hawaiian culture.

There's only one thing I tell them (haumana): If you come from me and claim to be a resource as well, then you must be able to do what I do. Therefore, until that point then this is the point you are striving for. All these things... I try to teach the language, but it's very difficult for me, so I encourage them to take classes. They measure their own standards by their kumu. I'm not one to instill hunger or desire or to lavish this wonderful knowledge and wisdom upon one particular individual because I feel that if they want it then I need to provide the opportunity for them. I never feel like I'm losing them. There is always that connection. In fact, Auntie Ma'iki told me I was using the wrong term, "'oki", meaning "to cut". She said you never "cut." The connection between the baby and the mother is that--the umbilical cord. I think there is still that respect between the kumu and student. Even though I accord them the respect of going out and teaching on their own, they will always think of me as their kumu. When you come you belong to a particular class. First thing we do is pule, prayer, and I always believe in that. It's a unifying force binding us together. We discuss the halau business and any information that needs to be disseminated, and from there we go into

basics, and the basics usually take about 15 to 30 minutes. And from there we go into the choreography and whatever needs our direct attention whether its the choreography or competition, and then for the last ten minutes or so in the end we come back together and then finalize everything and pule and the session ends.

There is a very personal reason why I wanted to do this project. In a sense I should had done it when it was available to me, but now that the opportunity has availed itself and i do want to take advantage of it. We know that life is very short for all of us, and we do not know when the time will come when we have to meet our maker, but for me and my students I am not ashamed. I feel very... It's very difficult for me to explain being that I am presently suffering from AIDS. I have AIDS. I don't know whether I will die a month from now or a year from now. Nobody can say. But in the time that I have, whatever it is, I want to make it a time of quality, of productiveness, and a time where I am able to do the things I want to do. And those things I want to do is first and foremost I just want to thank the people, thank people for being a part of my life. Thank those who have touched me greatly and I have this opportunity. And at the same time I also am hoping for a miracle. You never lose hope, at least for me. If I am unsuccessful, and if the time comes when I have to check out I will go with the feeling that I did a lot, I accomplished a

lot. And for this to come about it may be a wonderful opportunity that when that time comes I will have something substantial for myself, my family, and my students. And that is why I am so grateful for this opportunity.

I don't despise competition. In fact, I feel that competition brought hula into the forefront of the general public. It was as if hula took on a whole new life when the general masses or the people of Hawaii began to look at it and say, "this is beautiful, this is wonderful." And it was as if we were exposing it to a large number of people. And the unique thing about it is that people are saying so the Hawaiian people are unique to Hawaii, but so are the people of Hawaii. And therefore the uniqueness that make the Hawaiians Hawaiians is the same uniqueness that gives us that special quality that we as people of Hawaii can say "this is ours." So hula has not only become an art for just the Hawaiian people themselves, it has become a signature for all people of Hawaii to be proud of. And this is what makes us all unique whether we're Japanese, Chinese, Haole, Popolo--any kind. It's the same thing, same feeling, that they illicit when they see Hawaiian hula performed on the television here or abroad. I think that's wonderful, and I think competition is the reason it has come to that point. And it has made my reputation. It has built my reputation. I would be nobody. I would just be a hula teacher--not well known. But because of the exposure of Merry Monarch, Kamehameha Day it would be... I don't think you would be totally surprised, but believe me if I travelled to the mainland and did a workshop the amazing thing is that people would recognise my name or me because of competition, and I've already proven that because people have told me "oh, I remember what you did in 1988 Merry Monarch. I saw the video," and they start talking about the costumes and the choreography, and I'm like, "I don't even know who you are. You're from Milwaukee, or Chicago?"

I used to feel in the beginning, and I guess it's my own immaturity or naivete, because I felt in the beginning that winning was everything. Now people may debate me on that, but at this point in my life and for the past few years, winning is not everything, and my focus is basically on having the students enjoy what they do. There's a feeling that you have when you're on the stage in front of the cameras, the lights, the audience, and it lasts maybe for 7-9 minutes in the Merry Monarch particularly. But in those 7-9 minutes there is this feeling of overwhelming joy to perform as if you've come to the moment of your fame. And then, of course, it goes away when you leave the stage, but, to me, that's important, that feeling, and whether the opinions of five people or seven judges that are sitting in front of you see fit that they award you with a prize that's fine, but even if they don't award you with a prize they can't take away that feeling. They can't take away that joy of being on that stage. And to me... I don't know. My students, they are still stuck on a trophy. They are stuck on winning. But to me, I say, well, you never lose. You are never a loser. And as such you are always a winner because you made the attempt and you tried. And to me, I always tell them this, a trophy is merely a symbol that recognizes excellence and

achievement, but that doesn't say you didn't do well. I can point out to many of the trophies that I've won and all it does is sit on a shelf and collect dust. It can illicit fond memories of the past, but at the same time, to me, that's not where it's at. Here, right here in your heart, that's where it's at.

It seems to me that it comes in a moment of emotional upheaval, and I shouldn't say that it comes in a moment of stress because it doesn't. Sometimes it comes as I'm lying in bed and dreaming. Or perhaps maybe, some people like to think that it comes in a vision--the supernatural. It could. But it comes, and when it comes I think I always try to jump on it. For the past years that I've competed I've come to a point and I've presented the works that I've done whether it is original as far as the songs, the choreographies are always original. Sometimes I look at past tapes and I tell myself I could have done better or I could have done this differently, so it is never a final or end product. People say that once you hit the stage that's it, but for me it doesn't end there, it never ends because I can look back at the things I've done in the past and critically think about the things I could have done, or maybe in the future instill in some of my students who may want to repeat the same work again, to look at it and try to improve upon it. It's never a final thing, it's an ongoing thing.

Every hula teacher has had some influence. Unfortunately, the ones who are in the public eye are those who, their students, are here among us to promote them or make us aware of them. There are some wonderful people in hula who have passed on. And I recognize... I'm of that age, I think, where I was one of the young ones that came about and I've met all these people just maybe touched bases with them--people like Lokelia Montgomery, Henry Pa, Edith Kanakaole, Iolani Luahine. I've met all these people, but I was at that age where I was not really into hula, but I recognize it, and when I finally got into hula-- ah, here are all the students of these people, Hoakalei Kama'u, Robert Cazimero, Kaha'i Topolinski, all these people who were influenced by all these other people who have since passed. And many of them you have in that first book, in fact. I don't know if you have Edith Kanakaole in the book? I don't think you do. And I think Iolani Luahine, too.

I am from a generation which is young--hungry, eager, very much adept to things like research because people like myself, like Kihei and Mapuana de Silva, and several other people, we take a very deep interest in the hula and a lot of pride. For the kumu hula back in the 50's and 60's much of them was not focusing on scholastic pursuits--research and designs that had significant meaning. They were more into performance. I feel that this particular generation of Hawaiian artists has a much more stronger influence in the hula than those 20-30 years ago. That's a harsh statement to make, but if you look back, who was doing the hula around the 50's and 60's? You may come up with--if you're lucky--about 10 names. You sit down now and talk about the people that are doing hula now you can name 20, 30, 40 people. There's a lot of people

into the art, a lot of people into the research. And like myself, a lot of them are young, wanting to leave a mark in the art. As far as the masters today, fortunately or unfortunately, we give that title to those in hula who are kupuna--Uncle George Naope, George Holokai, Kau'i Zuttermeister--these are what we consider "kupuna." They are of that age where respect is automatically given. These are the, per se, masters. In many respects this goes against the grain of thinking. Many of the masters who are living today are not of the kupuna age. They are younger, they are eager, hungry, whatever. And achievements that we've made, these young people in hula, will stay with the art for many generations. Names will be recognized some hundred years ago. People of this generation will remember a lot of their works through basically through the availability of technology--video taping and the things that we're doing. People will have the convenience of going back and looking at the tapes checking on the things we were doing. And the names will pop up again and again. All of these people--Olana Ai, Thaddeus Wilson, Johnny Lum Ho, the Kanaka'ole's, myself, Mapuana--all these names will be coming up again, and they will be well recognized in the future. If you say masters who are living today, I think if you've been around for quite a long time and are familiar with the arts in many respects you deserve to be considered "kumu", and the more influence you have on the art you deserve the title of "master."

I think the phrase that I use on my students is that if you can weather the storm then you deserve all the respect that comes with it. And what that means is that there are people out there who have gone through this particularly special training. They were fostered by their family or certain individuals who took them under their wings and nurtured them in hopes that they would become someone of great value in the art of hula. There are people out there, but many of them do nothing. They don't have halau, or they just sit back and do nothing. Whereas there are those of us who have had this burning desire to choreograph and have attempted to introduce new ideas into hula and they don't have that traditional linkage, this uniki, to the past, but their works have helped to influence the whole hula world. To me, whether you come from a traditional background or a non-traditional background if you can weather the storm then you deserve all the respect that comes with it.

I have been a judge at the Hayward festival, the 'Ia 'oe e ka la Festival, in California. And also a judge at the Seattle festival, the Northwest Pacific Hula Festival, and I have enjoyed both. I like being a judge. I like being very critical of other people not so much to get back or have any kind of revenge, but at the same time I want them to know how I look at hula having the opportunity provided me to share that with the kumu hula. It can come through the sheets. In fact I am one to write comments, to make little notes on the judging sheets. I wish judges would do more. Judges should look at it not so much as just putting a score down, but they should look at it more as helping to improve what's already there. A score doesn't say, a comment does. I don't care if a comment is critical or not, at least at that time that is the way the judges felt and whether I

like it or not I have to appreciate the fact that they took the time to write the comment. I shouldn't believe that everything I do is wonderful and marvelous and everybody's going to love it. That's not true, and it would be foolish of me to think that every judge will give me good comments and high scores. We cannot totally dismiss the fact that the judges that are judging us have some sort of personal connection with us because they are our friends, our mentors, or people we are familiar with in the world of hula. We cannot divorce that from ourselves, but at the same time we have to remember that they are the ones who are going to critically looking at our works, and unless you come to a point as a kumu to say to yourself--it's one person's opinion--some people really get into it like "Oh, she really hated my hula," or "he really didn't like my hula." Hey, that's just one person. Another person might say it was the most fabulous thing I've ever seen in my whole life. I hope that kumus don't get too caught up with the comments of certain individuals. Perhaps maybe some think that there is a lot of politics involved in the decisions of kumu hula, but maybe I'm foolish to think that I don't want to think like that. All I want to do is just say that's Auntie such-and-such's opinion. That's not my opinion and if she didn't like it that's too bad. So what?! I always believe that the best judges are the ones who've done the work before. Because truly, unless you've competed, had a halau, gone through all the pains of actually getting them prepared for the competition, you really don't know what it's like, and if you're sitting in the judges' panel you don't know. You don't know what it's like to stay up all night because one girl's sick and knowing that the next day you'll be going up on stage. Or you don't know about the hassles that certain parents are giving a particular student, or worrying about the leis or the cost of hotel payments. You don't know. These are the kinds of things judges, unless they've competed, just don't know. People say that's irrelevant because what you're being judged on is your art. That's true, but I think that if I was to bring up something like that then there doesn't seem to be some sense of compassion on the part of the judges to the kumu hula because they just don't know. Hula, or the final product, is not the end product, everything that goes in the back of it is a tremendous field that involves financing, planning, preparation, all that kind of stuff. The judges don't see that. The judges don't know that. They don't care. Unless you've been there before I think you bring with you as a judge and former competitor all those things into judging and consideration. And I think perhaps then and there you realize the kinds of extending compassion toward competitors. Hopefully that will help to improve the judging.

I hope to get them (students) more involved, but if anything we've had only little opportunity to travel and go to those places (of the mele or chant.) For the most part it's me talking to them. If it's competition I have one person do the costuming. The selection and the whole idea of what is to be presented is mine. The decision is mine. As far as the students themselves, I love it when they give me suggestions or comments. I think some of the best ideas that come out of my halau is not mine. It's little critical comments from somebody. I wish we had

more workshops, but for the past year there has been very little opportunity. We never truly understand other kumu unless we train under them. There's a lot of misconceptions among kumu like "he's too strict" or "she's too boring." And once you actually meet a kumu hula it's a whole new world.