

Pōhaku Nishimitsu

Pōhaku Nishimitsu is a Hawaiian Studies resource teacher for the Department of Education and a lecturer for the Kaua'i Community College. He also conducts teacher workshops in Hawaiian culture for the University of Hawaii School of Continuing Education on Kaua'i.

I have been teaching hula since 1979. The name of my hālau is Kani Ka Pahu o Lohi'au which is a traditional name that comes from Kaua'i and is part of the Pele-Hi'iaka cycle. It was given to me by my kumu 'ōlelo Hawai'i and kumu mo'olelo, Rubelite Kawena Kinney Johnson, a Kaua'i native.

I was a sophomore in high school on the Island of Kaua'i when I started hula with Auntie Ku'ulei Punua. She was teaching in Kapa'a and Līhu'e. She had trained under old time kumu hula Kent Ghirard and 'Iolani Luahine. These two kumu hula were really diverse; one being modern and one immersed in the old. But both were very strict and rigid in terms of discipline and protocol. This was passed on in their teachings.

I learned a number of traditional hula from Auntie Ku'ulei so I had a good foundation to grow from. I left her because I finished high school and my schooling took me to O'ahu. I continued with my hula training and learning more about Hawaiian culture and arts. I majored in Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, with a strong emphasis on 'ōlelo Hawai'i.

While on O'ahu, I started hula with Nathan Nāpoka and Auntie Hoakalei Kamau'u when they were teaching in Nu'uano. It was special to listen to Auntie Hoakalei and the way she chanted. Her vast knowledge sparked an interest in my wanting to continue my hula education. I stayed with her for at least a year and a half.

Uncle Henry Mo'ikehaokahiki Pā was kumu hula for the King Kamehameha Civic Club, and I started taking hula from Uncle Henry. I thought that his wealth of mana'o and style was really neat because he was one of the oldest kumu hula still teaching. I can remember people

like Aunty Sally Woods, Alicia Smith, Mae Lobenstein taking hula at the same time. It was fabulous being able to learn things from someone who had been doing it all his life.

After Uncle Henry, I moved to Darrell Lupenui and Waimāpuna. It was very different because I was usually in a combined men and women class and now I was in a group made up of all men. They were robust and able to do totally different styles of hula from what I was doing before. Darrell was founded in traditional mana'o and styling, but he was also very innovative and he tried to meld the two to make a pleasing kind of picture so that the kūpuna would not find his hula offensive.

After a year, Darrell, Thaddius Wilson and O'Brian Eselu found it necessary to go their separate ways. A bunch of us went with O'Brien and Thaddius and formed Nā Wai 'Eha O Puna in the summer of 1978. I stayed with them for three years.

I have a great deal of respect for Uncle Henry Pā and Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole because they taught with great aloha and humility, and they conveyed what they believed through what they did. Their actions proved they were living what they talked about. Also, both of them were fluent Hawaiian speakers so they knew of the nuances and things hidden away to those not ma'a i ka 'ōlelo makuahine. They were gifted. Through them I learned that the language ('ōlelo) is of vital importance to hula. Without proper 'ōlelo, how can you have proper hula?

"Pono nō e a'o mai i ka 'ōlelo Hawai'i, 'o i'a ka mea nui. A e a'o mai i ka hula o kou 'āina pono'ī." Language is the key that opens doors. These passages shed light on things of the past; some of which are no more. We may never know everything but that's the beauty of the hula and the mele-its subtlety. Now more so than ever, I am very happy to be able to watch other people do their hula and enjoy what they are trying to do and share because of this resurgence i ka 'ōlelo Hawai'i.

For me when I think of traditional hula, I look for a mele that has a real connection to nā

kūpuna kahiko. Hence it has a solid foundation; it has a concrete link with the past. Traditions are like an unbroken piece of thread. It connects every era and that thread is going to continue stringing us into the next century. It will be linked back to us and back to our kūpuna who came before us. Tradition has a grounding, a basis in the past and is carried on for the future generations.

I enjoy being able to share what little I know of hula and the Hawaiian culture and history with my haumāna. I will always want to see hula keep on growing positively.

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