

# Hula, Ancient to Modern: “Hands-On” History

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Hula! Most of the world accepts the term as a form of dance. Lovely maidens telling us stories with graceful hand movements and swaying hips. A tourist’s dream.

To Hawaiians themselves, the hula is an expression of the beauty in nature, a religious/tribal and historical expression, deeply rooted in myth and legend. It also is social enjoyment.

The dance requires special training and education, many times guarded by tradition. Experts were called *Kumu-Hula*, a combination of priest and teacher, appointed by a local Chief. Young men and women were selected and placed under a strict, school-like environment. They were housed in a *Halau* (building), given special foods and were not allowed contact with anyone outside the building.

In ancient times the hula was accompanied by primitive percussion instruments consisting of drums, gourds, rattles, bamboo sticks, nose flutes and small stones, similar to castanets. There were 17 types of instruments to accompany the dance, which itself can take over 30 forms.

Performers were basically divided into two groups; *Olaia*, the agile ones, and *Ho’Paa*, the steadfast ones. When there had been sufficient preparation all members of the clan would assist in the building of a *Heiau* (alter), and a dance would be given in honor of LAKA, goddess of the dance. All work would be halted; in some instances war would be forbidden. Priests accepted offerings of roasted pigs, taro, sweet potatoes, colorful feathers and woven kapa cloths. Prayers ended with words similar to these: “The land is free—gird yourselves for play.”

The coming of Christianity put hula on hold. Missionaries and merchants (M&M’s) played a great part in the decline of the dance. When Hawaiians were told their dance was sinful they had to make up a word for sin. The 1930s brought many more changes. The Mexican cowboys introduced the guitar, the Portugese a smaller one. From this came the now familiar ukelele. World wars, commerce, tourism brought severe change to the hula. One could take lessons in hotels, studios and on board cruise ships. In more recent years, and during the reign of the last king, Kalakaua, the ancient hula has been revived. The rich heritage of Hawaiian culture is being taught in schools and colleges. An annual festival, “The Merrie Monarch”, features both ancient and modern hula with hula halaus from all the islands and some from the mainland participating. The world series of Hula!!

Music and costumes may have changed but the basic hula *mele* or chant has not. A simple tune, very old in tradition which closes with the phrase “Thus ends my song.”