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## Kindred Spirits

Hula demands dedication and sacrifice,  
and brings a new definition to 'family'

*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of reports about how one halau prepares for Hawaii's best-known hula competition, the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival. For the two dozen or so schools of hula that enter, the event requires almost a full year of hard work, thought, highs and lows leading up to the big days.*

**By Vicki Viotti**  
Advertiser Staff Writer

PEARL CITY — Those who are part of the hula world know all about family, probably because they all have more than one.

There's the one headed by parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. And then there's the hula halau, or school. And near the door of Halau Hula Olana on Waihona Street, it's clear which one counts the moment a dancer sets foot inside.

"Please keep this area clear from distraction and noise," the sign reads. "This is not a waiting area for parents."

Make no mistake: Olana and Howard Ai, the *kumu hula* at the helm of this halau, love and rely on their halau parents. Mom and Dad are the ones hauling dancers to and from class, arriving en masse on this night to collect the pile of ti leaves and fabric strips their kids need to make their *pa'u* (skirts) for that Sunday's Pro Bowl performance.

And the financial burdens grow even greater for the most serious dancers and their families, Olana Ai said. Thursday nights are the regular class sessions for her Noho Nani group of young women, those who are bound for competition at the annual Merrie Monarch Festival in April and — later this month — for a performance aboard a cruise ship to Tahiti.

But although it's Mom and Dad who help pay the bills, it's the dancers who make the most intensely personal commitment. Noho Nani means "to establish your beauty," Ai said, and the responsibility for that effort rests with the dancer.

"People think all I have to do is put them in a

pretty costume and shove them onstage," she said. "But it isn't so. It has to come from inside. That understanding has to come from inside."

At this point on the road to the Merrie Monarch, Noho Nani focuses on its entry in the *kahiko*, or ancient hula, competition. The women have chosen,

as they did last year, to perform a *hula noho*, a form in which the dancers perform from a seated position while they sing the chant in unison.

This one is "Mele Inoa No Kalakaua," dedicated to

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Kumu hula Olana Ai surveys the room as her students run through their *kahiko* (ancient style) dance selection. The chant will be performed as a *hula noho*, or seated hula.



### Merrie Monarch Hula Festival

**WHAT:** The Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition.

**WHEN:** 6 p.m. April 11-12, 5:30 p.m. April 13.

**WHERE:** Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium, Hilo, the Big Island.

**HOW TO ENJOY IT:** Tickets available only for the Miss Aloha Hula solo competition: \$5. However, all three nights of the event will be broadcast live on KITV-Channel 4.

**INFORMATION:** (808) 935-9168.



Natalie Kamau'u, center, leads the women of Halau Hula Olana in a rehearsal of the 'oli, or chant, they will perform in introducing part of their entry in the Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition.

Photographs by Gregory Yamamoto/The Honolulu Advertiser

## Halau Hula Olana

■ **The Ai family:** Olana and Howard Ai, ages 48 and 51, live in Aiea, have six children and six grandchildren. Of the five children who dance, four will perform at Merrie Monarch this April.

■ **Halau history:** Founded June 1975 with a gathering of neighborhood children in Waiiau — including daughter Natalie, then 6. "I started teaching because I wanted

Natalie to learn in my mother's style," Olana Ai said. Her mother is Blossom Ka'iliponi Clark Kaipo, who ran a Wahiawa hula studio and taught in city parks and military centers.

■ **Competitions:** Halau competition began with the Queen Lili'uokalani Keiki Hula Competition in 1981. The group has won trophies at the Merrie Monarch since 1988.

■ **The halau style:** Competition in the Merrie Monarch was important, she said, because she wanted to be sure the style

she and her mother developed was "registered" in hula annals.

"I would love to believe my mother's soul is very prominent in the way we portray hula," she said. "We try to stay and keep our steps grounded in the earth. . . . I would have to say our (style) is like a tree that's rooted and balanced, taking energy from the 'aina, and looking upward for divine inspiration."

# Hula: It takes an extended-family effort

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King David Kalakaua, the "Merrie Monarch" for whom the hula competition is named. It's a portion of a "fire chant" tracing Kalakaua's journey from Hilo to Honolulu after his election to the throne, Ai said, a historical crossroads that had divided the Hawaiian community. He was not at all sure his people would unite to accept him, she said.

The torches carried by people in each location along his journey are a potent symbol for Kalakaua, whose lineage accorded the authority to light torches, Ai said. The dancers use the 'uli'uli, feathered gourds, to suggest the torches.

"His dream was to rekindle his people and their Hawaiianness," she said. "And as he comes from Hilo to Oahu, he sees his people with torches." Her eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "It was a symbol for him, that his people were united as a nation, and they were rekindled."

Traditional *mele*, or chants, are filled with deep meaning like this, which for many hula devotees makes *kahiko* performances exquisitely profound. However, rehearsal has its moments of comic relief, too. Since all the dancers are chanting, proper vocal development is a must. So they all must lie on the floor with legs raised while singing "ma, me, mi, mo, mu" warmups.

Kapi'o Lenchanko and some of her mates erupted in giggles.

"My legs are shaking!" she laughed.

In some ways, seated hula seems more



Gregory Yamamoto/The Honolulu Advertiser

*Hula noho* requires that the dancers chant loudly enough to be heard above the rattle of their gourds, so they work on vocal strength through floor exercises.

physically taxing than if the dancers were standing. They must move their legs above the knees to perform "steps," Ai said, almost as if their knees had become their feet. Ai let her daughter, Natalie Kamau'u, model this for the dancers ("Can you imagine if I had to do this?" Ai moaned).

Most of them still had the flexibility of the teen years. But even youth succumbs to the stress of kneeling on a concrete floor, padded only by a dancer's towel. U'ilani Hirao-Solem unfolded her legs and rubbed her reddened kneecaps.

Throughout it all, a visitor gets the sense that a family lives here. Kamau'u,

who serves as halau *alaka'i* (assistant), glowers briefly at a girl who confesses she's forgotten her *pa'u*.

It's a strict family.

Meanwhile, 18-month-old Shalei Kamau'u toddles freely about the floor, basking in the affectionate glow of her mother and about 20 young aunts.

It's a warm family.

And when Olana Ai first arrived that evening, she'd just come from the hospital, where her son and daughter-in-law had just greeted their first son.

"I'm a grandmother again!" she bubbled. It's a growing family.