

Nālanī Kanaka'ole Zane

Since the early 1900's, hula has been a family tradition that Nālanī Kanaka'ole Zane and her sister Pualani, continue to preserve in their hometown of Hilo.

My grandmother was Mary Kekuēwa Kanaele Fujii. After my grandmother passed away, the oldest female grandchild took over teaching the hula. Her name was Mary Keahi Lihau, my first cousin. And then after her, my mother, Edith Kanaka'ole, took over the studio. My mother was given the studio because my cousin had moved away. We just went according to rank.

During the time when I was born, my grandmother was associated with Akoni Mika. She was like his alaka'i but she did not originally take hula from him. She was a student of hula kapu from a man called Pulu who was originally from Kaua'i. He had moved to Kona, then to Hilo where he had taken my grandmother and two of her first cousins. They were taken at birth. Then at three years old, they were taught hula until they were about eight and they lived only with him. Grandmother didn't know her parents until she got a little bit older. She was fully immersed in the art.

I was about three years old when I learned hula. My grandmother was teaching at that time and she was real strict. If you didn't do something that was perfect, you would go out in the corner and do it about 80 times until it was perfect. You could not come back into the line until it was perfect. She often took the pu'ili to our knees, hands, feet, or she picked up the closest thing that was near her at the time to hit us. She taught out of fear and that was a pretty good tool to learn from. We spoke Hawaiian until I was probably about nine years old. That's when she died.

At that time, we only learned the hula. We were expected to learn the chants by just learning the hula. You learned everything at the time that you learned to dance. There wasn't any kind of ho'opa'a class. Learning the background of the hula was a matter of privilege. You were taught the hula first because you were the body of the kumu and after a while you learned

the background of the chant. But it wasn't until after you were given a ho'ike that you were able to learn the research or the background of the chants.

I remember at the beginning, women would come in and they would lomi your body to make it soft. Well, lomi is a nice word. They would come and they would step on your uha until a certain part of your uha would reach the floor. And they would mold your feet so that your feet would lie flat on the floor when you're in the sitting position or a noho position. They would step up and down over it for a long period of time. Usually we would warm up for an hour, and part of it was where they would come and step on your feet. It wasn't a nice image for a little girl at that time. Most of the time, we were forced to go and learn things. But it was alright.

First, I was the body for my mother. My mother would chant and I would get up and I would do the motions so that I could teach. Then after a few years, I just took over the two positions. I always knew that I was going to teach.

My grandmother hardly talked to us. She relied mostly on the language that wasn't spoken between us. It was like she could read our minds. That's how we were taught and that's how I teach today--no papers. When I teach my students the dance, they are not only going to learn the dance but they have to know the chant. I hardly bring papers to them. I don't even spell it out or make the footsteps. Nothing. But when you are taught in that fashion, you can go out and learn any kind of dance.

Students would have to be with us for ten years to uniki. They would have had to learn all their required chants and dances. There are three levels that they have to reach. Olapa levels and our advanced class. They have to have done all of their implements and their pahu before we'd consider them to be a candidate for uniki. They have to know three styles of chanting. But they usually choose to stay within the realm of the halau and not go out to teach on their own.

Some younger teachers today have embellished other forms of dancing into their hula. I feel that if they hold on to tradition, they would come out more creative than to look to other forms of dancing. I have also seen a couple of modern teachers cling to the older traditional forms and it looks good. But my advice to younger teachers is that they have to know the poetic language. Not the everyday language, but the understanding of the poetic language.