

Bella Richards

I went through uniki excercises with Bella Kuamoo of Keaukaha. It was just a presentation. I graduated as a dancer, not a kumu. I studied with Bella for three years. We went to her house because in those times there was no such thing as a halau. Halau was not a freely used word like it is today. It meant a very choice group of people. In a real halau, the students had to live with the kumu, eat and sleep with the kumu. I believe only those people can call themselves students of a halau.

My first teacher in the hula was my mother and she has been my most important influence because she was family. Her kumu was Elizabeth Beamer and I was taught piano, & Hawaiian bass alongwith the dance. When I turned eight my father passed away and my mother said nobody must mourn. She packed us all up and sent us to Bella Kuamoo. Bella taught us the ten basic olapa steps but she gave us no instruction in chanting. After several years of in-depth study with Bella I was graduated as a dancer. Then I was sent to Mary Fujii, the mother of Edith Kanakaole, who I studied under for the next two years. I learned a lot from Mrs. Fujii because her style of teaching was very strict. We would sit on the floor and the kumu would stand on our legs. Then we would stand in the doorway with our hands outstretched and ami to the floor then back up. This was all to make our bodies flexible enough to dance the way our kumu expected us to dance. In those days you could not question the kumu. You just had to do what you were told. You had to listen to every word and watch every motion because when it came time to dance the kumu gave you little if any help.

I began to teach in Hilo with my mother in 1935. What I remember about teaching was that the Hawaiian people I taught never took notes or wrote anything down. In my time we were trained to remember everything but today's Hawaiians try to imitate that tradition without the disciplined training that we were given. My forte in teaching is the auwana and to tell you the truth I wasn't a very good dancer even though I had a good memory. I see myself in all my students and I tell them to concentrate on themselves. There is no future in trying to keep up with the Jones'. I train my kids hard but I read once where Mikhail Baryshnikov practices seventeen hours a day and it gives me faith in my kumu.

I am a contemporary kumu and I watch all the dance programs on P.B.S. (Public Broadcasting System) and I put any ideas I get into my hula auwana. But when I was young we were taught that the olapa must be left as it was passed down. Today all the motions in the olapa are created and I'm not saying this is right or wrong but it is not the olapa that was performed by my kumu hula during my time. As a result I cannot judge the contemporary groups today because what I consider important in olapa is not considered important anymore. I feel the olapa that I knew is going down the drain. The kumu of today don't know the language or the culture so they have created an entirely new dance to fit their needs.

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