

Leialoha Amina

Leialoha Amina travels to the Big Island where she teaches with her sister, Nani Lim Yap. She first founded the halau, Na Lei 'O Kaholoku, on O'ahu in 1979.

My sister and I had a dream to have sister halau on O'ahu and Hawai'i. Maybe it was a far fetched idea but we felt anything was possible. We wanted to open a halau on both islands, go to competitions together and do programs together. That was a challenge. Nobody's done that. So Nani opened up a halau on the Big Island the same time I had one on O'ahu.

My mother, Mary Ann Lim, was a kumu hula. I was around five years old when Nani and I started learning the steps and some of the hand motions. My mother tried to teach us the hula 'auana but she didn't have patience and we used to get spankings. We were very unhappy and my mother was getting more frustrated.

After about a year or two, she gave up. She sent us to our aunty, Margaret Moku Tablit, who was my father's first cousin in Kohala. She had a studio and would also use the gym because she had between thirty to forty students. She had the old style, very sweet and simple. You will see a little of her style in our hula today.

Because she had jobs at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, we learned more 'auana and Polynesian dancing. She taught us some kahiko but not a lot. She let us go out to learn kahiko from other instructors. The first person she recommended was Aunty 'Iolani Luahine whom I stayed with for almost two years. Then we went to Uncle George Naope and later when I was in college, I had the privilege of studying under Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole.

When we were sent to Aunty 'Iolani Luahine, that was the turning point of my life. I can still see it as plain as day. She was talking to her class, then she got up and she started to dance. I was in total awe because it almost looked like her feet weren't touching the ground. She touched you by the way she portrayed the mele in her motions and her expression. I was captivated by her. She has had the most profound effect on hula as far as I'm concerned.

When I married Skippy Kamakawiwaole in 1978, his sister was actively teaching hula. She was told by her mother that she was kapu from teaching kahiko so she asked me to help her train Nanakuli High School to enter the Kualoa Hula Competition. I told her that I'd never been a teacher before. I had always thought of myself as a hula dancer but you are talking about a whole different prospective. I consulted my good friend Darrell Lupenui and he said not to worry, that he'd help me. We put everything together and that's how I started to teach.

I met Darrell through Skippy and we got to be very good friends. I remember dancing for him for the Palani Vaughan Show at the Ala Moana Americana Hotel. When he made the decision to finally train women, I was one of the few who was chosen. He first opened his classes for the Parks and Recreation in Nanakuli and I was able to attend the first couple of classes. Then he got serious about opening up a women's halau. He called us the Maile Pakaha because three of us were performing with him.

It is not public knowledge but Darrell's mother came to me and said because Darrell and I were so close, she wanted me to consider being his alaka'i. Because Darrell was big and couldn't get up, I would be his hands and his feet. I had helped him when he first entered his men in the Merrie Monarch Hula Competition and Skippy helped him with his choreography and formation.

About the time she asked me to become the alaka'i, my husband ended back in the hospital. I told her that I was sorry but I couldn't give her one hundred percent. She really wanted me to help Darrell. She said a man can teach a man because they can feel the same emotions. It's the same for women. He needed an intermediary to help portray women's emotions.

During the days when Skippy was in the hospital, I remained by his side. After he passed away, I didn't return to Darrell. I decided that it was time for me to sever all relationship with others and pursue teaching on my own. In 1979, I made the decision along with my kako'o, Pilahi Pahi, to start another halau. The name Na Lei 'O Kaholoku was endowed to me by Pilahi.

I went to Pilahi Paki because I needed to understand translation and translation comes from understanding the culture. She was willing to have me become one of her students and I agreed to attend classes every week. I learned how to interpret and translate. I learned principles of how to work with material things, to give your respect to the author or the composers of the mele, and if they are alive, to ask them for permission. And you ask them the reasons why they wrote the mele so you understand the personal feelings. For mele that didn't have composers still living, she taught me how to translate and put the right emotions. In other words, what does it sound through the context of the mele? She taught me the spiritual side of the language. She taught that there are different levels and how to work with the levels. It shows a good teacher is one that can reach into a person and have them emote exactly what you feel and give back to you. She said, "Leialoha, you have to work really hard on that."

I told a few people that I was considering opening up a halau and I just got barraged with students. About thirty students came to the first class. I was working at a glass company and they let me use their warehouse to conduct hula. I eventually moved to Kaumakapili Church. When we needed a large area, we would use my home because there was a field in the back.

There was a time when I used to get really creative. We were very influenced to change with the times and the people that were migrating to our shores. I told Nani that we must keep the traditional hula that we learned from our hula instructors like Aunty 'Io, Uncle George Naope, Aunty Edith Kanakaole and Aunty Margaret. We will be responsible for not passing along tradition. We should get back to the basics and teach our women what we learned; let them always remember that's what we started with and try to keep that portion untouched and sacred. We teach exactly as we were taught and if we are going to do anything creative, we do it with other mele.

Hula like any art lets you express yourself and be something that you never thought you

could be. It lets you explore emotional realms that you've never explored before and be able to pretend. You can take somebody's story and make it come alive.

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