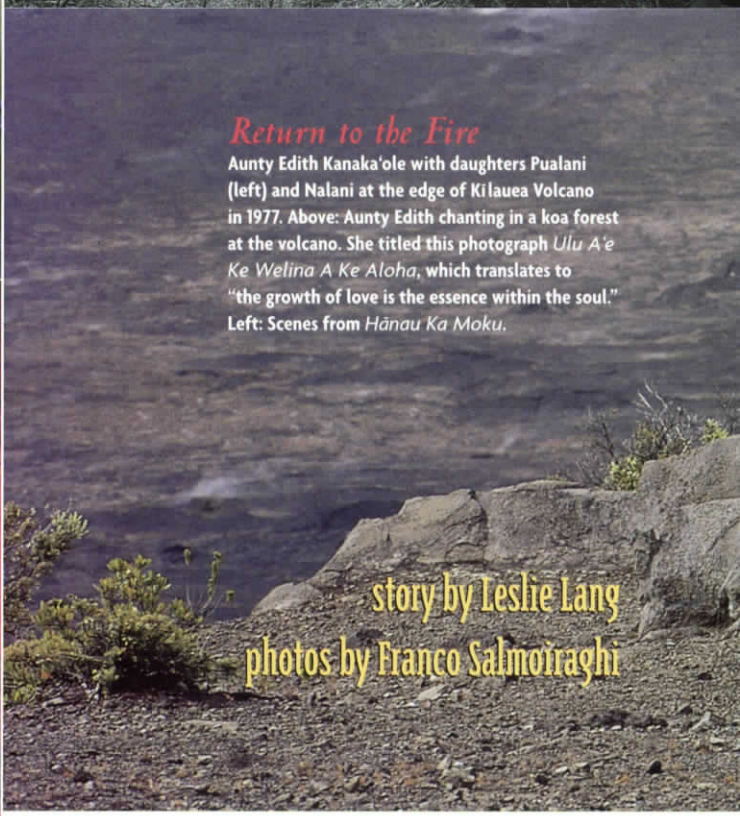
Making Hula



Return to the Fire

Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole with daughters Pualani (left) and Nalani at the edge of Kīlauea Volcano in 1977. Above: Aunty Edith chanting in a koa forest at the volcano. She titled this photograph *Ulu A'e Ke Welina A Ke Aloha*, which translates to "the growth of love is the essence within the soul." Left: Scenes from *Hānau Ka Moku*.

story by Leslie Lang
photos by Franco Salmoiraghi

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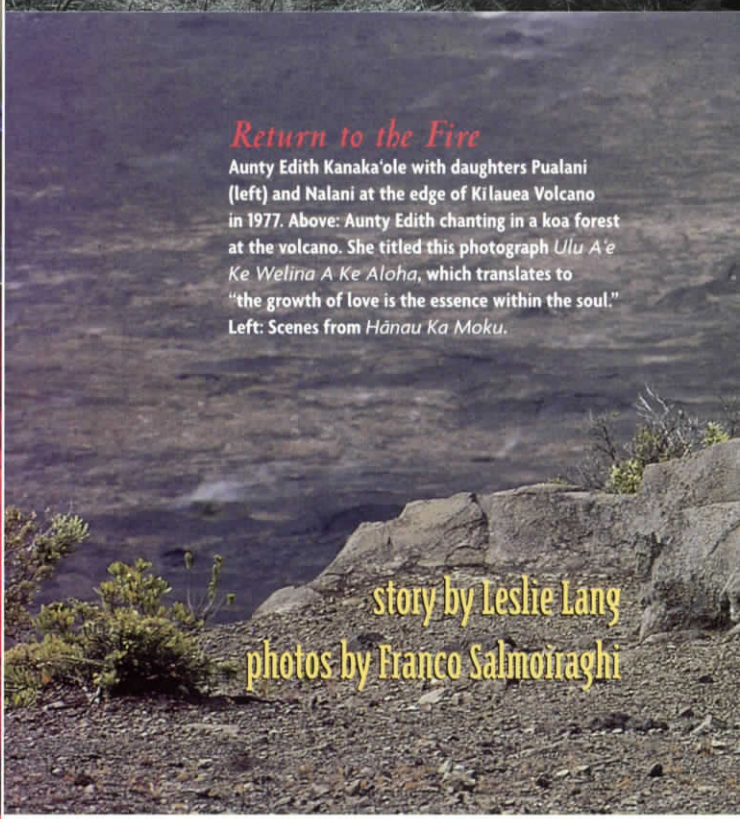

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History

The august Kanaka'ole clan dances into the future in the footsteps of the ancients

When the curtain rises on the stage production of *Hānau Ka Moku* ("An Island Is Born"), hula and chant masters Pualani Kanakaʻole Kanahele and her daughter Kekuhi Kanahele-Frias stand stage left, next to traditional-style drums of wood and shark skin, and in front of a simple backdrop of blue and green fabrics that represent sky and distant mountains. They chant in the old style, their voices powerful and sure. Kekuhi's husband, Kaipo Frias, holds a traditional flute to his nose and breathes a haunting melody. The women's striking costumes are a startling mix of ancient and modern: old-style *kihei* (capes), greenery and lei over more modern *holoku* (gowns) made from shimmery fabric. The hula dancers onstage, like the modern dancers they move next to, unexpectedly wear tights under their handmade traditional costumes and their lei of fresh leaves and flowers.

The performance, co-produced by the hula school Hālau O Kekuhi and the modern dance troupe Tau Dance Company, includes hula and contemporary dances performed to both ancient and newly composed chants. In its mix of the very old and the very new, the production tells a true-to-life story: the formation of a future Hawaiian Island that is growing beneath the sea off the Big Island's southern coast.

"Hula is a reflection of life," explains Aunty Pua, who along with her sister Nalani Kanakaʻole is *kumu hula* (hula teacher) of Hālau O Kekuhi. "Hula is a way of telling history."

Hālau O Kekuhi is making some history itself. The traditional-style, formal hula school has received great acclaim both for perpetuating the ancient art—for which the Kanakaʻole sisters received a National Heritage Fellowship award—and also for its groundbreaking stage productions.

The hālau's first dramatic hula epic, staged in 1995, was the three-hour performance *Holo Mai Pele*. This was something no one had seen before, a kind of classical theater form drawing together individual chants and hula into a single dramatic narrative. Some described the production—which followed the grand saga of the volcano goddess Pele and her sister, Hiʻiaka—as the first-ever hula opera. A huge success, *Holo Mai Pele* was later taped and aired on the PBS series "Great Performances." It was the first time such a hula presentation was broadcast to a national audience.

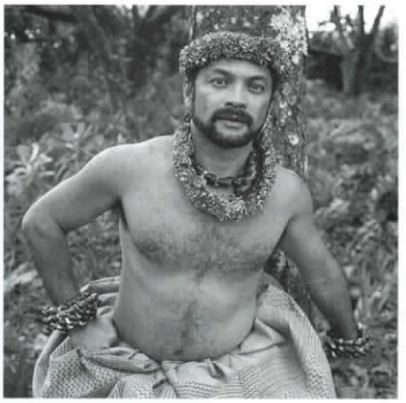
The traditions of Hālau O Kekuhi have been passed down through the women of the family for generations beyond memory. Aunty Pua's and Aunty Nalani's mother, Edith Kanakaʻole—a revered dancer, chanter, composer and advocate for Hawaiian cultural education—was the hālau's kumu before them, and she trained her two daughters to take over after she was gone.

"It's simple for us to practice our hula traditions and live the way my grandmother raised us," says Aunty Pua's thirty-six-year-old daughter, Kekuhi, sitting at the kitchen table of the airy home she and her husband designed, which has huge glass windows looking out on the Hilo rainforest. "That lifestyle is how we were raised; it's what we know. And it's a link in the chain that we won't take responsibility for severing."

Kekuhi, who is next in line to become the hālau's kumu hula, teaches some of its classes. She's also executive director of the Edith Kanakaʻole Foundation, which the family founded in 1990 to "heighten indigenous Hawaiian cultural awareness and participation" through educational programs and scholarships. In addition, she coordinates a federal grant for Native Hawaiian students and teaches Hawaiian culture and language classes at Hawaiʻi Community College, and she's a contemporary musician who has won Female Vocalist of the Year honors at the Nā Hoku Hanohano music awards. (And that's all in addition to raising five children between the ages of eight months and twenty years.)

Kekuhi points an arm, shiny with gold bracelets, across the ten-acre Hawaiian Homes farm lot she lives on in Keaukaha, at the south end of Hilo Bay. Her mother lives in that house over there, she points, and her sister's family is in the other one nearby. Her brother and his family live on the property, too, and so does a cousin and her three children.

"We call it the compound," she says, "and it's really nice. There's always someone home. It's a great support system when we need to leave our kids with someone. And



Hālau O Kekuhi **Sisters Nalani Kanaka'ole (left) and Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele are *kumu hula* of the acclaimed hālau which features dancers (top left to right) Oilipua Kaikaina, Sig Zane, Keala Pitoy, Huihui Kanahele-Mossman, Punahele Lerma and Heanu Weller.**

if we run out of food, we can just run next door and 'shop.'" At this, she lets out a deep, throaty laugh that sounds like her mother's, and Aunty Edith's before that. Clearly, there's much more than just dance and chant being passed down the line.

The family compound is reminiscent of the communal way in which Hawaiians lived together and helped each other in older times. Such cultural values extend, too, to the work of the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation. Among its many projects, the foundation runs a family-based pre-school, a visual arts school and a seventh through twelfth grade public charter school in Keaukaha. Lehua Veincent, one of the charter school's creators and a Kanaka'ole cousin, explains that while the school covers the usual topics such as physics, world history and algebra, "we take a little jump into what they mean in regards to who we are as individuals, or as Hawaiians, or as a community."

Framed by a large picture window with mangos ripening just beyond, Aunty Nalani sits in the lovely front room of her home, relaxing on a *pūne'e* (day bed) covered in elegant

fabric designed by her husband, Sig Zane. (Known for his signature native-floral prints, Sig sells his popular hand-printed, hand-cut clothing at self-named shops in downtown Hilo and Wailuku, Maui). Deep in thought, she admits that she and her sister Pua are stricter kumu than their mother was: "My mother was a little bit more loving. I'm a witch." She laughs, then looks serious. "It's hard now to get results."

Turnover at the hālau, where new classes start every January, is high. "The training is rigorous," Aunty Nalani explains, "like taking full training for ballet. What we teach is a lifestyle, and sometimes the students are not prepared to handle that."

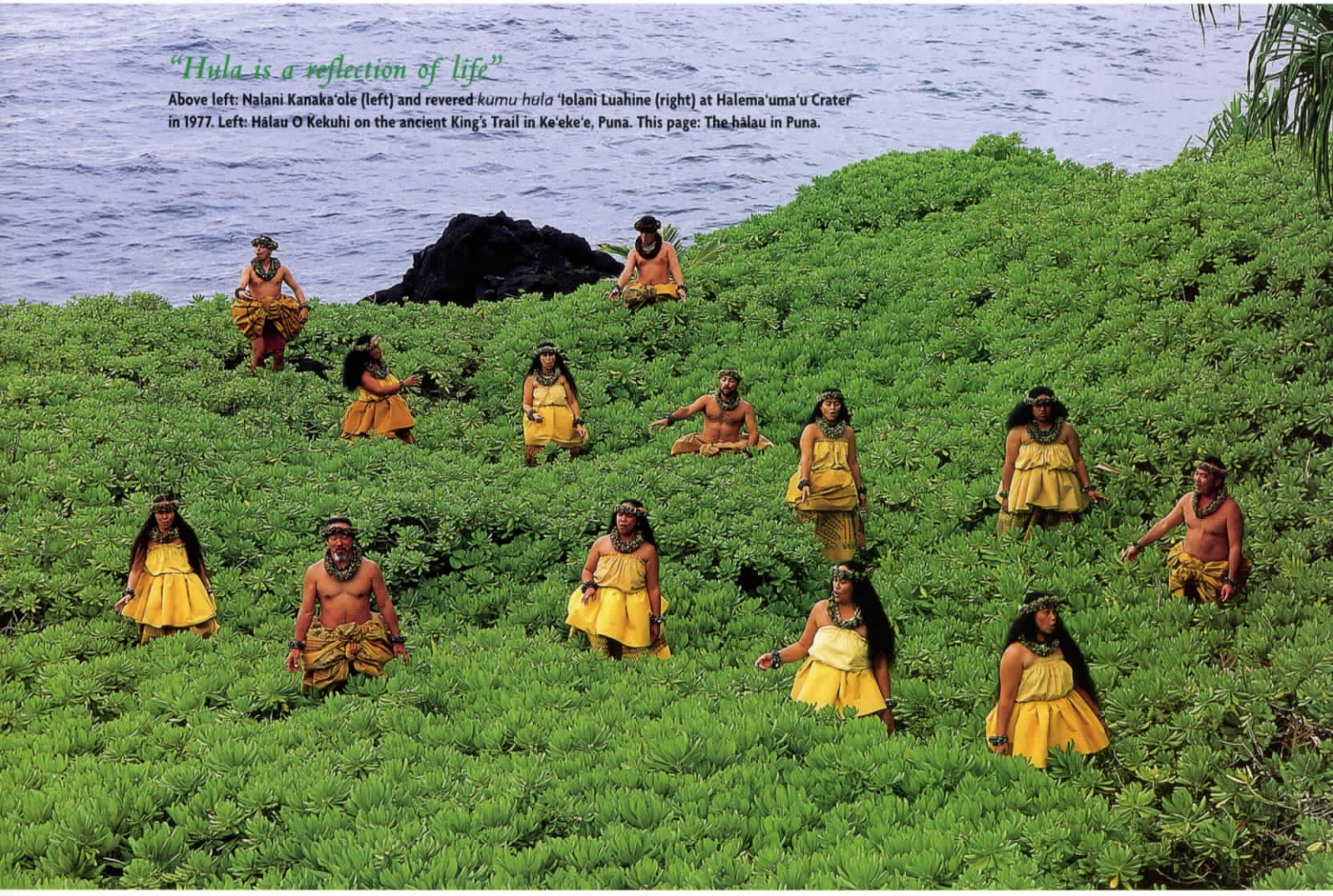
Hālau O Kekuhi is an enormous undertaking, with some eighty hula students ranging in age from five-year-olds to older adults, and various classes offered four afternoons and evenings each week. The hālau's performing group currently has more than twenty dancers, all of whom have studied with the sisters for at least five years—and some have been with the hālau for as long as seventeen years.

Noe Noe Wong-Wilson, who met the Kanakaʻoles when she helped organize the World Indigenous People's Conference on Education in Hilo four years ago, takes a class for older women, which she says they unofficially call "hula light." "It's a little less strenuous," she says, laughing. "Supposedly."

Noe Noe commends the family for its willingness to teach anyone who wants to learn: "They don't hold their training or their knowledge just for their family, or just for people of Hawaiian ancestry. I know they think these efforts are important for the general community as well—to teach the culture, the language and the traditions of Hawaiʻi."

While the Kanakaʻole clan's tradition of performance is particularly visible, Aunty Nalani points out that many other modern-day Hawaiian families also keep up their own cultural traditions. "Some are a little more secretive because of the responsibilities they have," she says. "Like they keep a *koʻa*, a fishing shrine, or they're keepers of a cave."

Aunty Pua sits at her computer in her office at Hawaiʻi Community College, where she teaches Hawaiian studies during the day before heading out to teach hula, and



"Hula is a reflection of life"

Above left: Nalani Kanakaʻole (left) and revered *kumu hula* ʻIolani Luahine (right) at Halemaʻumaʻu Crater in 1977. Left: Hālau O Kekuhi on the ancient King's Trail in Keʻekeʻe, Puna. This page: The hālau in Puna.

explains some of the philosophy behind Hālau O Kekuhi. "You can't go dance with other hālau while you're dancing with us," she says. "We train you in a certain way, and that's the way we want you to dance. We expect you to dance with us for a while and learn not only the dances, but also the attitude of dance."

As their mother did, the sisters teach a vigorous hula style called *'aiha'a*, which springs from the goddesses Pele and Hi'iaka. "It's very bombastic," Aunty Pua says, "very low to the floor. It's full of energy. The whole body is kind of low, the knees are always bent. We stay low to the ground because that's where we get our energy from."

Hālau students learn to make their own costumes and lei. "Culturally, when you're *pau* (finished) with our hālau," says Aunty Pua, "you know a lot of things, and you're very confident about what you know. You become a serious dancer with us."

Aunty Pua exudes that certainty, as do Aunty Edith's other descendants. "We're so secure about who we are and what we practice," says Kekuhi, "and, more importantly, *why* we practice. Doubts and questions about what we do—whether it's appropriate or not, should we do it or not..." She stops and shakes her head. "We don't have that problem."

There's a scene in *Hānau Ka Moku*—which the troupe recently performed at the Smithsonian and the international Celebration of Sacred Dance and Music in Greece—in which Kekuhi's husband, Kaipo, wears a black, tailed tuxedo jacket along with his *malo* (loincloth) and lei. The unexpected costume embodies a principle that Kekuhi says her family feels very strongly about: the idea that traditions must continue to evolve. She illustrates her point by describing a dream an uncle of hers once had, in which the family was conducting a workshop on a new lava flow at the

Off-stage The Kanahele-Frias family (clockwise from top left) Ulumauahi, Kauila, Kaumakaiwa, Kekuhi, Kaipo and Kili the dog at home in Pana'ewa in 1998. Left: Kekuhi and Kaipo.

beach. A man in a malo appeared and led them behind a stone wall, where he had a "full-on computer set-up."

"Whether you're changing with the world or not can determine whether your practice lives or dies," Kekuhi says. "We choose to live, and we choose to evolve, based on the principles and philosophies of our grandparents and their grandparents." But even when the kumu are being at their most innovative, she says, "the style and the discipline and the ritual that goes into the preparation is the same. We don't compromise those things, ever."

The chants from long ago, Kekuhi says, are the "treasure chest of information" that the current generation of kumu refer back to. "But my grandmother forced us to make sure that we also make some contribution to that treasure chest," she adds, "so it doesn't remain only a pile of old chants, but is a continuing practice."

In 1990, for example, when the U.S. military finally stopped using the island of Kaho'olawe as a target for bombing practice, Aunty Pua composed new chants for the attendant ceremonies. Other times to write chants, she says, are births, deaths, lava flows, "when you have problems, or when you have a good time. All those kinds of sentimental reasons. Write it in chant."

Hence the new chants in *Hānau Ka Moku*, written for the undersea volcano that was discovered by scientists only relatively recently. The Kanaka'oles call the emerging island "Kama'ehu" (The Red Child), though the scientists have named it "Lō'ihi." The Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation has petitioned to officially change the name to Kama'ehu, which Aunty Pua says is more culturally appropriate for an island being born through submarine volcanic activity. "There is a chant that has the line, *'Keiki 'ehu kama 'ehu a Kanaloa*,'" she explains. "'The reddish child, the reddish child of Kanaloa,' who is the deity of the ocean."

Kekuhi's twenty-year-old son Kaumakaiwa (or "Lopaka," as the family calls him), recalls that one day, when he was six or seven, his grandmother, Aunty Pua, sat him down and offered him a choice. "It's one of those vivid moments in life you always remember," he says. "She said, 'Well, we're opening new *keiki* (children's) classes finally; do you want to dance hula?' I said, 'Yeah, okay. I will.' The fact is, we were all born into it; it's a given. But my grandma wanted to see if I really had the passion."

Now being groomed as a future kumu hula in the Kanaka'ole tradition, Lopaka works hard at perpetuating the family legacy. "With us, being constantly busy is a genetic trait," he jokes, "like how you inherit your hair, or your eye color." He teaches noncredit Introduction to Chant classes at West Hawai'i Community College and hopes to graduate from the University of Hawai'i at Hilo this fall, a year early, with a bachelor's degree in performing arts, with an emphasis on Hawaiian music and dance. His music is a passion, and he recently released his first CD, called *Ha'i Kupuna*, from Hula Records.

There was a time when he was younger, Lopaka says, that he felt very different from his friends: "My mom thought it was trivial to hang out at the mall. When my friends went on sleepovers, instead we'd stay home and learn stories and chants. She would take us camping and introduce us to places. We used to do storytelling together as a family. When you're that age, you don't understand that kind of thing at all."

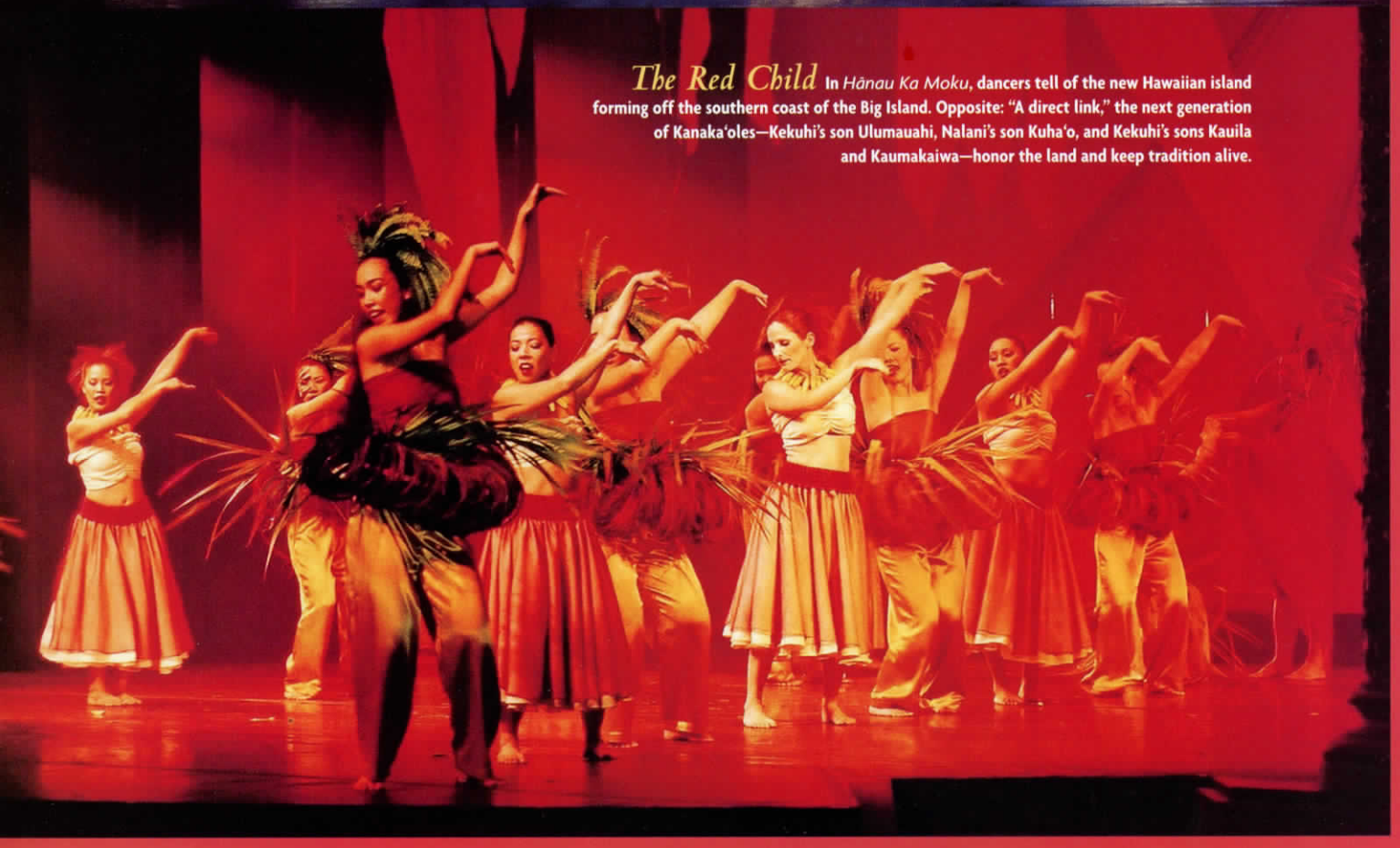
Now he understands. "It's a direct umbilical cord," he says, "a direct link to my family's traditions. And to my mother, to her mother. It's the common thread we all share, through the years and through the generations."

For her part, Aunty Pua praises Lopaka as a talented choreographer. "He's two generations below us," she says, "and his choreography is a little bit different from what we expect. That is pleasant for us; we like to see it evolving. Otherwise, we're doing the same motion for lightning and thunder for many, many generations. There's nothing wrong with that, but lightning and thunder also have different movements and different forms."

Aunty Pua leans forward in her desk chair and says she hopes that her grandchildren's grandchildren will also understand they are children of this land, "that this land is like a relative, like a great-grandfather. I think if they have that kind of relationship with the land, they will always treat it well.

"They also need to remember that we have a tradition they need to carry on," she adds. "Those are the only two things they need to remember."

For online information about Hālau O Kekuhi and the Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation, visit edithkanakaolefoundation.org.



The Red Child In *Hānau Ka Moku*, dancers tell of the new Hawaiian island forming off the southern coast of the Big Island. Opposite: "A direct link," the next generation of Kanaka'oles—Kekuhi's son Ulumauahi, Nalani's son Kuha'o, and Kekuhi's sons Kauila and Kaumakaiwa—honor the land and keep tradition alive.