

CECILIA KAAI

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① I was interested in the hula when I was a little girl growing up in Opihikao on the Big Island. There would be family parties every Saturday afternoon in town, at chur halls, pavilions, and other areas where tents would be erected. We children would help serve the food and afterwards everyone would call for entertainment. I didn't know anything about the hula, but my friend and I would make up motions to the songs the musicians played.

② I came from a large family which spoke fluent Hawaiian and although my auntie, Rose Kuamoo, was a well known hula instructor I did not have the benefit at that time of lessons since she lived in Hilo. By the time I was 12, however, she asked my father if she could give me lessons. He agreed and a bargain was struck. He would supply the ti leaves she needed to entertain on the Lurline and she would give my sister and me hula lessons. Every Saturday my father would drive us to Hilo in his car for our three-hour lessons, including awana and kahiko.

③ During high school in Hilo I studied informally with George Naope and Martha Kaiawe and upon graduation I went to Oahu to attend Church College. I took a few lessons with Piilani Watkins in Kapahulu, but before long I was more interested in Polynesian dances than hula. While attending Church College I met my future husband, Nelson Kaai, whom I married after graduation. We lived in Kaneohe until shortly after our daughter was born, when we moved to Kauai.

④ On Kauai we became active with the Kaunualii Civic Club. It was they who asked me to dance "Minei" and to my surprise my husband said OK. Prior to that time he had not been too keen to have me dance in public. My interest in hula was now revived.

⑤ I met "Uncle Joe" Kahaualelio who had also moved from Honolulu to Kauai and was already a popular hula kumu. Unlike some teachers who did not seem to care whether the hula was learned correctly, Uncle Joe would tell you the meaning of the song, why you were dancing it, why you were doing each motion, and he would watch everything you did to be sure it was proper. I was with Uncle Joe until he moved to California and consider him the greatest influence in my career.

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⑥ During the years I studied with Uncle Joe, in addition to perfecting my hula he introduced Polynesian numbers -- Tahitian, Maori, Samoan and Tongan were now included in my repertoire. We danced professionally at hotels, luaus, private parties, and botanical gardens. We also formed a club (Kauai Ethnic Education Association) dedicated to studying the cultures of Polynesia. Most of the members of this club danced in the Polynesian Show held at The Market Place and with the financial support of that shopping center and the guidance and hard work of the members, Kauai's Tahiti Fete was born. The Fete became famous throughout the state of Hawaii, drawing more and more entries each year from halaus on all of the islands and even from the Mainland for the four years it was held.

⑦ I began to teach under Hoakalei Kamauu in the State Foundation Program of the 1970's. She trained us and then sent us out into different districts to teach. I wanted people to see the way Hawaiians told their stories, and that it was all in the hula.

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I also associated with Kauai hula kumus Roselle Bailey (Waiohai Hotel), Henry Taea (Sheraton Kauai), Lovey Apana (S.S. Constitution), Kuulei Punua (Sheraton Coconut Beach), and Naomi Yokotaki (Hanalei Bali Hai), all of whom are respected entertainers; and Teitu Edward Kameanui for his Tahitian artistry.

In the early 70's I took over the Polynesian dance group which Uncle Joe had formed to put on the shows at The Market Place, a visitor-oriented shopping center at Coconut Plantation on Kauai.

In 1975 I was delighted to learn that I had been selected to go to New Zealand with Hoakalei for a special performance of ancient dance, when the lowest point in my life occurred. I suffered a massive stroke -- I couldn't move, I couldn't talk, I couldn't sing. I was certain my career was ended.

However, encouragement for my recovery came from many sources. Lynn Smith, manager of The Market Place, insisted that my group (Cissy's Hula Hauoli) continue to perform regularly, three times a week as it had for several years. Nelson, my husband, took over instruction of the boys and acted as "sergeant-at-arms" keeping the group under control. My daughter Corinna and niece Rose Kamau instructed the dancers under my direction. The group stayed together and traveled together to promote Kauai. I continued to recover.

Since 1975, Cissy's Hula Hauoli has traveled to Tahiti, Samoa, the Mainland, England, and Scotland. Our future plans include a visit to New Zealand, the trip I had been denied.

While I no longer dance, I direct the group, choreograph the numbers, and participate in singing. With God's blessing I will continue my career in any way that I can.

CECILIA "CISSY" KUAMOO KAAI

As told to Lynn Smith
July 6, 1983