

# Living the Hula



Kumu hula Pat Nāmaka Bacon.  
(Photo: Augie Salbosa)

*She has spent her life  
sharing Hawaiian culture  
through hula. The work,  
the love, continue*

*By Manu Boyd  
Illustration by Garry Ono*

*Garry Ono*

People tend to envision a *kumu hula*—a master and teacher of hula—as a statuesque, imposing figure clad in yards of cloth, heaped with *maile* and ferns and flower leis, chanting a haunting story.

Pat Bacon's outward appearance—her petite frame, soft features and humble demeanor—certainly don't fit such preconceived notions. Her power is within.

Pat Nāmaka Bacon, known to many as “Aunty Pat,” has been deeply immersed in Hawaiian culture since childhood. She is the *hānai* (adopted) daughter of Mary Kawena Pūku‘i, the highly respected authority on Hawaiian language and culture, who died in 1986. Bacon has shared her deep knowledge of things Hawaiian virtually all her life, and is still often called upon to conduct hula workshops, judge annual hula and chant competitions and interpret Hawaiian language texts.

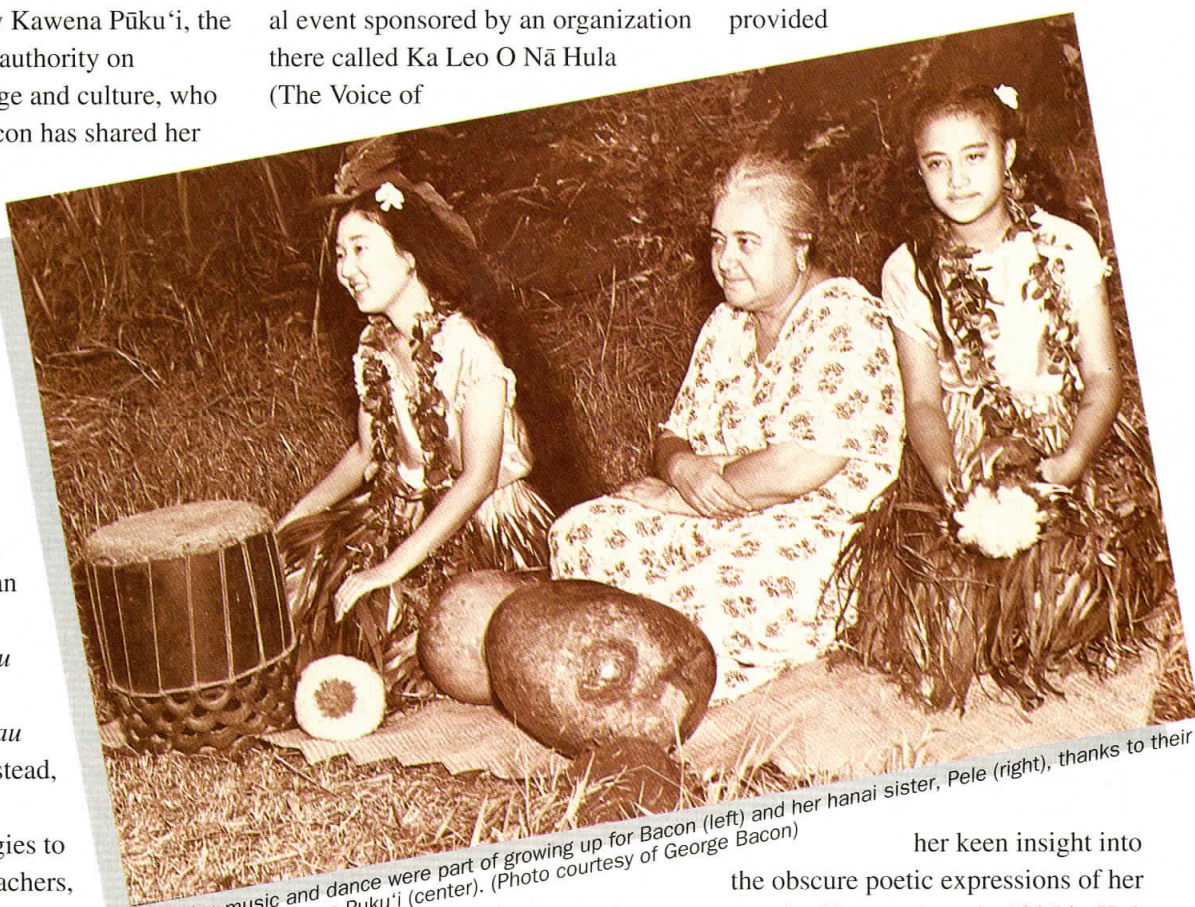
She is a *kumu hula*, but doesn't lead her own *hālau* (hula school). Instead, Bacon generally devotes her energies to teaching other teachers, just as her mother did. Her workshops in *hula kahiko* (ancient hula) provide other *kumu* with the traditional choreography to specific dances, which Bacon learned many years ago from a number of traditional hula practitioners. Bacon's knowledge is treasured by

those teachers who wish to pass on these pure, unembellished dances to their students. Bacon also sometimes contributes *mele* (chants and songs) from her family's extensive collection, which the *kumu* can teach their students.

Other *kumu* have come from as far afield as Florida, Colorado, Canada and Samoa to learn from Bacon. She also travels to the Mainland to share what she knows. Last October she went to Mexico City to judge a hula competition and give a workshop. This was the second annual event sponsored by an organization there called Ka Leo O Nā Hula (The Voice of

in Mexico City alone. “The hula groups are quite small, not more than 10 or 12 students,” reports Bacon. “What I wanted most to get across to them was the need to internalize the art form by having a better understanding of the language. Without the Hawaiian language, there is no hula.”

The importance Bacon places on language is just one legacy left to her by her mother. Mary Kawena Pūku‘i's deep practical and academic understanding of the Hawaiian language (she co-authored the definitive Hawaiian-English dictionary) provided



Hawaiian music and dance were part of growing up for Bacon (left) and her *hanai* sister, Pele (right), thanks to their mother, Mary Kawena Pūku‘i (center). (Photo courtesy of George Bacon)

the Dances). Bacon is uncertain as to exactly when the love for hula hit Central America, but something about Hawaiian dance has clearly struck a chord with the Latins. She learned that, within Mexico, there are several *thousand* hula schools, between 500 and 1,000

her keen insight into the obscure poetic expressions of her people. She was born in 1895 in Ka‘ū on the island of Hawai‘i, where she was raised by her maternal grandmother. There, from a very early age, she learned traditional dances and many other facets of Hawaiian culture. This set the stage for a life spent gathering, preserving and sharing the “old

continued...

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For her *hānai* daughter, Pat, this meant deep immersion in music, chant and hula. “We were always surrounded by hula,” Bacon recalls.

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The first of three children of Kawena and Napoleon Kalōli‘i Pūku‘i, the girl assumed Kawena’s maiden name, “Wiggin.” In full, Pat Bacon’s name invokes images from cultures that are worlds apart. “My first name, chosen by Kawena’s father, is actually ‘Patience,’ which was popular then in New England [where he was raised],” she says. “My second name, ‘Elmay,’ is a contraction of ‘Elmyra’ and ‘Mary,’ honoring Kawena and a cousin of hers. My Hawaiian name, ‘Nāmakaauhoaokawena‘ulaokalani-ikiikikalaninui’ speaks of Kawena’s haughty eyes and intense heat acknowledging the Ka‘ū family ties to the fire goddess Pele.”

Hawaiian names can be classified by their origin, whether from the family genealogy, or woven in dreams. Bacon’s is classified as an *inoa kūamuamu* or insulting name, and speaks of a time when her mother, Kawena, was accused of having hard,

haughty eyes. Hawaiians sometimes gave their children these types of names to continually remind the offender of the incident where unkind words or actions were directed toward the family.

The Wiggin-Pūku‘i family lived in the vicinity of McKinley

25 cents a lesson. That was good money back then!”

By the time Bacon entered her teens, interest in old-style hula was waning, giving way to cellophane “grass” skirts and



From left: Pele, Pat and Mary play traditional instruments. (Photo courtesy of George Bacon)

High School in a home that embraced three generations, with Kawena’s parents, Henry and Pa‘ahana Wiggin the elders of the household.

As a young, self-confessed “rascal,” Bacon admits that she used to take advantage of her early hula training. “When I was 12 years old, I began teaching hula to some of the neighborhood kids,” she recalls. “We did songs like ‘Nā Hala O Naue’ and ‘Holoholo Ka‘a,’ and sometimes a chant like ‘Kāwika.’ I charged them

*hapa haole* (half foreign) songs and dances. To ensure that the old ways would not be lost, she and her mother began studying with traditional hula practitioners like Joseph ‘Īlālā‘ole and Keahi Luahine.

“In 1934, we began with Keahi Luahine, the grand-aunt and adoptive mother of ‘Iolani (Makekau) Luahine,” recalls Bacon. “Keahi and her husband, Sylvester Gomes, had a house on Ilaniwai Street in Kaka‘ako, where private lessons were taught in a spare bedroom. Being from Kaua‘i herself, she taught us classical dances from the island of Kaua‘i—old dances

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that were handed down within her family. Across the street was a community hall where Keahi's cousin, a man named "Kapua," taught. With more space, there would be three *ho'opa'a* [chanters/drummers] and six or seven *ōlapa* [dancers]. His style was quite a bit different from Keahi's."

All the knowledge of hula and Hawaiian culture Bacon absorbed while growing up became her livelihood. Today, she serves as cultural resource specialist at the Bishop Museum Archives, where she catalogs chants and other resource materials as part of a project funded by the Native Hawaiian Culture and Arts Program. These materials will be listed in a Bishop Museum data base, which will eventually be accessible through the University of Hawaii, the State Public

bers. "There was one line and only 12 extensions. I would also help out by selling postcards and museum publications. In those days, hula was rarely seen at the museum."

During the Second World War, Bishop Museum anthropologist Dr. Kenneth Emory worked with a young armed forces newsreel photographer named George Bacon to produce a "survival film" for Pacific-based troops. Upon completion of the project, Emory mentioned that there were some girls (Kawena and Pat) at the museum who knew old dances that he should document on film."

"George filmed Kawena and me up in Nu'uaniu at Dr. Emory's place," recalls Bacon. "Kawena chanted, and I, dressed in a cloth *pā'ū* (skirt) was the dancer. 'A little to the right,' he said while filming, 'a little to the left.' Suddenly I slipped on a moss-covered rock and landed with a splash in Nu'uaniu Stream! If you see that film today, you'll notice that I'm dressed in a ti-leaf skirt doing dances that would normally require a (dry) cloth skirt."

A couple of years later, at a ceremony also in Nu'uaniu Valley, Nāmaka married George.

Today, the Bacons live on a hill in Mānoa Valley. Their home was named "La'ialoha"—peaceful affection—by Mary Kawena Pūku'i.


Naturally, Pat Bacon is pleased

with the growing awareness people have of traditional Hawaiian culture and particularly hula. During the 1970s, she was a little concerned about certain "way out" choreogra-



(Photo courtesy of George Bacon)

phers who favored what she considered to be inappropriate costumes and overly dramatic presentations. That trend has died out now, she feels, thanks to younger *kumu* becoming more deeply immersed in Hawaiian language. These days, save the occasional chanter whose pronunciation leaves something to be desired, Bacon is quite content with the direction in which hula is going.

"I enjoy hula much more now than I did several years ago," she says. "The young people are taking it more seriously and are getting back to the basics—more like the hula I remember. I think hula has come full circle." 



Bacon was often called on to demonstrate elements of traditional hula. (Photo courtesy of George Bacon)

Library System and Bishop Museum.

Bacon has worked at the museum for nearly 40 years. Her first job there began more than a half century ago. "I was hired as a switchboard operator when I was 19 years old," she remem-