

Odetta Nesmith

I think we have to appreciate that the hula has been passed down to us through the hundreds of years and that it already has been altered and changed during those hundreds of years. We should let the new kumu take their turn in trying to improve it. Maybe what they're doing is not an improvement but they are recording the modern influences of their time and I cannot believe our ancestors did not do the same when the kahiko was passed to them.

I became interested in the hula because my parents were entertainers. I was born on the Big Island but we left in 1940 before the War and we lived with my aunt in Kalihi. In 1941 we moved to Kaneohe where my mother sent us to Eleanor Hiram Hoke who was teaching at the Kaneohe Community Center next door to Honey's Inn. Entertainers about dancers and I came from a big family of girls. My mother said she wasn't about to beat the bushes looking for dancers when she had them right in the house.

I was thirteen at the time I was sent to Eleanor and the transition between child and teenager was a rebellious time for me. I grew up ashamed of being Hawaiian. I didn't know what I was because I certainly didn't enjoy being Hawaiian. I was lost and my parents couldn't even help me understand who I was because they were just as confused. My mother often told me about the confusion she went through growing up. At school she was forbidden to speak Hawaiian and at home she was forbidden to speak English. In school to try and save her children from that kind of confusion we were not taught Hawaiian.

I studied kahiko and auwana under Eleanor for two years and it was a settling process for me. Because we were musicians, Aunt Alice Namakelua was a constant visitor at our house and I studied hula auwana informally under her between 1950-54. My last kumu was Pearl Keawe who has been my greatest influence. She seemed to always have time for me. We were taught in small groups so I wasn't a number or a space to her. I was Odetta.

I arrived on Kauai in 1960 and in 1964 the county needed a teacher and Margaret Aipoalani suggested I do it. I jumped at the chance because I wanted to continue dancing. I wanted to teach the Hawaiian kids to be involved with the hula with or without money. It offers them stability and an identity. I found my identity through the hula and because of that I'm not ashamed to say I'm a Hawaiian today. We Hawaiians cannot wait around for changes to happen, we can't hang back and sit in our houses and dream. If we need information then we should go to the library and read a book. I would have taught the Hawaiian kids for free because I didn't want to see them suffer through the inhibited, unsure, unstable world that I lived through.

Odetta Nesmith

My excitement for dancing came eventually as i did it. At first it was not there. I was about 13 and at that transition point between kid and teenager. It was a rebellious point for me. To become involved in something was a settling point. I grew up being ashamed of being hawaiian. I didn't know what i was. I remember distinctly in school feeling inhibited and unable to verbalize myself. I think my greatest influence was pearl keawe. She seemed to always have time for me. When I studied with her it was in small groups so i wasn't a number or a space to her. I was odetta. If you mention odetta to eleanor hoke she'll say fine but she won't know who i am. Hula gave me confidence in myself.

I arrived in Kauai in '60 and in '64 the county needed a teacher and Margaret suggested i do it. I jumped at the chance because I wanted to continue dancing and at that time it didn't seem that people danced around here.

I still have a confusion as to what is contemporary, and what is traditional. In auwana the beat of today is incorporated into the dance and the beat of the individual and the beat that the individual takes with him.

I am have an idea of what is the old way but it's so distorted now that I am really not sure anymore. There is no one historical document that you can refer to and say that this has to be hula kahiko. You can look at a certain definition and say that sounds good but you can't say definitely to any of it only probably.

If I had danced with my tutu for a longer time I would not hesitate to say that I consider myself a traditional kumu but I didn't. I studied with tutu Alice but it wasn't steady enough. We danced with her only when she was over there. It was a rushed thing, she spent maybe a day or two at our house. If I did I would not hesitate to say this I consider traditional.

In this day or two we had to learn this much. Then we don't see her again for a few months and then we would see her for a day or two again.

But I think she was caught up in the contemporary rather than the traditional. because she didn't want to participate in the kapu. I think knowingly or unknowingly they were confused themselves.

I see creation playing a strong role in hula kahiko in the next ten years.

I think the kahiko of today is too contemporary to be called traditional.

I think the innovations of today are exciting and I say why not. It doesn't have to be something you have to

People say you can ask Tutu Pukui and that she has direct recall of how things were done. I think we have to appreciate that the hula has been passed down to us through ~~hundreds~~ the hundreds of years and ~~many~~ that is has been changed and altered during those hundreds of years already ~~and that~~. They should let the new kumu take their turn in trying to improve it. Maybe what they do is not an improvement but in the hula they will be recording the modern influences of their times and I cannot believe that our ancestors did not do the same to some degree when the kahiko was passed onto them.

They are taking part of their past and combining it with a part of themselves, the modern Hawaiian and maybe there will be something created that will be something better.

The kumu of today are not together. The attitude is what is mine is mine and I will not share. I want to teach the Hawaiian. I want the Hawaiian Kids to be involved in the hula. with or without money. It offers them stability it offers them identity. I found my identity through the hula. and because of that I'm not ashamed to say I'm a Hawaiian now. I'm Not afraid to be who i am Odetta Nesmith, Part-Hawaiian, portuguese, german, and irish. I was lost and my parents couldn't even help me. understand who i was because they also were confused. My mother often told me about the confusion of going to school and learning to speak English

school were they were forbidden to speak Hawaiian and returning home where they were forbidden to speak the English they had been taught in school. In order to try and save us from that kind of confusion we were not taught Hawaiian by our parents. ~~And now when I hear~~

And now I have to go every tuesday night to learn the hawaiian language from my haole friend.

If you have to go read a book, go to the library. You cannot wait around for changes to happen, you can't hang back and sit in your house and dream. If I have to teach these Hawaiian kids for free I will because I don't want to see them hang back anymore. I see the Niihau hawaiian as me growing up.

Inhibited, unsure, unstable,

Odetta Nesmittz  
Keokaha  
April 3, 1935

I became interested in the hula because my parents were entertainers. I was about 13 or 14 when I started. I come from a big family of girls and musicians need dancers. My mother said she wasn't about to beat the bush looking for dancers, she had them right in the house. She told us we were all going to be dancers so we were dancers. I left the Big Island in 1940 before the war and we lived with my aunt in Kalihi. In '41 we moved to Kaneohe and I graduated from Castle in '53. After graduation I spent 2½ years in the army and seven years away from home. I came in '59 and moved to Kauai in '60. I only came here planning to stay two years, but we've ended up raising seven kids here.

My first kumu was Eleanor Hiram Hoke. I studied with her for two years. She was teaching next door to Honey's Inn in the Kaneohe Community Center. I learned Kahiko and auwana, but my mother was not too happy about us learning Kahiko. We started with Eleanor when mama told us we were going to be dancers. She was hesitant about kahiko because of the kapus.

I studied with tutu Alice Namakelua. She was a constant visitor at our house because we were musicians. I studied with Auntie Alice from about '50 to '54. She would not teach me kahiko.

I studied for two years with Pearl Keawe and that was it. Each of my kumu were different in teaching styles. Eleanor had great discipline in her class. The same is true for tutu Alice. You never asked why, you just moved. Pearl Keawe was a little more open to questions but she still was quite strict. My mother and tutu Alice refused to teach me chant and kahiko so I learned it from the Culture and Arts Program. I did not want to dance but my mother said we would dance and after you have danced since 13 years of age it becomes a part of you. I was named after the daughter of Daddy Bray, Odetta Bray.