

Kumu dispute one man's belief that hula was birthed on Molokai

By Catherine Kekoa Enomoto

Star-Bulletin

ON the eve of a Friendly Isle dance festival, a less-than-friendly debate has erupted on the event's theme.

Hula teachers and Hawaiian experts are questioning the validity of the title of tomorrow's "Moloka'i ka Hula Piko — A Celebration of the Birth of Hula on Molokai."

The inaugural celebration unfolds from 10 a.m. to sunset at Kapu'aiwa Coconut Grove near Kaunakakai.

Performers include Halau Hula o Kukuna'okala and kumu hula John Kaimikaua; Halau Hula 'o Moloka'i and kumu Rachel Kamakana; Moana's Hula Halau and kumu Moana Dudoit; and Na Wahine Makamae 'o Moloka'i and kumu Loretta Ritte.

Although the festival is based on Kaimikaua's "contemporary tradition" that Molokai is the birthplace and center of the hula, the 32-year-old kumu disdains involvement in any disagreement about the theme's validity.

"I am not interested in an article to prove or disprove the traditions that were handed down to me," said Kaimikaua, an Oahu native whose halau specializes in animal hula. "What I am doing is for the good and benefit of the Hawaiian people, to enlighten them. I am not really looking to put up my credentials. To me those things are very sacred, handed down from pre-Western times. I want to maintain an integrity that is not spoken of."

Kaimikaua said that when he was about 14 years old he met Kawahinekapuheleikapokane, a 92-year-old Aiea woman who is now deceased. She gave him 156 chants and a hula genealogy going back 10½ centuries.

"You count 100 years for every two names on this genealogy," Kaimikaua said, "and it goes back to about 900 A.D."

"That genealogy taught me of Laka. If anyone has a true hula genealogy, their names link into one of my names because hula came from one source. I have not met anyone who has a hula genealogy that goes back to pre-Western times — yet."

When newspaper reporter Lori Matsukawa asked to see the documents in 1976, Matsukawa reported, "Kaimikaua said he could not show anyone the sheets, as it showed 'disrespect' for the person who taught them to him."

Kaimikaua's references to "Moloka'i ka hula piko — Moloka'i, the center of the dance" began appearing in magazines, newspapers and books a dozen years ago. Kumu hula Noenoelani Zuttermeister frets each time the media repeat Kaimikaua's reference.

"Everybody is entitled to an opinion. But when he states his opinion, he has given no proof up to this point," said Zuttermeister, a University of Hawaii hula teacher

and daughter of revered hula maven Kau'i Zuttermeister.

"There comes a time when we as teachers don't even want to be a part of it. But if we don't stand up and say what we believe to be true, 20 years down the line our children and our children's children will think it is the truth, because in 1991 it was being accepted by everyone — and that's the sad part."



John Kaimikaua

Other kumu hula and Hawaiian scholars refute Kaimikaua's position. John Kaha'i Topolinski, kumu hula of Ka Pa Hula Hawai'i, said

that in writings of historians John Papa I'i, Samuel Kamakau and Kepelino, "There is no reference of Molokai as the font of hula. This Molokai phenomenon is in recent times; it has blossomed from God knows where."

Kumu hula Wayne Chang, who is assistant admissions director of the Kamehameha Schools, said, "I personally think he is filling in some of the blanks. But that's how you become a scholar and an authority: You get enough people to listen and believe."

Carol Silva was not so lenient: "I am not a great supporter of John Kaimikaua. He is a half charlatan in my books. I kind of resent that he comes out of the woods with these things that have not been known to be true — I'm being very candid."

Silva said her background embraces many years of researching records and resources.

An archivist and chief of the records-management branch of the state Archives Division, and a

part-time lecturer in the University of Hawaii College of Continuing Education and Community Service, Silva spoke as an individual.

John Charlot, former University of Hawaii religion teacher who invited Kaimikaua to speak at UH, tempered the debate by noting that Polynesians have a pluralistic culture.

"In Polynesian culture, there are many traditions, and Polynesians argue among themselves about which traditions are good or not," he said.

Chang called the controversy healthy. "It sure is stimulating the hula world to look at it and say, 'Now what?' They have to look at their traditions and make their own judgment."

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