

So You Want To Study Hula?

There are many ways to go about studying the hula. Not all of them are equally regarded as respectable. What follows are various factors for prospective students to consider.

1. The hula is a way of life to which many students and teachers dedicate their lives.

In Hawaiian culture, the hula is more than just dancing. The movements and gestures performed by dancers are just the surface. Underneath this surface is a cultural system that celebrates creation and procreation, a pantheon of gods and their descendants on earth, mythological and legendary exploits, historical events and places, ancestral beings and cherished relations, and natural manifestations of life forces that nurture and sustain Hawaiian people. Sacredness permeates many hulas, and much of the work associated with creating, teaching, and performing hula. Not all students aspire to deep levels of knowledge and understanding. Likewise, not all teachers who offer lessons have achieved insight into the spiritual depths of hula. Prospective students who wish to undertake study of the hula should understand that hula is held by many to be a serious endeavor, and that respect for Hawaiian cultural lifeways is appropriate, and will be appreciated.

2. Prospective students should consider what level of commitment they wish to make.

The prospective hula student is faced with an array of choices. Classes are available for students who want a casual, relaxed experience that requires no commitment to perform. These classes are typically offered through community recreation centers. Students who aspire to performing on stage should seek out teachers experienced in presenting classes and soloists in public performances; these may range from amateur community exhibitions to professional entertainment venues. Those with a desire to probe more deeply into cultural knowledge must enter the world of hula schools, known as halau.

3. Hula halau function as a family.

Becoming a haumana (student) in a halau usually requires a serious commitment. This is because halau run on cooperation. Haumana depend on each other to ensure success in all endeavors. Haumana consider each other as "hula sisters" and "hula brothers." Haumana learn quickly that those who do not pull their own weight are not to be entrusted with responsibility.

4. Not all knowledge is contained in only one school. This is a famous proverb.

It is also a fundamental truth. Different schools of hula stem from different lineages of teachers and teachings, and teachers bring their own individual creativity to their teaching and to their original choreography. This is why there are so many divergent styles of hula. And the beauty of it is that there is no one-way to be right; rather, there are many ways to be right. Unfortunately, it also means that there are many ways to be wrong, too.

5. Not all teachers of hula have achieved comparable mastery of hula.

Hula teachers in the present are referred to using the title "kumu hula". This wasn't always the case, however. In the old days, a kumu hula was an individual who had undergone extensive training that culminated in an "uniki graduation ceremony. Nowadays, anyone who teaches classes may call himself or herself a kumu hula. And anyone who directs a halau tends to be automatically called a kumu hula, regardless of whether or not the teacher considers himself or herself to be a kumu hula.

6. A kumu hula is a foundation for hula.

The term "kumu" means "source" or "foundation". Thus, a kumu hula is, by definition, a source or foundation for hula. This is why the title was closely guarded in the old days, and reserved for those who had mastered an understanding of how hula needed to be carefully maintained, resented, and passed on from one generation to the next. Delving deep into hula is a humbling experience. The more knowledge and experience one acquires, the more one comes to realize how much there is to know, and how little of that one can ever learn. Deep study instills humility (ha'aha'a). The most respected kumu hula are also the most humble. They are the ones, too, who respect their peers, and they teach their students to respect the efforts of other kumu hula, other halau, and other haumana.

7. Deep knowledge is reserved for those who have earned it.

Teachers cherish what they have learned from their teachers. They hold their knowledge close, because it is special. It is shared when students are ready and receptive. This is why an "uniki ceremony is an ultimate achievement. The student has earned the teacher's trust. The teacher trusts that the student will care for what has been taught. The teacher trusts that the student can discern what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. The teacher trusts that the student understands why things are done the way they are. The teacher knows that his or her teacher's teachings will continue. So the teacher sends the student off on their own. They are free to create. What they must never do is disrespect the teaching, or betray the teacher's trust.

8. E nana, e ho'olohe. E pa'a ka waha, e hana ka lima.

Watch, listen, and keep the mouth closed, and the hands busy. One learns by listening and observing. Ask questions

only after you've tried to figure out something yourself.

9. Hula is to be enjoyed.

There is deep satisfaction to be derived from bringing joy to oneself or someone else through hula. May your journey to hula be a fulfilling one.