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The Heartbeat of Hula

Like choreography, gesture and chant, rhythm conveys the story.

STORY BY SHANNON WIANECKI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NINA KUNA & RYAN SIPHERS

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A few years ago, I witnessed an astonishing performance at the Merrie Monarch Festival. A handsome young *kumu hula* (hula teacher) strode onto the stage, carrying an enormous staff. Chanting melodiously, Kau'ionalani Kamana'o stamped his staff against the floor, and struck it repeatedly with a small stick. As the clear peal of native *kauila* wood rang out, the dancers of Hula Halau o Kamuela flowed from the four corners of the stage to its center. Each dancer placed a *papa hehi* (wooden treadle) at her feet, and raised a pair of *kala'au* (percussive sticks). Swaying as one, the dancers clacked their sticks against their neighbor's, and tapped a second rhythm on the treadles. Each tap reverberated through the auditorium like the Earth's own heartbeat.

The sounds of *hula kahiko*, the oldest style of Hawaiian dance, are deep, resonant, and hypnotic. In contrast to modern hula (which is typically accompanied by Western-derived stringed instruments, such as the slack-key guitar or 'ukulele), ancient hula is purely percussive. *Hula kahiko* dancers often make their own music, and, as I discovered while watching Hula Halau o Kamuela, the sounds are as significant as the movements. The creation and mastery of traditional hula implements is both an art and a sacred practice passed down through generations.

Homegrown Rhythms



Gayle Miyaguchi, one of the primary crafters of hula implements in Hawai'i, started as a farmer. In 1994, she took a bumper crop of gourds to Happy Hula Supplies, which was then Maui's main source for hula gear. Instead of buying her gourds, the owner sold Miyaguchi the business. She renamed it Na Kani o Hula, the sounds of hula.

Twenty years later, she and her husband, Kent Apo, continue to handcraft traditional Hawaiian instruments at their farm in Kula. They sell *'uli'uli* (feather gourd rattles) and *ipu heke* (double gourd drums) to dancers around the world and teach workshops for those wishing to make their own.

The couple are best known for their beautiful gourds. *Ipu* arrived in Hawai'i along with the Polynesian voyaging canoes, but few people grow them here today. They're a difficult crop; fruit flies sting them, birds peck them, and tropical rains rot the shells before they can harden. Miyaguchi has an extra-green thumb where *ipu* are concerned. As they ripen, she visits the field daily to turn them over, ensuring each one grows fat and round, not lopsided.

"In the old days, a family would take care of one special gourd, name it, and care for it like a child," says Miyaguchi. She raises around 300 *ipu* each season. They take four months to grow and just as long to dry. Scraping the insides clean is Apo's job. He's perfected it, using special tools that he invented to reach through a gourd's narrow neck. The cleaner the inside of the gourd, the better the sound.

Hula's Ancient Instruments



1. ***ipu heke:*** a drum formed of two joined gourds that is

To learn more, I consulted with Hokulani Holt. She comes from a long line of *kumu hula,* and has the regal carriage and natural expressiveness of a lifelong hula practitioner. Trained by her mother, the renowned Leiana Long Woodside, Holt opened her own *halau* (school), Pa‘u o Hi‘iaka, in the 1970s. Her students learn as she did, first to move their bodies with fluid precision and then to handle instruments.

Novices start with the *kala‘au,* learning to strike them so that they ring, rather than thunk, says Holt. Next up are *pu‘ili*, split bamboo sticks that produce marvelous rustling sounds when brushed against the body. Performing with the flamboyant feather gourd rattles, *‘uli‘uli,* builds arm muscles, says Holt. “Your hands have to twist. You have to hang on so the gourds don’t fly away, and you have to shake them hard.”

Dancing in the tight formation characteristic of *hula kahiko* requires profound proprioception — a sense of one’s body in relation to others. It’s a skill that likely informs a hula practitioner’s life on and off the stage. When mastered, dancers’ movements appear as effortless as a school of fish surging with the current, or the multiple petals of a single flower opening to the sun. Adding instruments engages an appreciable level of difficulty and depth.

The *papa hehi* that so impressed me are reserved for advanced dancers, who can tap out separate rhythms with their hands and feet, perform complex choreographies, and chant — simultaneously. The concentration required boggles my mind.

Kumu hula play the primary hula instruments: the *pahu*, a large, deep-voiced drum carved from the trunk of a coconut or breadfruit tree, and the *ipu heke*, a drum formed out of two joined gourds. The rhythmic drumbeats dictate the pace of the performance.

Kumu hula are composers, choreographers, and directors. They select a historic chant, or compose one of their own, and then create choreography, costumes, and music to tell its story. The accompanying instruments serve multiple purposes: the drums, rattles, and percussive sticks stimulate the audience with rousing beats, help the dancers stay synchronized, and offer visual clues that complement the storytelling. A *kumu* might incorporate feathered *‘uli‘uli* >in a song about forest birds, or *‘ili‘ili* (polished river stones, played like castanets) to bring the sound of mountain streams to the stage. Staffs evoke warfare, farming, or thunderstorms.

On a deeper level, the materials the instruments are made from — plants, rocks, shells, feathers, and animal skins — reinforce the dancers’ connection to their natural environment. A drum cover made out of sharkskin contains the mana (spiritual power) of the shark.

“The sounds that emanate out of the *pahu* or *ipu heke* are the voices of the ancestors and gods,” says Holt. “The mana of the *kumu* and the *mana* that resides in the implements create sounds that harken back to the beginning of time.”

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rapped on the side and against the ground to produce various resonant sounds
2. ***kala‘au:*** percussive sticks, one to five feet long, that are carved from native hardwoods and played in pairs
3. ***pu‘ili:*** split bamboo sticks that are struck against one another and the body, producing lively rustling sounds
4. ***ipu heke ‘ole:*** a drum made from a single gourd, played by both dancers and *kumu*
5. ***‘uli‘uli:*** feather gourd rattles
6. ***‘opihi*** shell
7. ***niho mano*** shark-tooth knife are traditional tools used to scrape gourds.



1. ***puniu:*** a small drum made from coconut shell and surgeonfish skin, strapped to the thigh and struck with a *ka,* or braided cord
2. ***papa hehi:*** a treadle made from *kauila* or koa wood, played by advanced practitioners
3. ***‘ili‘ili:*** smooth river stones, clicked between the fingers like castanets
4. ***naowili:*** drill used to bore holes
5. ***‘uli‘uli:*** gourd rattles (ancient version sans feathers)
6. ***‘ulili:*** rattle made of three gourds on a stick, played by yanking a string that’s wound around the stick
7. ***ko‘i*** stone adze used to carve hula implements

Not Pictured
kupe‘e: anklets made of shells, seeds, or dogs’ teeth that clatter softly as dancers move
oeoe: a small, hollow gourd tied to a length of cord and whirled in front of the body
pahu: a large, deep-voiced drum carved from the trunk of a coconut or breadfruit tree, traditionally capped with sharkskin

*Instruments courtesy of Na Kani o Hula, 105 Baldwin Ave., Pa‘ia; 573-6332; **nakaniohula.com***

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Kaju AZ Hula Halau

"Dancing in the tight formation characteristic of hula kahiko requires profound proprioception — a sense of one's body in relation to others. It's a skill that likely informs a hula practitioner's life on and off the stage. When mastered, dancers' movements appear as effortless as a school of fish surging with the current, or the multiple petals of a single flower opening to the sun. Adding instruments engages an appreciable level of difficulty and depth."

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Sifu Jennifer Corder

Love this article! I hope to master hula someday! "When mastered, dancers' movements appear as effortless as a school of fish surging with the current, or the multiple petals of a single flower opening to the sun."

Reply · Like · Yesterday at 12:20pm



Carol Whilldin Ki'ihele West · Works at Ki'ihele West at Sew Me Hawaii

Over the years I have made all the above named hula implements except the papa hehi. Now, knocking on 70, there is no way I could ever muster up the concentration needed to manage a chant, a rhythm AND choreography with the hands. It is an amazing skill and absolutely mesmerizing to watch!

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