



Lessons of the Kumu

by Lynn Cook

The dressing room of the Hawai'i Theatre is filled with the earthy fragrance of maile leaves. Electricity arcs from dancer to dancer as one ties the next into her costume. "Deep breath. Deeper!" one hula sister instructs as she pulls, cinches and finally knots the braided cord of another's skirt. Fern lei po'o, head lei, are pinned tight. Wrist and ankle fern lei are carefully fastened. There is a smile here, a laugh, an admonition: "Not tight enough. Let's try again." With the performance minutes away, kumu hula Mapuana de Silva steps into the room. All eyes turn to the teacher. She adjusts a costume here and there, then carefully drapes each dancer with a lei, whispering reminders and encouragement. It's time.

The dancers of Halau Mohala 'Ilima seem to float onstage, their feet hardly touching the floor. If stomachs are filled with butterflies, it doesn't show. The lines are straight. Faces glow with anticipation.

Mapu's entrance chant moves into the call to be ready: *E ho'omakaukau*. The responding voices declare their story. Thirty dancers move as one. The telling of the ancient chant begins.



photo: Linny Morris Cunningham

E tu i ta hoe uli /E tohi i ta pale tai: Seize the steering paddle and press it to the side of your canoe, resist the onslaught of tide and current, steer free, steer clear. This advice, from the 200-year-old chant 'Ulei Pahu, has been handed down unchanged from kumu to kumu. According to noted scholar Mary Kawena Pukui, who learned 'Ulei Pahu from Keahi Luahine, the chant is a prophecy given by a Kaua'i priest who foresaw the coming of Captain James Cook and the drastic changes that would follow. Pukui's daughter, Pat Namaka Bacon, learned it from her mother and passed it on to de Silva, to be taught exactly as it was handed down and presented "when the time was right." For this chant—days before Merrie Monarch 2004—that time is now.

Mapuana de Silva is standing in a classroom at the Kokokahi YWCA, looking out at a view of Kane'ohe Bay. The huge room is the new home of Halau Mohala 'Ilima. On the walls there are pictures of some of the great women in traditional hula: Mary Kawena Pukui, Lokalia Montgomery, Lani Kalama, Sally Wood Naluai, Maiki Aiu Lake, Pat Namaka Bacon. All are important influences in Mapu's hula lineage. "When these great ladies of hula were here with us, no one worried as much about maintaining the culture," Mapu says, noting that now only Aunty Pat Bacon is still here to pass on knowledge. "Now that they are gone, we feel our work is cut out for us. We are the keepers of the flame."

Mapu has dedicated her life to that flame, to the art of traditional hula. In the last twenty-eight years, she has taught hula to many hundreds of haumana (students). Her halau holds the record for performances at consecutive Merrie Monarch festivals: twenty-six. "What we do," says Mapu, "is to present hula. No frills, no innovation, no 'new' steps. Our path follows the footsteps of our kupuna, hula ancestors, directly to some of the most traditional hula."



photo: Kihei de Silva

Several of the students who have passed through Mapu's classes have stayed and worked for years to 'uniki (graduate). They study to graduate first as 'olapa (accomplished dancer); next as ho'opa'a (chanter); and finally, for a select few, as kumu hula. Most students, though, are simply there to dance, year after year. Sixty percent of Mapu's dancers today have been in the halau five years or longer. Several have been dancing with Mapu for fifteen years or more; many joined at the age of four. Trips are part of the learning process: Students have traveled with Mapu throughout the Islands, to visit the sites that their chants and dances pay homage to.

For students with small families, or no families, it can be almost overwhelming, the love that can come from this room full of hula sisters. No matter what is going on in a dancer's life, a smile and a hug from a hula sister can make it better.

Halau students learn more than hula; they also learn Hawaiian language and Hawaiian values. Training begins when the four-year-olds arrive for their first class. "First lesson," says Mapu with a smile, "is slippers." Something as automatic as leaving your rubber slippers outside the halau door becomes a lesson in respect. Mapu expects slippers to be placed in a neat row. "If they

are crooked, move them with your hands. Don't push things with your feet. Would you like to be pushed with someone's foot?" asks Mapu. Hula rules are hula rules: Shirts tucked in. Belts if there are belt loops on the hula shorts. No sweatshirts or sweaters tied around shoulders or waist. Ask ten- or fifteen-year veterans of the halau, and they will laugh and agree, "We don't even go to the supermarket with our shirts untucked. We might see Mapu!" Performances are done without jewelry or makeup.

Students recount the joy of the preparation for performances, of making their first feather lei or 'uli'uli dance implement. No plastic or silk flowers here, everything is done by tradition, which can mean hours, even days or weeks, of sorting and sewing feathers. One of the toughest things to hear is kumu's soft scolding, "I can see space there, your feathers will get loose and not be beautiful. Go back. Try again." But no one complains. It is all part of learning the art of making hula costumes and implements.

Standing at the halau work table, multi-tasking as usual, Mapu's hands sort copies of chants. Her eyes dart around the room, seeing that all is ready for the next class. Her famous smile spreads across her face as she says, "Our halau is too traditional to win many awards because our traditions often require us to go against certain competition rules. Winning is always nice, but our greatest joys are in the preparation and presentation."

Leslie Mapuana Howell was a Kamehameha Schools student who transferred to Punahou School for her last two years of high school. Growing up, she was not part of a halau and had danced only with her mother or at school functions. In 1967, she and her sweetheart since eighth grade, Kihei de Silva, headed off to colleges on the Mainland. After graduating with a teaching degree in physical education, Mapu returned to the Islands to look for a teaching job and marry Kihei. In 1972, she found her way to the hula studio of Maiki Aiu Lake. She knew she was home.

"At twenty-three, I began to really learn 'auana, or modern hula. I was a sponge, soaking it all in," she remembers. Then she heard about Maiki's kahiko (ancient hula) class. "I was there on the right day, but I had a feeling that Aunty Maiki was surprised to see me. Thankfully, she didn't send me away." After three intense years, Aunty Maiki graduated Mapu with a formal and very intricate 'uniki—the same tradition that Mapu carries forward today.

Aunty Maiki's graduates include kumu hula Vicky Holt Takamine and Robert Cazimero. "I am the one who made the decision to 'keep the knowledge' as exact as I could," explains Mapu. "When I graduated, I wanted to keep dancing. The only way I could do that was to start my own halau." Her first students included her mother, other family members and close friends. Class was held in her parents' living room. Some of those first students are still with her, still dancing.

Mapu and Kihei have now been married for over thirty years. They move as one. They are yin and yang, offering their lives as examples of living Hawaiian culture. Kihei quotes a proverb from Mary Kawena Pukui, Aia ke ola i ka hana i ke ku a 'aha lua: There is life in work in partnership. Once a full-time teacher at the Kamehameha Schools, he now works translating chants and researching and working to perpetuate the culture. A Hawaiian language expert, he is a highly respected authority on ancient mele and teaches Hawaiian to Mapu's halau students. Mapu herself has served as kumu for the Kamehameha Schools' halau for twenty-eight years and also teaches hula and

oli (chant) at Ke Kula 'o Kamakau, a Hawaiian immersion school.

The de Silvas have two daughters, both Kamehameha graduates and University of Hawai'i scholarship students. Kahikina de Silva is working on her master's degree in English and teaches Hawaiian language at UH-Manoa. She hosts an all Hawaiian show, Kipuka Leo, on Sundays afternoons on the university's radio station, KTUH 90.3 FM. Kapalai'ula de Silva, an award-winning musician, is halfway through her undergraduate years. Both girls, who danced before they walked, will 'uniki with their mother.



photo: Linny Morris Cunningham

In 2000, Mapu took a group of dancers to the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts in New Caledonia. Held every four years in a different Pacific nation, the fest is the world's foremost celebration of Pacific art and culture. One day, fifty of the eighty-member Hawai'i delegation led by Mapu boarded a bus and headed north to dance in the outlying areas. They were headed for Poindimie, a full day's drive north of the capital, Noumea. The bus broke down in the mountains, was repaired in the rain, and the dancers arrived after dark. A "performance venue" had been prepared, and sound and lights were rigged up to the intermittent electricity. A tin-roof lean-to with old metal chairs was set up for the visiting dignitaries. Mapu describes the scene: "We were greeted by hundreds of Kanaks [native people], lining the road, in the pouring rain, waving scarves and what must have once been cardboard welcome signs. They had been standing there for five hours waiting for our arrival. It was so humbling." Later, the delegation learned that most of the Kanaks walked for two to three days, from their even more remote northern villages, just to see "Hawai'i."

Mapu's dedication to sharing traditional hula has taken her around the world. This year Mapu again led a delegation to the Festival of Pacific Arts, this time to Palau. On the other end of the spectrum, every year Mapu and her teenage dancers perform centerstage for Disney's Magic Music Days. "This is a real eye-opener for the girls," Kihei says. "They haven't really thought about how fragile our culture can be. Now they are presenting Hawaiian hula and language in a foreign setting. They realize that the rest of the world is not always like home."

It took some time for Mapu to be comfortable taking hula beyond the Islands. "Year after year, we cringed as we watched 'modern dance hula' offered up as 'traditional' hula," explains Mapu. "I finally realized that I can't be critical of what isn't pono (right) if I don't offer a chance for people to learn the true hula tradition." It is now a mission for the halau. Her workshops in Washington D.C. and Colorado sometimes sell out a year in advance.

In her newest teaching adventure, Mapu has invited a group of forty-five women—from across America and beyond—to join a five-year program to graduate as 'olapa. These women, all professionals and some already hula teachers, have made a major commitment: Each year they come to Honolulu for a week of intense study with Mapu. They have just completed the second year, sharing condos, cars and stories. One gave her husband a bloody nose, smacking him in bed, "dancing hula in my sleep." Another, a kumu from the West Coast, lost students when she began to fine tune her teaching to reflect Mapu's lessons. A dance therapist from London who gave up ballet to concentrate on hula as a healing art tells of her daily solo practices. A California halau assistant quit her job, packed up and moved to the Islands, "following her hula dream." They all agree that their lives are richer for their commitment.

It is often said that hula is not just a dance, it is a way of life. I have been dancing with Mapu for the last sixteen years, and in that time, she has influenced my writing, my art, my family and my spirituality—in fact, she has changed my entire life. Every week, I drive over the Pali to class and meet my hula sisters. Mapu greets us with her smile, and we take our places. "E ho'omakaukau," she says, and we get ready to dance.