

A male hula dancer is captured in a dynamic pose, wearing a traditional costume. He has a green leafy lei around his head and neck, and multiple beaded bracelets on his wrists. His hands are held out in a specific hula gesture. He wears a bright orange top and a yellow skirt with a pink waistband. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

The Ha'a Condition

The health of the kino hula

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Ke ha‘a la puna i ka makani la

To the hula ‘ōlapa who initiate the wind
and give vitality to the mele



The Ha‘a Condition - Introduction

Across our Pae‘āina there are many ancestral practices that have survived the test of time. One of those practices is Hula. In the 1800’s the Christian missionaries thought the art licentious and lascivious and the disapprobation of Hula was sought. Despite the challenge of abandonment during the coming of Christianity to the islands and due to the tenacity of Kupuna hula is alive and vibrantly practiced today not only across our state but much to this author's surprise, across the world. Hula is international and like any other international past time there exist only a handful of true Hula experts. Who are the hula experts? They are the physically conditioned, the highly trained, the high performing ‘ōlapa hula who will for the most part benefit from this information. Having stated this, it is believed that this information will benefit all hula dancers whatever their level of physical investment. This book contains information based on the knowledge and experience of a hula dancer of 40 continuous years with the most physically demanding hula hālau in the world. The demands on the dancer is simply due to the natural origins of this particular hālau’s tradition, that being the volcanic element. As readers will be able to glean, the Hula or its archaic label, the Ha‘a, should not be entered into lightly. There is more than just what's seen on stage involved in this artform. Those that choose the path of traditional Hula must be prepared to be more than just a dancer. In this seemingly free flowing grace there is a right way and a wrong way. This writing will explain the elemental factors, the ceremony, ritual, meditative circumstances, the allowances and the physical demands. This book is will be followed by videos that will demonstrate appropriate stretches, exercises that enhance surrounding joint muscles specifically those that surround the knee, calisthenics and exercises that highlight possible muscle recruitment.

This writing is informational based on 40 years of knowledge and experience of a student of a physically demanding hula hālau. The years of physical therapy, cortisone shots, and resisting early retirement is the reason for this information. I hope the active hula students who find themselves hedging these conditions will find some benefit in this writer's advice.

Ceremony and Rítual



Hula begins with our natural world. Hula is the abstract form of water cycles, volcanic cycles, energy transfer, and reproduction. The responsibility of a hula dancer is reciprocation to these natural processes in the form of dance and adornment. This reciprocation is done through the ceremony. For a hula dancer at the appropriate skill level the ceremony is bounded by time, location, and specific actions which create a space outside of the mundane for recognition and connection of and to the natural world.

For this simple reason, preparation, consultation and organization for a hula dancer is imperative. When participating in or leading ceremonies, the following are important considerations.

Tradition

Tradition is imperative. To conduct a ceremony one must come from either a lineage of practice or a blood connected lineage because lineage is the “library” of ceremonial resources and lineage is the ‘aha or the connection that reaches back generations. There are certain components that lineages have in common due to necessity and relevance. Water for example has remained a required element of ceremony. This representation can be in the form of ‘awa ceremony or cleansing i.e. pikai, or kapu kai. Another ceremonial tradition that has a high probability of commonality amongst lineages is an audible presentation of prayer or pule. The intentions must be audibled much like wind through trees, ulili skimming over the coasts or auwae bubbling through water ways. Mele is the “sound” that man imbues to audible the intention.

Relevance

Yes, tradition is imperative but attitude, outlook, and environment change as time goes on therefore ceremony requirements must reflect the time. Hula dancers as tradition keepers know the necessity of innovation to experience the relevance of our practice. We must continually ask the question; how does this ceremony reflect today’s world or How should this ceremony exist in the present? Therefore we continuously strive to keep the elements of tradition and lineage but live in the present.

Deference

For the purpose of meditation in ceremony, this description particularly will hold deference to both Laka and Kapō‘ulakīna‘u. In a physically demanding art such as Hula there is a point during the endurance of dance that deference occurs. This is submission to the ceremony. What does this feel like? Athletes call it “being in the zone”. It is a point in the dance or ceremony when a dancer “feels” rather than “thinks”. Humans eventually and rightfully yield to the physical world and the Hula ‘ōlapa especially realize this.

Repetition

Repetition is practice and practice initiates and creates muscle memory. Repetition in hula is necessary. In Hula ceremony it provides foundation and then growth. Foundational understanding is formed in the beginning stages of learning. Growth comes through repetitive performances of the ceremony. Perfection and endurance occurs when muscle memory is established.

Preparation

From the time of our kupuna, significant ceremony demands prep time to appropriately complete ceremonial elements. Materials need to be gathered, mele need to be reviewed and/or learned sequencing has to be confirmed. These preparatory tasks are necessary for perfection. Perfection in ceremony is the ultimate goal.

Ha'a Ha'ena me Hopoe



Adherence to Nature, Ho‘okupu and Kūahu

Last but not least, as mentioned previously Hula is the abstract representation of Nature. The purpose of ceremony to a hula dancer is reciprocation to the natural world. Therefore, the hula dancer’s role in a ceremony is the ho‘okupu or the offering itself which is a combination of the dancer, a mele to audible the intention, and a lei as a representation of the forest. Also crucial to the ceremony is the focal point in which the prayer and focus are delivered. This focal point is the Kuahu. “Ku” to ascend or rise up, and “ahu” a structure of storage and collection. This edifice of the Kuahu is the representation of elevation of hula dancers through combined knowledge of mele, hula, ceremony, family and practice experienced in the hālau.

This is the ceremony and as mentioned before, this is the hula dancer. These components of ceremony also describe the components of a hula dancer. A dancer needs to come from a lineage of Hula, a dancer needs to be relevant which means a viable physical Hula specimen able to deliver perfection for their kumu, a dancer is the forest through repetition and achieving muscle memory, and lastly, a dancer is the ho‘okupu as they hold their ceremonies in the presence of their Kuahu and hence their natural world. .



Ha'a in Meditation

Internalized meditation

The dictionary definition of meditation is to engage in thought or contemplation, to reflect, quiescent spiritual introspection. For a hula dancer this definition parallels that of a practice session or a performance. Practice sessions may allow some distractions because this is where repetition and correction occur but performances are focused and precise.

Dancers are fully engaged in performances. There are several reasons for dancers' intense focus. One reason is the preparation process that occurs prior to the performance. The hula is a ceremony and like a static ceremony there is much preparation. The dancer begins to submerge into the performance days before, specifically at the lei gathering and making. Then ironing and adjusting is the next process. The dancer submerges further when donning their a'ahu. In the preparation and costuming, a dancer's focus is a "built-in" meditative process. A dancer is also required to reach the status of total engagement during practice sessions. It is expected that all Hula practices are attended with intention, leaving life at the door when they enter the hālau. If a dancer is totally engaged, they would have a direct connection to the efforts the body employs in practice. Attention to the body allows intensifying or controlling recruitment of other muscles.

Dancing is a meditation

As stressed upon in prior writings, Hula reflects nature. Thus meditation in and out of the dance is sought. When a dancer is outside of the practice room or performance they will almost always search out the movement in nature. This type of pondering is characteristic of a meditative state. In the dance, however, the dancer is the movement in nature by using that obtained vision and to emanate that vision of nature's movements. In order to use a visual obtained while in nature, the dancer is required to know the mele, required to interpret the mele and be able to audible the mele. This brings the dancer into a synchronous state with all necessary components of Hula which are the dancer, the mele, and nature. In this state the dancer is in full meditation. Is there a way to be in this state while not a part of the dance? Yes, with exceptions. When attempting to dive into this state the intention is now apparent, in contrast, when a dancer is in sync there is no intention of meditation, there is just the dance. So, outside of the dance, the search for this state necessitates intention. Intention is found in the visualization of nature. Therefore, one must recall a moving visual observed in nature and keep it for several counts.

It is beneficial for people not immersed in the dance to be able to access nature's details such as the flow of water over rocks, a crab running from rock to rock, perhaps even follow the tangle of a hau bush with your eyes or the rising dust and gas cloud from the crater. These are all visuals of nature. Movement is easier to keep in your mind so one might want to observe an element that is moving. Then whenever one is waiting in line, waiting to get onstage, or just want a calm mind, recall the moving visual and keep it for several counts. "Counts" may be controlled by breaths. Keep the visual in mind for 12-15 breaths with a 4 count for exhalation and inhalation. Come up to the surface then back down into the meditation with another collected visual and keep the breathing pattern or change patterns.





Recommendations for the High Per- forming 'ōlapa

This writing is a list of instructions. Beginner hula dancers, or those who've been on a long break from the practice will probably not benefit from this writing. However, if you are either one of the alaka'i 'ōlapa or in the 'ōlapa level this is a must read and follow.

DO....Warm up

Warm up promotes and catalyzes fluidity. The “warm up” allows the dancer to wake-up sleeping tight muscles and prepares them for work. If a dancer engages in the performance portion of practice without a warm up muscles that were either disengaged or involved in another task will be ill-prepared. The warm up portion of the practice sessions allow the dancer to gradually enter into the strains of the dance. A launch into the dance will result in jarring.

DO.....Maintain a consistent weight

Here is the issue with constant weight gain and loss. The muscle that is the powerhouse of a hula dancer belongs to both the rectus femoris anterior quadricep and the muscles bounded by the Iliotibial tract specifically the vastus lateralis. The rectus femoris runs across the knee joints. The already very large vastus lateralis is a muscle that is partially covered by the rectus femoris and is attached to the hip joint. It extends from the front to the back of your thigh. Therefore this is the muscle we work, and depend on to carry us up, down, back and forth in our dances. It becomes rather large after a matter of years. Due to the fact that this muscle is bounded by the IT bands which are attached to the knee at one end and to the hip at the other the growth of the vastus lateralis pushes on the IT band which thereby pulls on the knee joint. This is a common injury amongst hula dancers whose weight fluctuates constantly. If you become heavier, the muscle will adjust to the weight change and work harder, if the dancer loses weight the muscle may lose mass. This will cause unnecessary movement of the knee due to its attachment to the IT bands. There is one population of dancers who are more likely to suffer these pains, these are female dancers of child bearing years. Therefore, the ideal scenario would be for pregnant dancers to refrain from active dancing from month 4 of pregnancy to 6 weeks after giving birth.

DO.....Keep a regime of calisthenics

The video following this document will present a short list of helpful movements that will build supporting muscles. Goals are to one; sensitize the dancer to other muscles particularly the core, back, and hamstrings that can be recruited to carry the dancer other than those of the outside anterior thigh muscles. Much like an athlete engaging the core and the latissimus in order to complete a high number of push-ups, a hula dancer can engage gluteus, hamstring and perhaps core muscles to either support or stand in for those two quad muscles that we fall back on in hula. Two; these movements will strengthen surrounding muscles in the hamstrings, core and glutes for the purpose of support and flexibility when performing daily activities.

As mentioned previously, the IT band is attached to the hip at one end and the knee at the other. If a dancer does not take the time to stretch the stiffness in the hip muscles and joint will pull the knee outward. Stretching outside of the practice hālau is required, not just optional.

DON'T.....perform “turn-outs”

A turn-out position is fundamental in ballet and western modern dance. In order to do a turn-out type of movement a dancer must move in heels and face toes outward to the side. This means that your knees are not in line with the center of one's body. The proper alignment of a hula dancer's body is as follows: toes face forward, knees are lined up over toes and hips are facing the same as the knees and toes, shoulders square with hip bones. There is never a time when your knees are facing differently than the direction of the dancer. There may be an instance that this writing may point to in a choreography however in training, in learning fundamental movement of hula, alignment is key. There are many instances where the artistry may take the shoulder line to almost a perpendicular alignment with the bottom half for a very short period of time but the feet, knees and hip line will always stay in one direction.

DON'T.....Put all your weight only on your toes

As mentioned before in a prior document, Hula mimics nature. The hula dancer's stance has purpose and intention. As a tree, the hula dancer is fully aware that the biggest part of the tree is the one closest to the ground. In deference to the volcano, a hula dancer is aware of the origin of that energy. For these reasons, a hula dancer's foundation and strongest position is flat footed and close to the ground. The greater the area in contact with the ground the greater the dancer's stability. In basic steps such as the 'uwehe the heels of the feet come off the ground slightly and instantaneously. In half a second the foot is flat again. However, true to the principle of low stance, a dancer's knees are always in a bent position even while lifting the heels off the floor for that specific movement. For a running quick step or the 'aiholo, dancers are asked to go to the balls of their feet, again the knees are bent and the muscle engaged would be the same quadricep muscle due to the fact that the dancer will stand flat footed and bend their knees until the heels rise from the floor rather than just stand on the balls of the feet. Please keep in mind that this “DON'T” point is aimed at hula dancers only.

DO.....Form a line from elbow to elbow crossing a straight line from base of neck to tail bone.

This form is not only a replication of nature, it is also a replication of ceremonial pieces. For example in nature it is Newe (southern cross), in ceremony it is the akua loa traveling around the island in the time of the makahiki. As mentioned before, the dancer is human's abstract likeness to nature. Making sure the lines we form with our body are noticed and are possible to interpret is key. Once those lines are formed with arms and back, we can also address the spaces that are formed within the lines.

DO.....Be cautious when performing cardio fitness movements.

This point is crucial for veteran hula dancers to remember. Cardio fitness is extremely important for dancers. High performing hula dancers are highly encouraged to engage in cardio exercises at least 2-3 times a week outside of studio practice. However, high impact cardio movements can be detrimental to a dancer especially if pain was previously experienced in the knees. It is recommended to engage in low impact cardio. Bicycle spinning is excellent as it builds up the quadricep and allows that muscle to balance the “pull” that occurs due to the limits of the IT band. Another excellent cardio fitness is swimming. Swimming promotes healthy breathing techniques. For high performing hula dancers who regularly perform 20-30 minute hula sets, establishing a breathing rhythm is essential and swimming can help this practice. Another benefit to swimming is the feel of resistance when moving. Many times a kumu hula’s choreography calls for a resistant like force to a motion. Moving a hand, or a leg through water resembles this choreography, to clarify its the creating of a push or a pull on a motion versus simple placement of the hand.

DO.....Balance the inputs and the outputs

There are several descriptors that fall under this category of inputs and outputs. Most of these descriptors regard one’s physical input and outputs.

Breathe - yes, simply breathe, inhalation and exhalation must be the same. This may sound like a “no-brainer” but when a dancer is at a skill level in which their bodies are put through extreme conditions, 20% of the time the dancer does not complete a full breath. For instance, if the dancer has completed 5 minutes worth of warm-ups, their breathing pattern will hold their breath approximately 1 minute out of the 5. This is not a conscious act. If this practice continues the dancer will not be able to keep up a quality performance

As mentioned before, if you are a high-level performing hula dancer, you have overworked your outer quadricep muscles especially the rectus femoris and those muscles around your IT bands. Also, as mentioned before, these muscles are beginning to pull on your knees. Therefore outside of practice you must immediately perform exercises that work on your inner quads such as bicycling, swimming, or wall sits.

Water - again, another simple yet overlooked bodily need is water. A high performing student will perspire at least a half a gallon of water a practice. It is very important that this same amount of water be returned to the body immediately. Like plants, our bodies, specifically our muscles will “wilt” so to speak, if more water is perspired out of your body than being put into your body. Your muscles will then start to “burn” and “strain”. Hence, water plays a huge role in muscle maintenance.



Ke lū la i nā pua lehua nānā i kai o

Hopoe e

When the lehua flower scatters, pay heed to the source

The Bare Necessities

The 5 fitness elements of a hula 'ōlapa

The five pointed dancer.

As a high performing dancer there are 5 things that are a part of your physical being. These 5 things are...

Endurance

Isolation

Balance

Breathe

Core strength and extension

Endurance

The requirements of a high performing dancer are long vibrant, exciting sets of dances. Sometimes these sets last for 45 minutes and a dancer must perform at 100% from beginning to end. There are several cardio exercises in which hula dancers engage to maintain their endurance. Running, bicycle, swimming, calisthenics, hiking and walking are all adequate endurance exercises. However, when ultimate endurance is the goal for a high performing 'ōlapa, then a high intensity interval training type of cardio routine is necessary. The repetitive short resting periods and long intense reps is characteristic of a set of dances, therefore it would be beneficial if the cardio routine resembles the dancers on-stage reality.

Following this reader are video that demonstrates a variety of movements both resisting and flexing that will help sensitize the dancer to the supportive muscles and those muscles that can be recruited to perform the dance. These movements will also sensitize the dancer to issues, or twinges that may become problematic if muscle strain continues. This may be where a problem lies when engaging in cardio for endurance. It is imperative that a dancer become aware of their body to this extent.

Isolation

In all Hula choreography there is a necessity to move one part of the body and isolate the movements of other parts or vice versa. For instance, if the hips are moving then in most choreography the shoulders and shoulder line, the head, and the knees are still. Therefore isolation of body sections are part of a dancers kinesthetic knowledge base.

Balance

Part of the kinesthetic culture of the Hula is a flat-footed stance. Again, this is due to the reflective nature of the environment. A dancer has the advantage of the surface area of the entirety of both feet through the dance. The necessity of a dancers balance comes in the sudden stop, set, and execution of movements of the dance, and there are a great number of these movements.

A home stance for a dancer is a shoulder width stance, with the clavicle, noes and toes all facing in the same direction, chest out, weight on heels with balls of the feet and the toes providing a lever of balance. Therefore, when a dancer turns in accordance to the choreography, it is necessary to set one's body in order to go accurately execute the step, then, again, in accordance to the choreography, pivot and set up again for the step. This is all done instantaneously. It requires balance, and again, after a long set, it also requires endurance. If a dancer does not posses both, the weaker one will undermine the other.

Breathe

Either a pattern or just a normal rhythm, a dancers breath needs to continuously and consistently have an intake and out-push. This may be obvious, but in this writers experience, beginning dancers or dancers who are not in peak physical condition do not have a breathing pattern and therefore hold their breath for a time, or commence a very shallow pattern. This practice quickly inhibits a dancer's endurance and thereby all of the other very important points of dancing i.e. balance, quality of dance, and muscle awareness. There are exercises specifically breathing meditations, and cardio that can assist in improving a dancer's breathing practice. As mentioned in the "Do's and Don't's" section a very beneficial cardio exercise to promote a personal respiration pattern is swimming. When swimming, one is forced to take a breath in at a certain point and let it out at a certain point, but nonetheless one is always forced to breathe. For instance, a swimmer can breathe one breath when the head turns to the side and one breath out when face down in the water, or do a short double inhale when the head is turned out and one big exhale when face down in the water, or any combination that suits. When meditating one can adopt an intentional breathing pattern and practice moving in and out of that breathing pattern. Also, as mentioned before practice and repetition leads to muscle memory, hence, breathing practice is crucial.

Core

For hula dancers, the core is the section of the body that will hold a dancer up, allow a dancer to hold a position, radiate resistance in a motion, and allow a dancer to isolate. The dancers core runs from the 'elemu (backside) to the breast. Especially in floor positions, a dancer's core takes the place of mobility foot movements when standing and displays dynamic turns and level changes both up and down and back and forth. A strong core will keep a dancer healthy.



When performing floor movements for instance, a body's core is responsible for a perfect back bend movement. By using the core muscles both posterior and anterior, a dancer does not always have to rely on their thigh ('uhā, IT) muscles to do this. When dancing, quick, strong twists of the upper body will bring the other parts of the body along. All of these aspects of the dance benefit from a strong core.

Static core exercises that engage the back as well as the abdominals such as planks are most effective for a dancer. Also, standing core exercises are especially helpful when using your core to lift your legs or hips. If a rowing machine is accessible, this too is an ideal exercise to do. The videos display a set of standing core movements that dancers can follow.

Summary

To be other than healthy is not an option for a high performing hula dancer. In order to be a healthy and thriving dancer that gives back to his environment there are 5 components of fitness that a hula dancer must possess. Endurance is the key to a perfect performance from beginning to end. The time span from beginning to end may be as long as 45 minutes and nothing but perfection is expected from minute 1 to minute 45. Its a requirement to build up endurance and any cardio exercise will suffice. There are cardio exercises that will benefit a dancer in other areas besides endurance that may be more of an efficient expenditure of time. Swimming, paddling, and rowing are examples of efficient cardio exercises. The other component of a dancer is isolation. In traditional choreography, there never is an instance that a dancer moves there whole body at any one point. There are either foot movements only, hand movements only, or most commonly both foot and hand movements, which means hands are isolated from foot and vice versa. This requires muscle awareness, and this is basic Hula knowledge. Balance is very important. Although unlike classical ballet where a dancer's whole weight is put on a small foundation, hula dancers are nevertheless put in difficult positions where balance is necessary. In Hula, there are sudden stops, starts and turns and a dancer needs to be balanced in order to anticipate the next movement. Breathing patterns and a consistent intake-output of breath is mandatory. If a dancer cannot maintain a steady exhalation of breath from start to finish, dancing components start to break down. As mentioned before, swimming is an excellent cardio exercise for a dancer and practicing a steady breathing pattern in swimming is key.

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HAWAII TOURISM

