

Feature



Hula Kahiko Terry Walker*

A 'hula haumana' (hula student) describes her historical recreation of attire for performing the ancient form of Hawaiian hula, 'hula kahiko'.

For a couple of years I kicked around the idea of doing a traditional Hawaiian *hula* costume to enter at Costume-Con. I have studied *hula* for about a decade, but I am not Hawaiian, I'm not from Hawai'i, and have never been to Hawai'i. I took a dance class on a whim and by the second class I was hooked. I love the poetry of the music and the flow of the movement. Most people think grass-skirts-and-coconut-bras when they picture hula, and I enjoy showing people what the dance really is. Last year I found the inspiration for a costume in a chant describing the story of Hi'iaka.

An epic story in Hawaiian culture is of Pele, the goddess of fire, and her family of cloud bearers coming from Tahiti and settling in Hawai'i. Pele has many sisters; her youngest and favorite is Hi'iakaikapoliopele [Hi'iaka in the bosom

Attire for ancient *kahiko* style of *hula*, consisting of *pa'u* (skirt) and wrapped top, *lei po'o* (head) on head, and *kupe'e* (bracelet/anklet) on wrists and ankles. Photo: Ken Warren.



of Pele]. In one part of the tale, Hi'iaka embarks on a journey to bring Pele's lover, Lohi'auipo, to her on the big island. Among the many perils Hi'iaka encounters along the way is a torrential rainstorm. The chant "A Ko'olau Au" describes this event. This is the chant that I performed to. I chose colors, symbols, and greenery for my costume that represented Hi'iaka.

My costume is in the *kahiko* style of *hula*. (*Kahiko*, which means ancient, is the style of *hula* to chanting and percussion, and is the old, traditional style. *Auana* is the modern style danced to music.) It has a *pa'u* (skirt) and wrapped top. Pre-missionary contact, it would have been a *pa'u* made of a bark cloth called *kapa* and worn without a top. Nowadays, neither of those is practical.

Skirts

A *pa'u* is a skirt worn by hula dancers, made of fabric, *kapa* cloth, ti leaves, or raffia. If the side of the *pa'u* is open, it is tied with rope; if the side is sewn up, the waistband is elasticized. The skirt is worn on the high hip or at the waist and is between knee or mid-calf length.

Historically, Hawaiian garments were made of *kapa* cloth that was wrapped around the body as clothing or draped over the shoulder to connote one's status. *Kapa* is made from the *wauke* tree, which is a type of mulberry. When the missionaries to Hawai'i

introduced fabric, *kapa* production fell by the wayside. It is still made today by a handful of artisans, but on a very small scale. Most dancers wear fabric *pa'u*, but if they require something that resembles *kapa*, Pellon is used. It mimics the drape of *kapa* and can be dyed and stamped.

There is protocol covering the wearing of a *pa'u*. In all lines of tradition, your practice *pa'u* is to be revered. What I have learned through my different *Halau* (hula schools) is that 1) I am never to put on my *pa'u* or take it off by stepping into or out of it—it must go on or come off over my head, 2) I am not to eat in the *pa'u*, and 3) I am not to go *lua* (potty) in the *pa'u*. Other schools have other rules, e.g., put the *pa'u* on overhead, step out of it to take it off; do not hem it because that symbolizes a cutting off of your knowledge; the color represents where you are in your progress as a dancer.

A *pa'u* that is strictly a costume does not require as many rules. If you have to do a fast change, that *pa'u* might have to be put on by stepping in. There are also *pa'u* worn for ceremonial purposes that might require the dancer to dye and stamp or paint the it in a certain way. It is treated with more reverence than a practice *pa'u* and is considered to have your *mana* (spiritual power) in it. I treated my *pa'u* as a costume.

As a side note, something that I hear occasionally is that a *pa'u* should be a width of 5 yards or 3 yards. I once heard that Hawaiians consider those to be sacred numbers, but I have absolutely no

substantiation for that. What I do know is that no one gets offended by a 5 yard *pa'u*.

For my costume I wore three *pa'u*. My base layer *pa'u* was 5 yards of Pellon 830/patternmaking, dyed in the washer with Rit Cocoa Brown without prewashing. I air dried it. I chose brown to represent the land, and the stamped symbols are my interpretation of mountains. It came out very well, with no tears or pilling, which surprised me because Pellon 830 isn't made to be apparel. I chose it because it was the only non-fusible that was 45" wide.

The main *pa'u* is green for plant life. I dyed 5 yards of cotton muslin with iDye Kelly Green and then overdyed it with a little bit of black fiber reactive dye. The stamped symbols are a flower and woven



Design drawn on graph paper and transferred to flexible craft foam. Acrylic paint was sponged on stamp and pressed onto fabric.

lauhala at the bottom. *Lauhala* is the dried leaf of the pandanus (screwpine) used for weaving. At one point in the story, Hi'iaka dances in the pandanus groves.

The overskirt represents the sky and clouds, and was colored a blue gray for that reason. Pellon 40/craft, chosen for its stiffness, was dyed using 1 part latex paint mixed with 3 parts water. I used latex paint because I reasoned, correctly, that if it didn't wash out of the clothing that I got it on accidentally, it wouldn't wash out of the fabric I wanted it on intentionally. I dunked the Pellon into a bucket of the paint mixture, wrung it out and laid it out to dry.

There was a slight unevenness in the color due to the surface I dried it on. Next time I use this dyeing method I will deliberately dry it on a more textured surface for greater effect, as the paint settles in the lower areas.

The style of overskirt that I wore is used mostly on men over their *malo* (loincloth) but is occasionally seen on women. It is two pieces tied in front and back with a strip of black fabric, with the fabric also wrapping around the waist as a belt to hold up the overskirt. The stamp of stars was not only to signify the sky but also because the Hawaiian name given to me by my *Kumu* (master teacher) is "Waileia," which is the ancient word for the morning star. I chose two different stars because I couldn't decide which one I liked better.

To make the stamps, I drew designs on graph paper with pencil and rubbed them

onto sheets of flexible craft foam. I cut the designs out in stacks of three glued on top of each other to make enough depth. These were then glued to foam board. I used two layers of foam board, but that was not quite thick enough for a good hand hold.

Acrylic paint was sponged onto the stamp and then the stamp carefully pressed on the fabric. The acrylic will not wash out of fabric, so there are no second chances with this process. Let me just say that this is not something I'm good at. But I decided that from far away, no one would see the mistakes.

Bloomers may or may not be considered a traditional part of a dancer's uniform. I have seen traditional dances performed with and without them. I chose to wear them to avoid my underwear showing, but as it turned out my skirts never flew up that high. I dyed them turquoise using a cold water dye to represent the ocean. They didn't dye evenly, and I think that was because I used an old sheet that was worn more in some places than others.

The top is black cotton sateen fabric and a 15-yard, 9-inch strip of the same fabric twisted and wrapped around it. I chose black as a neutral color because I wanted to emphasize my skirts.

Leis

I wore several *leis*—a *lei mali* around my neck, *lei po'o* (head) on my head, and *kupe'e* (bracelet/anklet) on my wrists and ankles. A *lei* is defined as something

ornamental that circles a part of the body. The kukui nut ankle leis are strung on black elastic cording to keep them on. You can buy them pre-strung, but I like mine a little bigger so I strung them myself.

One of the constraints that I had was getting fresh greenery to make the other *leis*. I wanted greenery that corresponded with the story of Hi'iaka—*pala'a* lace fern and pandanus leaves. Pandanus leaves are available where I live (Washington, DC) but were too large to transport. When I tried cutting them, they went bad pretty quickly.

I wasn't able to get the lace fern before I left for Costume-Con, so I decided to see what was available in Charleston. I substituted Palmetto, which I cut from the side of the road, for pandanus. I was able to get a plumosa fern from a local florist to replace the lace fern. Bad choice. That type of fern sheds all over everything it touches



Lehua blossom.



Kukui nut ankle leis strung on black elastic.

and didn't have the volume of the lace fern, so I needed a whole lot of it.

Lei haku is a braided style and was used for the wrists. Palmetto and raffia were braided together. *Lei wili* style was used for the head and is characterized by twisting or braiding a material into a strip and using more material as a wrap for the flowers and greenery. In this case, fern, palmetto, *lehua* flowers and raffia were used.



Making the faux *lehua* flowers.



Lei hilo worn around the neck is made by twisting base of ti leaves around each other.

I also used ti leaves because they are commonly used to make Hawaiian *leis*. The ti leaves were brought from home because they have a wonderful property—if you heat them (iron on low heat), they become pliant and can be frozen and re-thawed. The neck lei is made from the ti leaves in style called *lei hilo*, made by twisting the base of the ti leaves around each other.

Hi‘iaka is also associated with groves of *lehua* trees, whose flowers are impossible to obtain in my area and are too fragile for reliable shipping. So these are man-made. I made the *lehua* flowers by taking the bristles

from a scrub brush and hot gluing them to a small piece of fabric that I shaped into a cone. I stuck a piece of floral wire into the center for a stem. Spray paint was used to give them their red color. (I had tried latex paint, which did not work well). The “flower” base was wrapped in floral tape.

Because the wrist and head *leis* had to be made the day of the competition to be fresh, I spent the afternoon working on them before judging and rehearsal. And because I finished the fabric stamping the day before leaving, and was working on other costumes while in Charleston, I never tried on the entire costume before competing. I didn’t actually see what I looked like until after I performed, and while there are tweaks that I would have made, I’m quite satisfied that it looked much as I had envisioned.



Finished *lei po'o*. Photo: Ken Warren.

The Performance

I tried to be mindful, in choosing the chant for the performance, that this was a presentation to show off the costume. Most hulas to chants don’t involve a lot of turns, so you don’t see the back very often or not for an extended time. I considered walking around the stage to a recited chant in order to show all aspects of the costume. But then I remembered that the second verse of “A Ko’olau ‘Au,” as taught to me by Kumu Kimo Awai, has the dancer turn in a square, and I knew that would be the perfect piece to display the costume.

Choosing a recording was difficult because none of them matched the version of the chant that I learned. I ultimately chose the one that sounded the clearest. I also didn’t want to be on stage too long because this was a costume competition, not a show. I asked a friend who is an audio whiz to edit the piece to one time through the first and second verses and remove extraneous beats, which involved me writing the whole song as a score for him to reference – something I haven’t done in a LONG time. But he did a great job; the final track sounds seamless.

There were a few hiccups in the performance. The lights blinded me, so I was unsure of my position on stage and felt my arms flailed a bit when I was afraid that I would fall off. I tried to use the whole stage, but hadn’t rehearsed it that way, and it threw off my positioning. I could also see that the skirt was not full enough and didn’t move

well. The underskirt acts as a crinoline, and it needed a second and maybe a third one.

Final Thoughts

I was surprised and pleased that I won Best in Class for Presentation in the Novice division. I thought that I might win a cheeky award like “Best Use of Interfacing” or “Best Adaptation of a Scrub Brush”, so I was floored that I also won a real award, for “Best Interpretation of Traditional Design with Modern Techniques.”

My goals were to create a traditional *hula kahiko* costume being respectful of the Hawaiian traditions and culture, show people what *hula* is, and get out of my comfort zone by competing. I feel that I achieved my goals with this project.

Bibliography

“Kane: The Rise of Men,” by Wanda Adams / Special to the Star-Advertiser on March 31, 2013.



Performing a *hula kahiko* to “A Ko’olau ’Au” in the Costume-Con 33 historical masquerade. Images from the masquerade video by Eric Cannon, [Rare Recorded DVDs](#).

A Ko’olau Au

A Ko’olau wau ’ike i ka ua
E kokolo a lepo mai ana e ka ua
E ka’i kū ana ka’i mai ana e ka ua
E nū mai ana ka ua i ke kuahiwi
E po’i ana e ka ua me he nalu
E puka, e puka mai ana ka ua
Weli, ke one i ka heli ia e ka ua
Holowai nā kahawai
Koke wale nā pali
Hae e ka wai ka ilina he ’ilio
He ’ilio hae ke nahu nei

From Ko’olau, I watch the rain
It comes with swirling dust
The rain passed in columns, it passed by
The rain roars in the mountain
It sounds like the roar of the surf I
t smites, it smites, now the land
The sands were pelted by the rain
The creek beds filled, water ran down
It poured down the hillsides
The waters became angry and raged like a dog
The dog rages, he bites to be free

Source: Bishop Museum, Mader Collection 1930-35, Kanahale Ka’io tradition. This hula tells of Hi’iaka’s journey to Kaua’i to bring Lohiau back to Pele. Among the many obstacles she encountered was the rain at Ko’olaupoko, Oahu. Only the first six lines are usually performed today. [Listen on YouTube](#).

Ka Hana Tapa: The Making of Bark Cloth in Hawaii, by William Tufts Brigham. Bishop Museum Press, Honolulu, HI 1911.

“Kukula Ke Ea A Kanaloa: A Culture Plan for Kanaloa Kaho’olave,” by Dr. Pualani Kanaka’ole Kanahale. Edith Kanaka’ole Foundation, February 1, 2009.

Terry Walker has been sewing for forty years but didn’t know about historical/sci fi/fantasy costuming until a few years ago. At her first convention she knew she had found her people. She and her husband live in Washington, DC.