

How did the Missionaries Feel about Hula?



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(Missionary CS Stewart)

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"Hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." (attributed to Kalākaua)

"Their dances ... are prefaced with a slow, solemn song, in which all the party join, moving their legs, and gently striking their breasts, in a manner, and with attitudes, that are perfectly easy and graceful" (Captain Cook Journal, 1779)

"Hula is not just a dance, but a way of life, an ancient art that tells of Hawai'i's rich history and spirituality." (attributed to many)

Did the Missionaries stop Hula?

Did the Missionaries really stop Hula in Hawai'i, as we are most often led to believe?

Open any book or read any article about surfing or hula and invariably there are definitive statements that the missionaries "banned" and/or "abolished" these activities.



However, in taking a closer look into the matter, most would likely come to a different conclusion.

First of all, the missionaries were guests in the Hawaiian Kingdom; they didn't have the power to ban or abolish anything - that was the right of the King and Chiefs.

Most will agree the missionaries despised the fact that Hawaiians typically surfed in the nude and that hula dancers were typically topless; they also didn't like the commingling between the sexes.

So, before we go on, we need to agree, the issue at hand is surfing and hula – not nudity and interactions between the sexes. In keeping this discussion on the actual activity and not sexuality, let's see what the missionaries had to say about surfing.

Let's look at Hula ...

As hula is the dance that accompanies Hawaiian mele, the function of hula is therefore an extension of the function of mele in Hawaiian society. While it was the mele that was the essential part of the story, hula served to animate the words, giving physical life to the mo'olelo (stories.) (Bishop Museum)

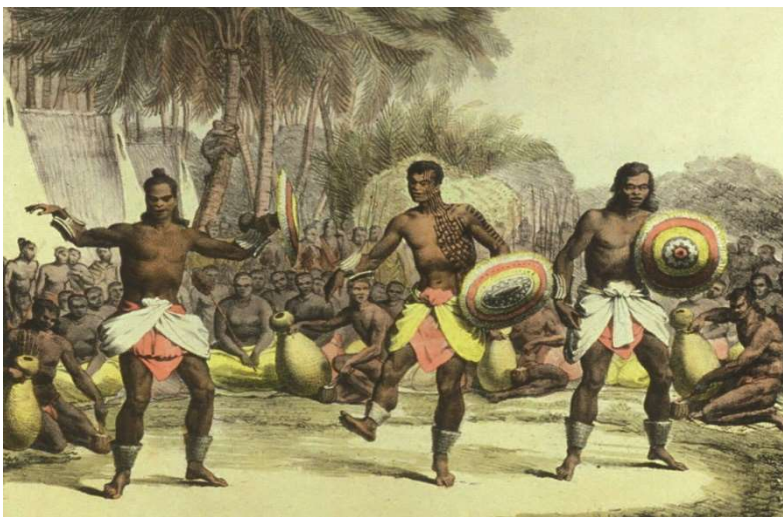
Hula combines dance and chant or song to tell stories, recount past events and provide entertainment for its audience. With a clear link between dancer's actions and the chant or song, the dancer uses rhythmic lower body movements, mimetic or depictive hand gestures and facial expression, as part of this performance. (ksbe-edu)

So what did the missionaries really think?

As Hiram Bingham once noted, they “were wasting their time in learning, practising, or witnessing the hula, or heathen song and dance.” (Remember, heathen simply means ‘without religion, as in without God.’)

Others were more supportive.

"The hula was a religious service, in which poetry, music, pantomime, and the dance lent themselves, under the forms of dramatic art, to the refreshment of men's minds. Its view of life was idyllic, and it gave itself to the celebration of those mythical times when gods and goddesses moved on the earth as men and women and when men and women were as gods." (Emerson, son of missionaries)



"(W)hen it comes to the hula and the whole train of feelings and sentiments that made their entrances and exits in the halau (the hall of the hula) one perceives that in this he has found the door to the heart of the people." (Emerson, son of Missionaries)

In describing a hula danced before Keōpūolani and her daughter Nāhi'ena'ena, in Lāhainā in 1823, Missionary CS Stewart wrote: "The motions of the dance were slow and graceful, and, in this instance,

free from indelicacy of action; and the song, or rather recitative, accompanied by much gesticulation, was dignified and harmonious in its numbers. The theme of the whole, was the character and praises of the queen and princess, who were compared to everything sublime in nature, exalted as gods." (Missionary Stewart)

In describing the challenges between commitment to hula, as well as their studies, Sybil Bingham, wife of Hiram noted, "... most of them (are) indeed in earnest to receive instruction as the conduct of each day testifies."

"Three of them are obliged to attend the hula hula every afternoon. At the close of the school this forenoon, and also last Saturday, they proposed going quickly to eat and return immediately that they might not lose the privilege of the bible lesson. ... We were gratified after the vigorous effort made for the hula hula to see our scholars both at public worship and sabbath school." (Sybil Bingham)

And how did Hiram Bingham feel (again, the one most often accused of a Hula ban?)

"This was intended, in part at least, as an honor and gratification to the king, especially at Honolulu, at his expected reception there, on his removal from Kailua. Apparently, not all hula was viewed as bad or indecent." (Missionary Hiram Bingham)

“In the hula, the dancers are often fantastically decorated with figured or colored kapa, green leaves, fresh flowers, braided hair, and sometimes with a gaiter on the ankle, set with hundreds of dog's teeth, so as to be considerably heavy, and to rattle against each other in the motion of the feet.” (Hiram Bingham)

“They had been interwoven too with their superstitions, and made subservient to the honor of their gods, and their rulers, either living or departed and deified.” (Hiram Bingham)

The missionaries most often opposed nudity, drinking and ‘wasting’ time. Even today, laws forbid nudity in public; frown on excessive drinking and, likewise, we tend to encourage people to be productive members of their community (kind of like the concerns expressed by the early missionaries, including Bingham.)

So what happened? Was hula ever effectively banned? Did hula stop?

“Missionary influence, while strong, never wiped out the hula as a functional part of the Hawaiian society. Faced with this undeniable fact, the authorities sought to curb performances by regulation.” (Barrere, Pukui & Kelly)



While not effectively stopping it completely, it does appear the missionaries did play a role on the Sabbath. "The king Kaumuali'i appears exceedingly interested in what he now learns from the bible through the interpretation of Honolii. The Capt. of the schooner informed us that last week the king sent out his crier, prohibiting dancing and work in the "Kalo patches" on the Sabbath. Honolii gives us some account of this in his letter to Mr. B."

“After giving many of the particulars relative to the king's desire to hear the word of the Great Jehovah he says "I, John, told the king 'your people have hula hula on the Sabbath day? The king say, yes' Then I

ask him, 'Can you wait hula hula on this day? Your people may hula hula on Monday, this day it is holy. Then king say we may stop hula hula on another Sabbath day.'" (Sybil Bingham)

In 1830, Ka'ahumanu issued an oral proclamation in which she instructed the people, in part: "The hula is forbidden, the chant (olioli), the song of pleasure (mele), foul speech, and bathing by women in public places." (Kamakau) Although it was apparently never formally rescinded, the law was so widely ignored, especially after Ka'ahumanu died in 1832, that it virtually ceased to exist.

Ka'ahumanu was not the only Ali'i who sought to ban hula: "A hula in the village today at the house formerly occupied by Kaomi."

"It was commenced at an early hour and continued until noon and was broken up only by the appearance of Kinau to put a stop to it. The notice that a hula was going on reached her and she sent word by Kalaaulana to Kaomi to put a stop to it & shut up the house". (Missionary Levi Chamberlain)

There are many references to King Kamehameha III regularly watching the hula. "The young king (Kamehameha III,) ... has been induced, however, to coincide with the other chiefs in all public acts."



"His conduct, therefore, as a private person, though far from correct, has had but little influence. But recently, he has asserted more openly his independence; & he has done it by pursuing a course, which he knew was altogether opposed to the wishes of nearly all the high chiefs. He has revived the hula, or native dance". (EW Clark)

He was not alone. "Unquestionably many christian Hawaiians considered hula immoral, and attempted to extirpate it. A series of letters from the Hawaiian journal Nupepa Kukoa in 1864-66 complains about hula schools operating in Maui, O'ahu and Kaua'i."

"These letters are interesting because they show that hula continued to flourish ... 'the "power and influence" of the national dance was never threatened ... hula remained the favorite entertainment of Hawaiians of all classes.'" (kaimi-org)

In 1836, it was reported the French consul for Manila visited Honolulu, and attended a state banquet hosted by the King. Part of the festivities was a formal hula performance. In 1850, the Penal Code required a license for "any theater, circus, Hawaiian hula, public show or other exhibition, not of an immoral character" for which admission was charged.

"No license for a Hawaiian hula shall be granted for any other place than Honolulu." (The law did not regulate hula in private, so the dance continued to be practiced and enjoyed throughout the islands.)

King David Kalākaua's 1883 coronation included three days of hula performances and his 1886 jubilee celebrations had performances of ancient and newly created dances.



Like surfing, Hula was never effectively banned; it is a common misconception that one would suggest that the American missionaries banned either. And, as noted in the comments from many over the decades, neither surfing nor hula was ever effectively banned.

Missionary Period

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the "Missionary Period"), about 180-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai'i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands.

Collaboration between Native Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries resulted in, among other things, the

- Introduction of Christianity;
- Development of a written Hawaiian language and establishment of schools that resulted in widespread literacy;
- Promulgation of the concept of constitutional government;
- Combination of Hawaiian with Western medicine; and
- Evolution of a new and distinctive musical tradition (with harmony and choral singing)