

The surprising history of **Hawai**i's hula tradition

With her flower crown and grass skirt, the hula girl has been synonymous with Hawaiian hospitality since cruise ships first docked in Honolulu in the 1920s. Over the past two centuries, the Hawaiian dance has moved from a sacred religious practice to a tourist attraction, to cultural appropriation and near erasure.

"Hula became more of a Hollywood show. We never danced with coconut bras," says Micah Kamohoali'i, a kumu hula (hula teacher) and cultural ambassador on the island of Hawai'i. Hawaiian cultural organizations are now reclaiming and safeguarding a more authentic version of hula both for residents and visitors.

"People are history seekers today," says Kumu Kamohoali'i. "They want to know the truth, and they crave something more authentic." Before Western contact in 1778, dancers would move to chants at temple ceremonies honoring gods and chiefs or tell stories explaining weather patterns, the stars, and the movement of earth or lava.



The strong Christian missionary presence in the islands changed the hula

Its chants became more melodic, resembling Christian hymns. Its dances honored Hawaiian monarchs, not the old gods. When ocean cruises became popular in the late 1920s, thousands of tourists from the U.S. mainland sailed to Honolulu. It ignited a Hawaiian trend and "a white version" of hula (with cellophane skirts and coconut shell bras) that appeared in Hollywood movies. The Hawaiian identity continued to erode after 1959: the Hawaiian language was not taught in schools. With the loss of the language, hula, which is always paired with chants in Hawaiian, was at risk of becoming obsolete.



A hula revival

The mid 20th-century was a time of rapid change. The Civil Rights Movement influenced the Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s. In 1978, the state constitution was amended to include Hawaiian as one of the two state languages and to mandate that public schools teach Hawaiian culture, language, and history, including dance. Locals were reclaiming the hula, too. On the island of Hawai'i, the town of Hilo launched the Merrie Monarch Festival in 1964. Now, the annual spring festival draws the best hula groups from the islands.