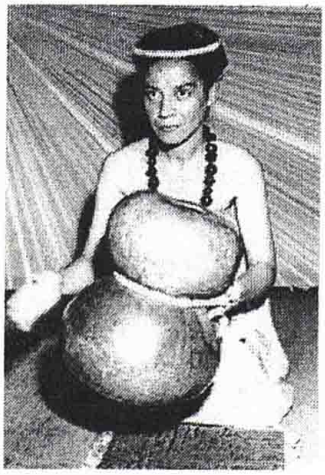


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'Iolani Luahine

By Michael Tsai
Advertiser Staff Writer


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One of Hawai'i's most revered kumu hula and cultural practitioners, 'Iolani Luahine, was once described by modern-dance pioneer Ted Shawn as "an artist of world stature."

Yet, while Luahine certainly helped bring international recognition and respect to traditional hula, her impact in her home Islands might have been even greater in that she helped keep Hawaiian culture alive through the latter days of its suppression.

Luahine was born in Napo'opo'o, Hawai'i, in 1915, and educated in the ways of hula by her aunt, Keahi Luahine, from the age of 4. She briefly attended the Kamehameha Schools, but was removed by her aunt because of the school's "missionary" attitudes at the time.

Luahine's other mentors included Mary Kawena Pukui, who steered her away from the commercialized hula forms popularized by Hollywood films. As a kumu in her own right, Luahine, a longtime curator of the Hulihe'e Palace in Kailua, Kona, and an adviser to the Merrie Monarch Festival, would become one of the most ardent and beloved practitioners of ancient Hawaiian hula and chant. Among the many students who continue her legacy are George Naope, Kawaikapuokalani Hewett and her niece, Hoakalei Kamau'u.

Those fortunate enough to have seen Luahine perform in person typically speak about the almost mystical experience she seemed to channel.

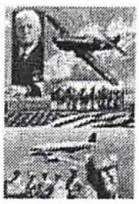
Indeed, there are just as many stories surrounding her memory that speak of a deep, spiritual connection to the hula goddess Laka and the volcano goddess Pele, as well as animals and the weather. In one oft-repeated tale, organizers of the Merrie Monarch hula festival were about to cancel their parade because of heavy rain, but Luahine stopped them, saying that the rain would cease for two hours starting at 1 p.m. So it happened.

Luahine died in 1978 at the age of 63. A statue of her is on display at the Hilton Hawaiian Village.

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