

To the uninitiated tourist, the word “Hula” conjures up an immediate picture of young lithesome girls moving their hips in a highly sexual manner.

O.K. – that is a true picture, but it is not the whole picture or even a main part of the picture. That is quite literally the blind man trying to describe an elephant by feeling the tail.

The Hula is sun, moon and stars to thousands of Hawaiians, native-born and adopted. It is a way of life to thousands of men and women who eat, sleep and live the Hula. There are dance academies all across the Islands (and on the “mainland”) which specialize in the dance, and it all culminates each April in the Merrie Monarch’s Festival, a week-long televised dance competition in Hilo, Hawaii. The Festival has been a staple of dance festivals for 40 years...and the dancers number in the hundreds. The Festival is attended by tens of thousands and watched by hundreds of thousands.

“Hula is the language of the heart  
and therefore the heartbeat  
of the Hawaiian people”

King David Kalakaua of Hawaii  
1874 to 1891

King Kalakaua, the Merrie Monarch, restored the Hula to prominence after Missionaries succeeded in banning the dance off and on for decades.

At the Festival, groups of men dance various Hula in khaki pants and Aloha shirts – the only thing “bare” is their feet. Groups of women, some young and lithesome and others old and not so lithe, dressed in long dresses or grass skirts, dance various Hula.

The Hula certainly can be lascivious...very, very lascivious – but it is also a warrior’s dance, and a religious dance, and a celebration dance, and a fishing dance...it is many, many dances. Some of the women do dance, ahh, lasciviously in grass skirts, and an occasional men’s group dances lasciviously wearing a *malo*, the Hawaiian loincloth.

Certainly, the first Europeans who remarked on the Hula, the second day after crewmembers of Captain Cook’s British ship *Resolve* came ashore on Kauai, said the “women danced in a most lascivious manner.” That was actually unremarkable, since all Polynesian societies were far, far more overtly sexual than the Victorian era Europeans of the 1700s. The historic Hawaiian society made the 1960s Woodstock look like a prayer meeting in a Monastery. It was common for hundreds of young Hawaiian girls to swim or surf to visiting warships or whaling vessels to have sex with the sailors, not for money but simply as a welcoming tradition.

It is little wonder that New England Missionaries demanded that the Hula be banned, and at various times the Hula was banned for brief periods in history. Heck, the Missionaries were so straight-laced that decades after arriving they were still dressing from head to toe in New England woolen clothing.

Today, the Hula is just part of the reconstitution of the Hawaiian culture. The language that was once banned is now taught everywhere, and used increasingly in daily language. The martial arts of warriors is being rediscovered, as are the ancient religious rites.

It is all part of a long overdue and welcome cultural revival.