

Photo by Randy Wichman



kūnihi ka mauna

The Opening Pages

One of the most well-known and oft-performed *oli* (chants) in the hula world takes its title from its first line, *Kūnihi ka mauna i ka la'i ē* (Steep stands the mountain [Wai'ale'ale] in the calm), and comes from the *mo'olelo* (story) of Hi'iaka, the youngest and favorite sister of the volcano goddess Pele. The earliest known version of "Kūnihi ka mauna" in print comes from *haku mo'olelo* (writer) J. N. Kapihenui in *He Moolelo no Hiiakaikapoliopole* (A Tale of Hi'iaka-in-the-bosom-of-Pele), published in the newspaper *Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika* (Star of the Pacific) in 1861. But the most well-known version is found in Nathaniel B. Emerson's *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii* (originally published in 1909), and in slightly different form in his later book *Pele and Hiiaka, a Myth from Hawaii* (originally published in 1915). The popularity of Emerson's version undoubtedly has much to do with the fact that it was the only one translated into English. However, at least five other versions of "Kūnihi" were published in the Hawaiian language in the 19th-century newspapers. The chant also exists in at least 17 unpublished forms in various collections in the Bishop Museum Archives.

In the most well-known version of this *mo'olelo*, Hi'iaka is sent by her sister Pele from the island of Hawai'i to the island of Kaua'i to fetch Pele's beloved, the handsome chief Lohi'au. When Hi'iaka reaches the south bank of Kaua'i's Wailua River near the *muliwai* (river mouth), she chants "Kūnihi" to the guardian *mo'o* (giant reptile or water spirit), also known as Wailua, asking to be granted passage across the river. When the *mo'o* rebukes her, Hi'iaka kills it, then crosses the river by placing stepping stones, and continues on her journey. In different versions, Hi'iaka chants "Kūnihi" in other situations: when she first catches sight of the island of Kaua'i while she is still sitting in her canoe, both greeting the island and seeking permission to step onto Kaua'i soil; when her canoe lands at Kapa'a before she continues on to Naeue and then to Hā'ena; outside the home of the fisherman Malaeha'akoa and his wife Wailuanuiaho'āno when seeking permission to enter their *hale* (home). In yet another version Pele, not Hi'iaka, chants "Kūnihi" when she arrives at Hā'ena on Kaua'i's north shore and sees Lohi'au for the very first time.

Although the individual contexts of each of these versions vary, they all express the traditional Hawaiian attitude of not “barging in” where one does not have *kuleana* (privilege and responsibility), and of showing respect for the people, place, and culture where one is an outsider. Although Hi’iaka is a goddess, she must still pay respect to the *‘āina* (land) and to those who have *kuleana* over it, as well as to those who have traveled the path she now seeks to travel.

“Kūnihi” is also about confronting obstacles and challenges, such as those that obstruct Hi’iaka’s efforts to fulfill her *kuleana* to her sister Pele, and about deciding to whom greater *kuleana* is owed. Although at times the obstructions seem impossible to overcome, Hi’iaka’s bravery, cleverness, and fortitude—aided by her companions, *‘ohana* (family), and *‘aumākua* (family gods)—enable her to reach her destiny.

Just as a growing number of Hawaiian scholars are now questioning and challenging Emerson’s work on many levels, including his translation skills, we have chosen to include other versions of “Kūnihi” on the opening pages so as not to continue the problematic practice of privileging Emerson’s text. The incorporation of these different versions also embodies the attitude contained in an oft-quoted *‘ōlelo no’eau* (Hawaiian saying) which states, *‘A’ole pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho’okahi*—Not all knowledge is contained within one *hālau* (school). And, finally, it embodies the *oli*’s transition from the oral to the written form, demonstrating the strength and adaptability of our ancient traditions as we move into the modern world.

Esteemed Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui once wrote that while there were

many *mele kāhea* (“calling” or “entrance” chants), “this Kauai one was well liked and commonly used,” even by those from other islands. Centuries after Hi’iaka first chanted “Kūnihi,” the *oli* is still treasured by Hawaiians, even though the context has changed. Today it is regularly heard by *hālau hula* (hula dance troupes) seeking permission to ascend the stage for a rehearsal, performance, or competition; and its refrain is still sent echoing across the land by *haumāna* (students) and other cultural practitioners seeking permission to enter a classroom, forest, or *heiau* (place of worship).

“Kūnihi” is thus “chanted” in the opening pages of this second issue of *‘Ōiwi* on behalf of all those seeking permission to enter into the sharing of talent, *mana’o* (expression and thought), and *mana* (spiritual energy) that follows. It is also chanted at the closing as a request from all seeking to enter into the new *wā* (epoch) of contemporary times as we confront its many challenges, ever mindful of our relationship to this *‘āina* and to those who came before us and who will come after us.

Today when “Kūnihi” is chanted, proper protocol instructs that a *pane* (response) be given in the form of a *mele komo*, a chant that grants entry. The *mele komo* on the following page invites those who are sincere in their desire to hear and learn, to partake of the *mea waiwai*, the riches contained between these covers. As another *‘ōlelo no’eau* states, which is associated with the area of Kaua’i containing the places invoked in “Kūnihi”: *Ua nani ‘o Puna mai ‘ō a ‘ō*—Only beauty is found in the Puna (Kawaihau) district, from one end to the other. Here then enter, and enjoy the beauty *mai ‘ō a ‘ō*, from cover to cover.

KU’UALOHA HO’OMANAWANUI