SHORTER COMMUNICATIONS

WILLIAM CHARLES LUNALILO’S ‘ALEKOBI
AS AN EXAMPLE OF CULTURAL SYNTHESIS
IN 19TH CENTURY HAWAIIAN LITERATURE

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William Charles Lunalilo’s chant, popularly known as ‘Alekoki, is recognised as a masterpiece of 19th century Hawaiian literature. Paralleling, in traditional Hawaiian fashion, the land and weather with his own emotions, the poet speaks of his hesitant beloved, who has promised herself to him, but has finally lacked the courage to commit herself and join him. His passion frustrated, the poet retires into himself. Their relation has, however, aroused a storm of gossip and the opposition of the king. Hiding his wounds, the poet feigns indifference and pays court to other beauties. But the memory of his beloved pierces his pose, along with the rending consciousness of her subsequent distress.¹

The traditional interpretation holds that the chant describes the unfortunate love between Lunalilo, 1835-1874, and Victoria Kamāmalu, 1838-1866. Both were of very high birth — Lunalilo was king of Hawai‘i when he died — and both gifted poets in the learned Hawaiian tradition. Lunalilo was also cultivated in English literature and was known for reciting Shakespearean soliloquies. Their relationship, which occurred about 1855-56, was terminated by her brother, King Kamehameha IV, for dynastic reasons. Lunalilo never married, and Victoria Kamāmalu was subsequently involved in a sexual scandal and died young. The chant has been described as a combination of Hawaiian and Western elements.²

I agree with the main lines of the traditional interpretation, but should like in this article to study the chant in greater detail than has been done up to now and to define more precisely its biculturalism.

The Hawaiian elements of the chant are naturally more obvious. The language is very pure. The introduced loan words of the Samuel H. Elbert and Noelani Māhōe text are therefore particularly jarring. The language is also that of classical chants: for instance, a‘o ‘of’, for the prosaic o. The turns of phrase are used that are intelligible, but rather unusual because somewhat archaic: lines 9 t., ho‘omalu ‘put a kapu or tabu’, for claiming possession of a person; line 11, Ua malu keia kino ‘This body is tabued’, which states the result of ho‘omalu and uses kino ‘body’, for person.³

This language — along with line 12, leo ‘voice or statement’, for command —
emphasises the nobility of the principals.

The language of the chant is also based on proverbial expressions, a procedure traditional in prose, but especially in poetry. The ‘alo ‘dodge’, of line 25 — Nāna e ‘alo ia ‘ino ‘His it is to dodge this evil storm’ — is used in stereotyped battle descriptions of the hero evading the missiles of his enemies and in figurative sayings. The connotations contribute to the mock grandiloquence of the passage.

Line 40, ‘Ai ‘ono a na manu ‘Delicious food of the birds’, is interpreted by Mary Kawena Pukui and Alfons L. Korn as an erotic symbol for the desired reunion of the lovers. This sense cannot, however, be reconciled with the plural of birds. A proverbial, figurative sense — ‘ai ‘ia e ka manu ‘destroyed by the enemy’ (Elbert-Pukui 1979:146) — seems more apposite. The separation of the lovers has rendered her vulnerable to the enemies and troubles alluded to in lines 21-31. The erotic overtones, certainly present, evoke Victoria Kamāmalu’s actions, which culminated in a public scandal.

I would argue that the difficult line 20 — Ma ke kū’ono li’ili’i ‘In a little inside corner/nook/cranny, etc’, must be similarly understood. Nathaniel B. Emerson and Pukui and Korn interpret the line as describing Lunalilo perched respectively “in the cleft of a rock” and “in the cleft of a dainty rock,” a somewhat risible picture. The text of Elbert and Māhoe places him Ma nā lumi li’ili’i “In the little rooms.” This last seems the Westernisation of a saying of which further evidence is available in the expression na ke’ena li’ili’i o ka pohu ‘the little offices/rooms/nooks, etc. of calm’ (Johnson 1976:194). This sense accords with the connotations of kū’ono and can be found in a proverbial saying. Moreover, line 21 contains the contrast A ʻa ho ‘But outside’, at the harbour, reinforcing the image of enclosed and secure comfort. Lines 19 f. should, therefore, be translated “But I am above it all/ Lodged in a little place of peace and comfort.” This translation fits, as will be seen, the story of the chant.

Lunalilo uses also traditional Hawaiian poetic devices, such as linked assonance, the joining of the ending of one line with the beginning of the next by the use of the same or similar vowels, lines 1 f., 2 f., 4 f., 6 f., 10 f., 13 f., 14 f., 15 f., 16 f., etc., and especially lines 36 f.

The chant contains well-known traditional Hawaiian symbols, each of which must of course be interpreted in context. For instance, cold can symbolise erotic response, but in line 5 is best understood as troubled friendlessness. The upland rain, line 3, is traditional in descriptions of sexual passion. The stopped-up waters, lines 15-18, clearly symbolise frustrated emotions or, even more physically, the unspent waters of life. Line 16, māna ʻoai “place where the water is obstructed for distribution in channels,” is figurative for the heart, by Lunalilo’s time a widely accepted Westernism for the seat of the emotions. The storm, lines 21-29, symbolises the time of troubles and scandal (the tale-bearing wind of line 29 seems to allude to informers and scandalmongers) and the anger of the king.

The dominant Hawaiian poetic device of the poem is, however, the use of places and place-names. A division is made between the uplands of Nu‘uanu valley and the adjacent lowlands of Honolulu and its harbour. In the uplands are the symbolic rain and the pool of Kapena, in which Hawaiians bathed naked late into the 19th century, an obstinate survival of an earlier life-style.
The lowlands below the valley are characterised by the pool of ‘Alekoki (a play, I believe, on the nickname of Kamehameha IV, Aleck); by Pelekanje, the king’s residence at Beretania (the word means “Britain” and recalls the monarch’s Western ways); and by the storm of harbour town gossip and anger that assails the lovers.

The hills Ma’ema’e ‘Purity’, line 34, and Mauna’ala ‘Fragrant Mount’, line 36, occupy a middle ground. The erotic overtones of the last two names are important for the meaning of the chant, but cannot be applied to the two lovers, as Pukui and Korn do, because of the plural Na pua ‘The flowers’, in line 36. This plural is as significant as that of the birds in line 40. Just as the beloved is attacked by birds, so the lover is admiring several beauties.

The first four lines of the poem establish the contrast between uplands and lowlands and state the speaker’s preference. The lines are phrased impersonally, but can be understood personally as well.

Not regarded is the water place of ‘Alekoki. I do not regard the water place of ‘Alekoki.
The upland rain is fitting settling at Nu‘uanu. The upland rain suits me better settling before me at Nu‘uanu.

The story is told in terms of places and movement or lack of it between them. Lunalilo waits in the uplands, i laila ‘there’, line 6. He thought her intention was firm i ‘ane‘i ‘about this place’, line 8. But he waits in vain. The upland waters are dammed and cannot descend to the lowlands. After the storm, he wanders aimlessly I ‘ō i ‘ane‘i ‘here and there’, line 33. He climbs Purity Hill and looks at the beauty, the blossoms of Fragrant Mount, lines 34 ff. But the fragrance of his true love clings i ‘ane‘i ‘here’, line 38 (as line 8). The protagonists are in places that symbolise their mental states and attitudes. The lovers do not reach the same ground, do not join each other except in thought, word and fragrance.

The poem can be interpreted on the basis of the previous discussion. The speaker rejects the lowlands and what they stand for, especially the anglophilic king. The sensuous uplands of Nu‘uanu with their fertilising rain suit him better. But in that place and mood, he waited loveless and in vain. He had thought that the intention of his beloved was firm to join him there. She had definitely and repeatedly placed her possessive tabu on him and his love to make them hers alone by her word and command. He contemplates now the pool of Kapena and the older, freer, more passionate life that persists there. But the waters of passion are blocked by the dams placed against them by society. So he draws himself up above it all. He puts himself in a place — adopts an attitude — that, though small, is comfortable and secure. But outside, in the harbour town, the storm of gossip and anger is unleashed. He is touched by it, smeared by it. So he acts the great warrior facing the storm. But it rages on, reaching him still. The storm bears the tale to the boss in the palace. But all this dark night is a mere nothing in the speaker’s mind. He feigns indifference. He goes here and there, climbs Purity Hill, admires the blooms of Fragrant Mount. Then he remembers the sweet fragrance of his beloved. It clings to him still. He bursts out in another call to the woman he loves, now being so cruelly used. His delicate, lofty flower is just food for the devouring birds.

I offer the following interpretative translation.
1 I do not regard
the water place of 'Alekoki.
The upland rain suits me better
settling before me in Nu'uanu.
5 Cold, I acted all in vain
while I was waiting there
I believed perhaps
your intention was firm about this place
which you laid under the protection of your tabu.
10 Tabu it till it is tabu.
This body is tabu
because of your word.
My thought is obsessed
with the mountain swimming pool of Kapena.
15 Closed fast to me
are the upland pools where the waters gather.
The pools fill up in vain with water,
the constructions there above.
But I am above it all
20 in a little comfortable corner.
Outside at Honolulu harbour
the sea spray blows this way on the roaring wind.
I am wet with the sea spray,
the salt water smearing my skin.
25 There is indeed only one great warrior
to fight this evil storm.
It storms even up to here
with the roaring of the wind
a tale-bearing wind.
30 The boss listens at the palace.
This great dark night
is a mere nothing in my opinion.
I go here and there:
climb Purity Hill
35 to look at the beauty
the flowers 'on Fragrant Mount.
You have such a sweet fragrance.
It is clinging to me here.
Oh my red lehua there above,
40 delicious food for all the birds.

The fact that the chant can be understood completely within the Hawaiian context renders more difficult the task of defining the Western influence on it. Emerson (1909:110) describes the result of that influence —"the pressure of the new environment that had entered Hawai'i" — firstly as "the moderation of its language and imagery." By this he undoubtedly means a lack of overt sexual, erotic character (compare Emerson 1909:111, 201). Emerson can, of course, only mean a relative lack, for the poem does contain sexual allusions (and a good number of
chants have as few or fewer). The poem has, in fact, just as many as necessary.

Emerson finds Western influence also "in the coherence of its parts," which he implies is opposed to the older style (1909:110; compare 82, 106, 129). From elsewhere in Emerson's book, I can see two points he could have in mind. First, Lunalilo's chant is restricted to a definite territory and does not allude, as others do, to places beyond it (1909:192 f). Second, Emerson is anxious in translating another chant to find "the point of view that shall give unity to the whole composition," even though he admits that "the native Hawaiian scholars of to-day do not appreciate as we do the necessity of holding fast to one viewpoint" (1909:226). This is clearly a delicate point. Emerson admits that Westerners may simply be unable to follow a Hawaiian poet's meaning (1909:111). Lunalilo's chant is indeed remarkable for its unity of viewpoint, but this characteristic can be found in classical chants as well. In chants of mourning, to give just one example, the speaker can be a single person with a clearly defined relation to the deceased.

Emerson's points certainly cannot be pressed. None the less, although none of the elements he mentions is absent in classical literature, their emphasis in this chant is so central to its effect — the chant is composed in such a consciously systematic way — that the final result is novel at least in degree, if not in kind. That Emerson's sensibility is influenced by his own culture proves an advantage for this question. Where he senses no obstacles to his comprehension and appreciation, he can suspect Western influence.

Two further stylistic factors add to the coherent, indeed concentrated, effect of the chant: the lack of ambiguity and the lack of allusions, such as to historical or mythological events and personages, common in chants concerning nobles. Both ambiguity and allusion are standard Hawaiian poetic devices, and their omission must be explained; most adequately, I would argue, by Western influence.

Pukui and Korn state that the chant is "in the form of a lover's 'complaint' (in the Shakespearean sense of the word)"; "Though traditional in imagery, the poem possesses even in the original Hawaiian some of the qualities of the dramatic monologue as developed by nineteenth-century English poets, including Byron, Tennyson, and Browning... A central feature of such poems is the mode of presentation, in which, as in the chant, we are given only the words of the embittered lover..." (Pukui-Korn 1973:94, 96 f). That is, the chant is a monologue, not the dialogue one could expect in Pukui and Korn's conception of the chant as a dramatisation of an actual meeting of the two lovers.

Put rather broadly, Pukui and Korn are suggesting that the structure of the chant is predominantly Western and its inner imagery Hawaiian (as Emerson 1909:110). Story-telling is, however, traditional in Hawaiian chants and songs, as could be expected in a culture which prized a variety of narrative forms. A chant can tell a story very directly and sequentially, as in poems about journeys or chants of mourning, which recount the stages of the life of the deceased. Knowledge of a story can be presupposed and its events rearranged for effect (e.g. Emerson 1909:228 ff). Chants can be composed to express the emotions of a character at a particular point in a famous story, as is done in the Pele and Hi'iaka cycle. Moreover, chants can be composed both from an objective viewpoint and from that of a character with a defined role in the story, as the chants of Hi'iaka. The above
do not exhaust the possibilities available to the classical Hawaiian composer, possibilities which overlap to a certain degree those of Western literature.

The form of the chant cannot, therefore, be defined as simply or predominantly Western. On the other hand, it does not coincide simply with classical Hawaiian genres. Rather, it is a typical product of 19th century Hawaiian literature: a blending of originally separate traditional literary forms. For instance, traditional expressions from both political and love poetry can be combined in a single song (e.g. Elbert-Māhōe 1975:39 f.). In Lunalilo’s chant can be found elements of a narrative poem and elements of a love poem, but neither is used continuously or exclusively. The beloved is addressed by the lover — as is usual in love chants — but is not addressed throughout the poem. The lover breaks away to speak of himself and his situation in objective, narrative terms.

The chant demonstrates also the 19th century characteristic of mixing traditional audiences and moods. A love song would address the beloved in a private, intimate mood. A narrative poem would have a wider audience and a more public tone. In this chant — as in the later Ka Momi ‘The Pearl’, by Kalākaua (Pukui-Korn 1973:150-5, 222 ff) — the mood of intimate self-revelation is extended to a wider public. The poet ruminates within himself in a confidential, even confessional, mode.

I find the clearest evidence of Western influence, not in the unity of viewpoint or monologue form as such, but in the fact that the main emphasis of the chant is on the exploration and description of the emotions of the person, or even persona, of the speaker. The story is told not for its own sake, but in order to register at each stage the changing emotions of the speaker. The beloved is addressed, but not in the usual hope of winning her back or changing her mind. The point is rather that the poet’s emotion is so strong that it must burst out again in direct address. In sum, traditional focus has been shifted from both the story and the beloved to the speaker’s own emotions.

Moreover, the description of emotion differs significantly from ones more traditional to Hawaiian poetry. Firstly, the poem does not contain one clearly dominating emotion. Rather, the emotions shift as the poem progresses: emotional preference, love, frustration, anger, withdrawal, grandiloquence (even self-mocking humour), feigned indifference, outbursts of longing and regret, worry for the beloved. Such a range of emotions in a single poem of this length is, as far as I can see, unprecedented in Hawaiian literature.

Most important, several of the emotions described do not fall into the pure categories of traditional Hawaiian poetry: love, hate, grief, and so on. I know of no adequate precedent for the lover’s attempt to “rise above it all” in lines 19 f., or for his feigned indifference in lines 31-36. Significantly, no traditional nature or weather symbols are available for these emotions, as they are for the more elementary ones of passion and anger.

Finally, the emotions are expressed with more indirection than usual (I do not refer to the use of symbolism, which is traditional). For instance, Lunalilo does not state that he is feigning indifference. The hearer surmises that from the fact that, though his emotion for his beloved is still strong, he makes a show of courting others. The impression of emotion is conveyed less by explicit statement than by
the juxtaposition of the parts of the poem. That impression can even override a direct statement: the hearer disbelieves the statement that all this dark night is a mere nothing for the speaker, line 32. This again is, as far as I can see, unprecedented.

This emphasis on the description of the speaker’s emotions and the untraditional means employed bring the chant indeed near to the literature mentioned by Pukui and Korn, and especially to Shakespearean soliloquy. Lunalilo liked to recite those of Hamlet, in which the hero thinks out his problems, expresses his feelings to himself in each situation, and, significantly, often shifts emotions and attempts to lie to himself.

Nevertheless, the interpreter must clearly be wary of drawing hard and fast lines between the Western and Hawaiian elements in the chant. For instance, mixed emotions are not unknown to Hawaiian literature. Hawaiian prose is often concerned with their description and perhaps less complicated mixtures can be found in poetry. Hiʻiaka feels a mixture of anger and sorrow at seeing her beloved land destroyed by her jealous sister Pele. Halemano feels love, anger and regret in his chants to his unfaithful beloved (Elbert 1959:3, 277-83).

The task of defining Lunalilo’s chant against its bicultural background is, therefore, extremely delicate. Much of the imagery and phrasing is clearly Hawaiian. Some of the descriptions of emotions and modes of expression can be urged with good evidence to be inspired by Western literature. But most of the arguments employed in this question must be based on omissions, emphases, combinations of factors, and a subjective perception of novelty of effect.

The difficulty of this task is itself significant. Lunalilo’s chant proves to be not a mere combination of Hawaiian and Western elements, but demonstrably a genuine artistic synthesis. The unity of the chant is finally its author’s greatest achievement.

NOTES


The Emerson text is the earliest known to me. Emerson collected his materials both from oral informants and from Hawaiian language newspapers. The Pukui-Korn text is based on Emerson’s, with the addition of stanza separations, changes in punctuation, diacritical marks, and minor variants: Line 11, neiā for keia; line 12, a for a o (a'o); line 18, papahele for papa-hele; line 21, Ma for A; line 22, anā for nei; line 24, heʻeheʻe for heaheʻa (heʻeheʻa); line 31, A 'ōia for O ia; line 34, a'o for a; line 35, i for o; line 40, 'oho for ono (ono; undoubtedly a typographical error). No support is offered for these variants or the division into stanzas, which, in fact, introduces a separation between lines joined by the Hawaiian poetic device of linked assonance. I will discuss the variants only where they affect the sense. In general, I prefer the Emerson text.

Various secondary versions of the chant, usually very abbreviated, are found in the repertoires of contemporary singers. The Elbert-Māhoe version is one example of the chant rearranged for singing. Lines have been omitted and displaced, and loan words introduced: line 1, pilīwai for manaʻo; line 20, lumī for kūʻono. I will refer to this text only
for the interpretation of certain lines.
I follow the above authorities in attributing the chant to Lunalilo against a minority
tradition that it was written by Kalākaua. The chant fits well into the episode of
Lunalilo's life it is held to describe, and the known poems of Kalākaua are stylistically
quite different.
The following text is based on Emerson, with the addition of diacritical marks. As-
terisks mark the lines with the textual variants listed above; the references in parentheses
are to further textual discussion in this article.

1  ‘A'ole i mana'o 'ia *
   Kāhi wai a'o 'Alekokoi.
   Ho'okohu ka ua i uka
   Noho mai la i Nu'uanu.

5  Anuanu makehewa au
   Ke kali ana i laila.
   Kainō paha ua pa'a
   Kou mana'o i 'ane'i
   Āu i ho'omalu ai.

10  Ho'omalu 'oe ā malu,
    Ua malu keia l'ino *
    Mamuli a'o kou leo. *
    Kau nui aku ka mana'o
    Kāhi wai a'o Kapena.

15  Pahi a pa'a 'ia mai
    Na māno wai a'o uka.
    Ahu wale na ki'owai (note 6)
    Na papa hale o luna. * (note 6)
    Maluna a'e no wau

20  Ma ke kiʻono liʻiliʻi. *
    A waho a'o Māmala *
    Hao mai nei chuehu. *
    Pulu au i ka huna kai
    Kai heʻahe'a i ka ʻili. * (note 15)

25  Ho'okahi no koa nui
    Nāna e 'alo ia 'ino
    'Ino'ino mai nei luna
    I ka hao a ka makani,
    He makani 'aha'ilono.

30  Lohe ka luna i Pelekane.
    'O ia pōuli nui *
    Mea 'ole i ku'u mana'o.
    I 'ō i 'ane'i au.
    Ka piʻina la o Ma'ema'e *

35  E kilohu au o ka nani, * (note 3)
    Na pua i Mauna'ala.
    He 'ala onaona kou
    Ke pili mai i 'ane'i.
    O a'u lehua 'ula i luna,
    'Ai ʻono a na manu. *

2. Emerson 1909:110; Pukui-Korn 1973: 94, 96 f. Influence from Western literature is
apparent in much 19th century Hawaiian literature, for instance, in the introduction of
new literary forms, such as novels, national anthems, and so on.
3. The o of line 35 — changed by Pukui-Korn and Elbert-Māhoe to i — may be an archaism.
4. E.g., Pukui-Elbert 1971 at ‘alo and kuāua.
6. Green 1923; 56. Line 18 presents difficulties. Emerson’s text reads Na papa-hale o luna. Pukui-Korn change papa-hale to papakele. The Elbert-Māhoe text omits lines 17 f. Emerson translates “For skies are ever down-pouring”; Pukui-Korn, “Let descending skies pour down their lesson.” No arguments are offered in support of these translations, and I do not see on what basis they were reached. The line contains no verb. Papa-hale would be a house platform. Papakele is “floor,” Pukui-Elbert 1971 at word. Moreover, Na papa-hale is clearly parallel to na kī‘owai ‘the pools,’ in the previous line (I follow Emerson’s translation of line 18 against Pukui-Korn’s). Line 18 would then describe the upland irrigation pools, in which the water is piling up, as artificial constructions, the edge of “development,” as it were, the uppermost constructions of the town. This fits the sense that human society is blocking the natural upland passions and prepares the sense of line 19, Lunalilo’s retreat into a comfortable nook. I am not, however, entirely satisfied with this interpretation and suspect the line might be based on some saying, as the other lines discussed in the article text. An alternative interpretation could be based on the sense of ahu wale as “Exposed...in plain view”; Pukui-Elbert 1971 at ahu wale. The sense would then be that, because the upper water system is stopped, the lower pools are dry. The general thrust of the passage remains the same.
11. Emerson 1909: 110; and, e.g., Judd 1930: 16, no. 114; Pukui-Elbert 1971 at ʻāikaikai.
13. Vs. the historicising interpretation of Emerson 1909: 110.
14. The French parole translates the sense adequately.
15. Line 24, heahea; Pukui-Elbert 1971 at he‘ahe‘a: “To imprint with spots, stains; smeared, as with red earth.” The line from this chant is given in illustration with the translation “sea that reddens the skin.” Both Pukui-Korn and Elbert-Māhoe change the word to he‘ahe‘a without argument. However, he‘ahe‘a in the sense of smearing fits the context. Compare the line, Pukui-Elbert 1971 at lali lali: “Lali lali ole ka ili o ke akamai...the skin of the skilled [surf rider] is not slippery [with water]”; also Emerson 1909: 36; Pukui-Korn 1973: 39.
16. The word mana‘o is used in several senses; line 1, “consider, respect”; line 8, “considered intention”; line 14, “thought, contemplation”; line 32, “opinion.” But each sense is clear in its context, so the use of the word is not ambiguous.

Another word used with several shades of meaning is luna ‘above.’ In line 19, Lunalilo is Matuna a‘e ‘above it all.’ In line 27, the storm reaches mai nei luna ‘even up to here.’ A play on the author’s name can be felt in both lines. He stands on his dignity and rank, but is none the less smeared by the spray, line 24. In line 30, the king is referred to disparagingly as ka luna ‘the boss,’ a term used only of low-ranking authorities, such as foremen and overseers. In line 39, the beloved is i luna ‘above,’ but this causes her vulnerability to the birds of line 40. As in the case of mana‘o, the sense is clear in each use of the word, so ambiguity is not employed. Rather, both mana‘o and luna are used as key words, which help to unify the poem and mark its various changes of perspective and mood.

On the luna in line 18, see note 6. This use links line 18 to the following line.
17. Elbert-Māhoe 1975:32: 'Alekoki “is an example of the story-telling qualities of the old songs.” See also, e.g., Pukui-Elbert 1971 at āla‘apapa and uwe helu.
18. A contemporary Hawaiian teacher once criticised as untraditional a student poem in which the lei ‘flower wreath’ the lover had plaited for his beloved was never given. Traditionally, such a lei should reach its goal.

REFERENCES