PACIFIC 2000

PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EASTER ISLAND AND THE PACIFIC

HAWAII PREPARATORY ACADEMY
KAMUELA, HAWAII
AUGUST 7-12, 2000

Edited by:
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NI ‘AU’S DIRGE FOR HIS OWN SOUL

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Poetry is the major Hawaiian and indeed Polynesian genre for the articulation of views and emotions. Fortunately, a vast quantity of Hawaiian poetry is available to students of literature and history and provides a rich and detailed source for understanding the intellectual and emotional responses of Hawaiians to their historical situations (Charlot 1985). The most important poet of the early contact period was Ke‘añumoku (1715/16-1784), whose career spanned the wars of late precontact history, the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1778, and the early wars of Kamehameha to unify the islands in order to face the challenge of the foreigners (Charlot 1992a). In chants of great power, Ke‘añumoku condemned the fratricidal wars and urged Hawaiians to unite under the only chief, Kamehameha, capable of preserving the sovereignty of the islands in the new world context. In his last chant, Haui ka Lani ‘Fallen is the Chief’, Ke‘añumoku described how the traditional culture was being shaken and overturned: the old ceremonies were no longer working and the umbilical cord that attached Hawaiians to each other and to the land was being severed. His solution was to identify the bedrock of the culture, the one thing that Hawaiians could not give up and remain Hawaiian: the land. Ke‘añumoku’s insight was articulated with great conceptual and stylistic originality; he was not only inventing a new way to think, but also a new way to speak. The violence of his words and the shock of his images expressed the inner turmoil experienced by Hawaiians for generations to come. Indeed, from the time of contact, Hawaiian culture was permeated by a sense of foreboding, expressed for instance in the prophecy of Kapite that all would be turned upside down (S. 1860):

E iho mai ana kō ka lani,
E pi‘i aku ana kō lalo nei
‘Those of the sky are coming down
Those here below are rising up.’

Indeed, Ke‘añumoku chants the same view in Haui ka Lani (Fornander 1919-1920:369, lines 13 f.):

‘O ke kini ho‘i i kahi ki‘eki‘e,
Aia ho‘i i kahi ha‘aha‘a,
‘The multitude also in high place,
There they are now in low place.’

Ni ‘au or Ni ‘auhoe was the great representative of the Ke‘añumoku tradition some two generations later in the first half of the 1820s. The Hawai‘i chief Kamehameha had united the islands and established a central government that successfully controlled the contact situation and maintained Hawaiian morale. His last words in 1819 urged his followers to continue his policies. However, for political reasons, his successors overthrew the national religion Kamehameha had established and fought a civil war against traditionalists to replace it with a syncretic royalist religion (Charlot 1991). This was only partially successful. Hawaiian morale fell, and the previously marginal practice of sorcery became widespread, creating among Hawaiians a lasting fear of their own religious traditions. In the same year, 1819, American Protestant missionaries arrived and were allowed to preach and establish Western schools. Their Christianity immediately came into conflict with many aspects of Hawaiian religion and culture, and Hawaiians were faced with major decisions that created both personal and political conflicts. Ni ‘au’s poems are valuable both as works of art and as intimate expressions of the emotional turmoil many Hawaiians were experiencing.

Ni ‘au was a minor chief of Kaua‘i, who accompanied his high chief, Kaumuali‘i, to O‘ahu in 1821.1 Kamehameha had gained only nominal sovereignty over Kaua‘i so the new government of Kamehameha II was anxious to strengthen its hold on that potentially dangerous island. Indeed, the German Georg Anton Scheffer, apparently working for the Russian government, had already tried in 1816-1817 to separate Kaua‘i from the central government, constructing a fort at Waimea to support the scheme. On O‘ahu, Ka‘ahumanu, Kamehameha’s widow and the most powerful person in the government, took Kaumuali‘i to husband and soon added his son, Keali‘i‘ahonui, as the second husband of the ménage. Ni ‘au was a member of this court and was much appreciated as a chanter, dancer, and composer, creating several Name Chants for his chief. After the death of Kaumuali‘i in 1824, the central government moved to complete its control of Kaua‘i. The chiefesses who ran the government sent
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to Kaua‘i the young and handsome but undiplomatic chief Kahalai’a to accomplish this. He took with him a group of chiefs, including several from Kaua‘i who were now loyal to the central government; among these was Nī ‘au. The older and wiser Kalanimoku was soon summoned to help Kahalai’a, but could not modify the policy of the central government. A number of Kaua‘i chiefs rose in revolt and gained entry to the fort at Waimea in a night attack that surprised the government forces camped nearby. Kahalai’a and Nī ‘au heard the fighting in the fort and rushed to the gate. Kahalai’a started to enter, but was stopped by Nī ‘au (Ukikihi 1842a:2f):

\[
i aku o Niauhoe e ku oe maanei e komo ae au a imake mai no au, ua kaawale oe ke ali'i. Komo aku la o Niauhoe e hakaka ana lakou la, i aku la o Niauhoe woki keia hana ana a oukou e hana nei Lele mai la lakou la me ke koilipi a make...
\]

‘Nī ‘auhoʻe said, “You stay here, and I will enter. And if in fact I am killed, you, the chief, will be out of the way.” Nī ‘auhoʻe entered, and they fought against him. Nī ‘auhoʻe said, “Stop this action that you are doing.” They attacked him with the hatchet, and he was killed…”

Nī ‘au was hoping that his connection to Kaua‘i would enable him to persuade the rebels to submit to the central government (Ukikihi 1842b:3). Kamakau writes that Nī ‘au was shot in the mouth.\(^2\)

The popularity of Nī ‘au’s chants is demonstrated by the fact that they have been transmitted in several manuscripts and published in Hawaiian-language books and newspapers. As is common in Hawaiian literature, the better-known works exist in differing versions, and a professional edition is much needed. Hawaiians naturally responded to the quality of Nī ‘au’s poetry. Like any master Polynesian poet, Nī ‘au worked within a tradition. He used traditional genres, like Place Chants, Name Chants, and Dirges. He alluded to and even quoted earlier poetry, especially The Kumulipo, the great chant of the origin of the universe (Beckwith 1972). For instance, in O ka Oloio Makani ka la o Kona (Mele Aimoku 1886:262), his line Pela iho ka miomio i ka a'a is based on The Kumulipo, (lines 261).

Nī ‘au’s chants are, however, most remarkable for pushing the limits of the tradition in unexpected directions. He adopts Keʻaulumoku’s boldness of language, using sounds almost abstractly in chanting, as in E Lalau ana no Hihimanu (Mele Aimoku 1886:262 ff.; Niau 1902) to express taking something forever:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lawe au,} \\
\text{Lawe au} \\
\text{Lalawe, lawe au lilo,} \\
\text{Lililo, lilo ia'iu} \quad \text{e.}
\end{align*}
\]

Again like Keʻaulumoku, Nī ‘au plays with language to create onomatopoeia, a strength of Hawaiian poetry (Charlot 1992b). In O ka Oloio Makani ka la o Kona (Mele Aimoku 1886: 262), he joins kū ‘strike’ to peke ‘tiny’ to create a word that taps and tinkles in the line, especially if the old t – used in chanting and most common on Kaua‘i – is substituted for the more modern k:

\[
\text{Ka ua kupeke kupeke o Mahamoku} \\
\text{‘The tiny striking raindrops of Mahamoku.’}
\]

Nī ‘au’s language and images fit the turbulent times. His subject matter struck a chord as well. As a response to the Hawaiians’ feelings of loss of control, sorcery had risen to an unprecedented importance, and Nī ‘au makes it a major theme of his poetry. Indeed, the last lines of his Kanikau no Kaahumanu Opio ‘A Dirge for Young Ka‘ahumanu’ – from Holo ae la Kawelo to the end – are an originally independent counter-sorcery chant appended to the larger dirge.\(^3\)

Nī ‘au was at his boldest, however, in using traditional genres with extreme unconventionality, a parallel as it were to the contemporary restructuring of Hawaiian institutions. A shocking example of this is the above dirge, which bears the longer title He kanikau no Kaahumanu-opio ka Wahine a Kaumualii ka Moi o Kauai ‘A Dirge for Young Ka‘ahumanu, the Wife of Kaumualii’ (Niauhoʻe 1867): Ka‘ahumanu was in fact still alive and would live until 1832! After a long struggle, she had decided in 1823 to support fully the Christian missionaries. To do this, she had been obliged to put away her second husband, Keali‘i‘ihonui, and to renounce many of her noble privileges, considered by the missionaries to smack of paganism. The supporters of the church would admire her decision and speak approvingly of the changes in her character, calling her Ka‘ahumanuhou ‘The New Ka‘ahumanu.’ Nī ‘au bitterly regrets the loss of Ka‘ahumanu ‘Opio ‘The

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Young Ka‘ahumanu,” the person surrounded with all the godly power of a traditional chief. Playing on the meaning of her name, ‘The Bird Cloak,’ Ni‘au begins his chant by connecting her to the godly birds of tradition:

‘O Halulu ‘oe, ‘o ka manu kani hālau
O kū ‘oe ka haka ‘ēheu o ia manu,
Kani Kiwa’a, ka manu i ka wā lana.
He kino manu, he inoa manu, no ka lani, kō inoa ē.
‘You are Halulu, the bird that calls above the longhouses
You stand on the perch of that bird’s outstretched wings
Kiwa’a is calling, the prophetic bird of the upper spaces
A bird body, a bird name, from the sky, for the chief. Your name!’

Using dirge conventions, Ni‘au portrays both father, Kaumuali‘i, and son, Keali‘iahaunui – āu kāne ā ‘elua ‘both your husbands’ – as widowers mourning their dead wife, remembering the events of their life together. Their wife struggled with constricted breath, like so many dying of the new diseases. Indeed, many Hawaiians believed the missionaries were destroying them with sorcery. Ni‘au describes Ka‘ahumanu’s soul alone and wandering towards the place where the dead leap off into their own land (Charlot 1983:97-105). Her husband thinks he sees her, but it is just her shade. She assumes her bird body and soars comfortably over the land, letting her voice be heard by those who love her. She has become a Wahine kino lūa “Two-Bodied Woman.” Her great pagan name has assumed the body of a bird, who whispers faintly to her husband at night, recalling the magnificent body of the living woman surfing naked, the godly progeny of so many great ancestors. Her other body joins them now in death, enclosed within a fence, food for maggots. The New Ka‘ahumanu is not as living as the Young.

A dirge for a living person was not only unprecedented, but dangerous; it could be considered an expression of a negative wish or even a lethal incantation. Indeed, the addition of an anti-sorcery chant at the end of the dirge may have been intended as apotropaic. The acceptance of the poem by Hawaiians, including Ka‘ahumanu, testifies to their high-mindedness and understanding of art. Ni‘au also broaches in this poem the theme of the Hawaiians’ divided identity. Ka‘ahumanu becomes two. She is no longer the person she was, but that younger Ka‘ahumanu has not disappeared: she lives on like a god. The former person – just like the culture – was too vital, too vivid to vanish. The Hawaiians of Ni‘au’s generation – and indeed later ones – lived in a double world and felt themselves double people.

The problem of identity is posed even more intensely in Ni‘au’s equally unconventional He Kanikau i Kona Uhana ‘A Dirge for his own Soul.” Hawaiians believed that human beings had a composite nature made up of a body, kino, and at least two souls, uhane, one for the regular functions and another that was less attached to the kino, being able, for instance, to separate itself from the sleeping body. The person was not identified with any single one of these elements. For instance, the separated soul could be captured and destroyed without immediately killing the person; on the other hand, after a natural death, the person was connected to the separated soul. The “person” was not itself reified into a component of the full human being. Furthermore, this composite view did not signify that Hawaiians lacked a sense of the individual, integral human being. Westerners also conventionally speak of “body and soul” without compromising in their minds the unity of the individual. Linguistically improper arguments have been made that Hawaiians and other Polynesians lacked a sense of self because no word could be so glossed in their languages. However, Polynesians had, among other linguistic means, the most particularistic device possible to designate an individual: his or her name. The great importance of names in Polynesian cultures testifies to the importance assigned to the individual, as does the psychological emphasis of Hawaiian literature. Moreover, the Polynesian sense of the person or self was not static like the Western. One’s self was a complex product of one’s genealogy and could be expanded by one’s personal history, as witnessed by the practice of adding new names as one progressed through life. Similarly, one could be diminished by loss. If a sorcerer captured and destroyed one’s wandering soul, one would begin to weaken and eventually die. In death, one lost one’s body and its most closely attached soul, but not one’s identity. However, if the last component, the surviving soul, was annihilated, identity disappeared as well. Both souls and gods could be utterly destroyed.

Ni‘au bases his Dirge for his own Soul on these traditional ideas and uses again the traditional language and motifs of the genre. His emphasis on faults and ritual is found, for instance, in the seventh section of The Kumulipo (lines 566-594; Charlot 1983:93 ff.). In his chant, Ni‘au expresses his fear that his wandering soul has been captured by Kahai, a kahuna po‘i ‘uhane ‘soul-snatching expert’ from Hawai‘i: 395
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‘O ka mea nāna i lowe ‘o ku‘u maunu
‘The person who took my bait.’

Maunu ‘bait’ is a piece of the body or a personal effect of the victim stolen to be used in a sorcery ritual. Nī ‘au asks what offense he or his dependents have committed that has weakened him in the face of his enemy; he lists the possibilities of commission and omission. He calls on his gods, especially Kāne, to help him in his danger, appropriating the language of Pele chants for the power of his own god against the priest from the island of that volcano goddess. He offers the appropriate sacrifices, and his actions are successful. He is saved, and Kahai’s evil deeds will be revealed and punished.

E ola Nī ‘au i ke ao malama
‘O Pele kō Hawai‘i, ‘o au keʻia.
‘May Nī ‘au live in the world of light
Pele belongs to Hawai‘i island, but I belong here.’

Nī ‘au bristles up like Pele’s greatest foe, the pig-god Kamapua’a of Kaua‘i and O‘ahu. Nī ‘au will undo all his own wrongs and use those committed by Kahai to destroy him.

So far Nī ‘au has been chanting within the traditional conceptual framework. Now, however, he uses the occasion to examine those received ideas by experiencing as intensely as possible his separation from his own endangered soul: his sense of something missing inside, of fragility and vulnerability. In that situation, his wandering soul reveals itself in all its classical beauty. Just as in his Dirge for the Young Ka‘ahumanu, Nī ‘au begins with a glorious vision:

Aloha wale ku‘u ‘uhane ‘ōpua i ka la‘i
E ʻōi ʻi ana me ka hōkū i luna
E puokoko ana ka lá i ke kai
Awe loloa ka ‘uhane māʻalo i ka lani
Kuʻukuʻu kanaka i ke ʻāliaia
‘Beloved indeed my soul billowing like a cloud in the calm
Appearing with the stars above
The sun burning on the sea
A long streak of light, the soul moving across the sky
Leaving behind the human being in the salt flats.’

This is the soul that explores the universe, communicates godly messages and visions, meets lovers at night, and feeds the art of poets. This is the soul from which springs the astonishing creativity of Hawaiian culture. Nī ‘au knows it is his own soul, but as he studies it, it begins to assume an identity of its own:

‘O ka ‘uhane aka loloa i ka liʻulā...
Me he kanaka la ke kua e hele nei...
‘The long-shadowed soul in the twilight...
Like a human being there the god as it proceeds…’

Nī ‘au can, therefore, chant to it as if to another individual:

‘O ‘oe – ʻā, ‘o au – ʻē
‘You are there, I am here.’

Since he sees his soul as an individual, he can give it a name using the conventional line of a Name Chant:

‘O ka ‘uhane kanaka ola kou inoa?
‘Your name is Soul of a Living Human Being.’

His soul leaves him, but it returns. Nī ‘au not only recognizes his soul, he loves it as well:
E aloha ana a'ae au i ko'u hoa...
Aloha wale ku'u 'uhane kino wailua
'Elua kā māua e noho nei.
'I love my companion...
Beloved indeed is my soul separated from the body/with a separate body
We are indeed two living here together.'

But he cannot see this soul now; it has been captured by someone who wants to do it harm. Niʻau calls out in anguish:

'Auhea ana 'oe
'Where are you? Hear my voice!'

Just as in A Dirge for the Young Kaʻahumanu, Niʻau splits an identity: he turns one of his own components, his soul, into a separate person. He praises that person with traditional chants, loves the person, and wants to live together with him. But the soul has been snatched away and is in danger, and Niʻau calls out to it in anguish. Niʻau will regain his soul in the end, with the help of his gods, but his reformulation of the traditional mental framework echoes even today as a painful expression of the emotions of Hawaiians in the process of cultural change. Hawaiians treasured Niʻau's dirge, I believe, because it described their feeling of being cut in two, of being split apart right through their identity. Even today, Hawaiians speak of their "Hawaiian side" and their "foreign side." Moreover, that split alienates them from what should be their basic identity: being a "side," the Hawaiian soul is no longer the foundation. Finally, the Hawaiian side is the one that is in danger of extinction. Niʻau recognized that Hawaiians were being torn between two cultural worlds, that they could not be themselves without their Hawaiian soul, and that that soul was threatened with annihilation. Niʻau immersed himself in the pain of the situation so he could reveal the way he triumphed: by loving his Hawaiian soul and fighting for it.

FOOTNOTES

1 Biographical information is from Kamakau (1961:254, 266 ff). (I have examined the original Hawaiian texts):
   Foracher (1919-1920:416, Note 1). Ukikihi (1842a and 1842b). I thank Marilyn Reppun, Lela Goodell, and
   Barbara Dunn for their assistance and the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library for permission to use
   and quote the unpublished manuscripts of Ukihihi. I am grateful to the students in my graduate seminar on
   Hawaiian religion for their comments during our discussion of Niʻau. A complete bibliography of the poet has
   been provided by Sherlynn Kuʻualoha Meyer Hoʻomanawanui, whom I thank for sharing her new information.
   All translations are mine. I have regularized all texts except titles and the signed Ukihihi manuscript.

2 Kamakau (1961:267); Ukikihi (1842b) also states that Niʻauhoe was shot.

   versions also exist.

4 Foracher (1919-1920:451, lines 1-4). Niʻau again seems to be playing on The Kumulipo, lines 364f.

5 Wilder (1948:103f), evokes Cicero's puzzlement at Catullus's introduction of split identity into Latin poetry:
   Have you remarked that he is constantly holding a dialogue with himself? Who is this other voice that is so
   often addressing him – this voice that urges him to 'bear up' and to 'pull himself together'? Is that his genius?
   Is that some other-self?...Either it is the raw experience of life which has not yet sufficiently made its
   transmutation into poetry or it is a new kind of sensibility....This man is not afraid to acknowledge that he
   suffers. Perhaps that is because he shares it in dialogue with his genius. But what is this other-self? Have you
   one? Have I one?

6 The textual problems of this chant are complicated. A short version is found in Foracher (1919-1920:416ff). A
   Long versions are found in Mele Aimoku (1886:253ff; 260ff). Manuscript versions exist. Mele Aimoku
   (1886:253ff) seems generally the most reliable text, although some lines might be amended on the basis of
   other versions.

7 Foracher (1919-1920:416, line 1) has kanaka ole, but all other versions have kanaka ola. Since kanaka 'ole is a
   conventional phrase, kanaka ola is the lectio difficilior; it also fits better the sense of the chant.
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REFERENCES


*Na Mele Aimoku, na Mele Kupuna, a me na Mele Pono no ka Moi Kalakaua I a ua Pai ia no ka La Hanau o ka Moi. Ke Kanalima Pono o kona mau Makahiki*. 1886. Honolulu (?).


