A Pattern in Three Hawaiian Chants

Basic to the understanding of a literature is the description of its literary genres, an objective of Form Criticism.¹ Such a description must identify subgenre elements, such as motifs, symbols, titular and concluding sentences, and formal patterns. I propose to describe one formative pattern found in three Hawaiian chants of different genres: a farmer’s prayer, which seems on internal evidence to have been recited at a planting or harvest ceremony feast; a prayer to the hula goddess Laka, recited by the members of a hula academy most probably at a graduation ceremony; and a section of The Kumulipo, the great chant of the origin of the universe. The three chants were composed and employed at different levels of society respectively, the makaʻāinana “the people of the land,” the “middling” level of artistic specialists, and the highest chiefly and priestly level—but each participates fully in the Hawaiian intellectual and literary, symbolic tradition and is of high poetic quality. This article does not attempt a description of each chant or its genre—discussion of relevant points and further references can be found in the notes—but merely of the pattern they share.

A farmer’s prayer preserved by Kamakau contains many details but can be seen to fall into definite sections.² In the first (lines 1–8a), male gods are invoked and offered food as an inducement to lend their presences to the feast.³

The second section (lines 8b–14) begins with the same words as the first: E ke ahu a “Oh god.” A series of female goddesses is invoked. Not all are identified, but the first is specifically designated as a female in a sexual position: “Oh Kahela, the female who lies down with her face up”; and Kapapaiilula (line 13) combines the names of two goddesses, Papa and Laka. The goddesses are called upon to wake up or be active (line 14): E ala!

The third section (lines 15–23a) begins with the same words that concluded the previous section: E ala. . . . The description of a turbulent sea in this section appears to the westerner unrelated to the rest of the poem, but, for the Hawaiian, is a clear, symbolic depiction of sexual activity. The rain (line 15), the mists (line 16), and the spray (line 20) are traditional poetic symbols for aspects of sexual activity. Line 17 gives the sense in nuce: “Male sea, female sea, crazy sea.” This activity is given a cosmogonic dimension by the use in line 15 of lā “day” and pō “night,” a dualism found in chants about the origin of the universe.⁴ The mention of the wave that floats from Kahiki (line 22) alludes to traditions of the migrations of the gods to Hawai`i, thus stressing the godly character of the mating. The third section ends with a phrase corresponding to the E ala of section two: E ola! “May there be healthy, vigorous life! May it live!”

The fourth section (lines 23b–30) begins with a repetition of that concluding phrase just as section three repeated E ala. The fourth section would again appear disconnected to the westerner. Life is wished for all grades of society, for the great farmer himself and his family and dependents, and finally for the earth.
The four sections do, however, fall into a pattern that is basic to Hawaiian thinking: male and female join, and from their union come life and fertility. Male gods are invoked. Female gods are invoked with a sexual posture specified. Their mating is expressed in traditional erotic symbols, and the result is *ola*: vigorous, fertile life rather than a mere uncharacterized existence.

The thought behind this pattern derives from the Polynesian view of the universe as the product of an initial mating of earth and sky, followed by a filling out and completion of the universe through generations of mating cosmic elements. The entire universe, therefore, is sexual and is perpetuated through fertile sexual activity, the power energizing its various manifestations. Such a pattern is naturally appropriate to a farming prayer but can also be used in other areas of life, as will be seen.

The chant concludes with a stereotyped ending (line 31) and an invitation to all, gods and humans, to eat the food they have cooperated to produce.

In summary, the chant is clearly marked into sections by three devices: traditional stereotyped expressions including invocations (lines 1, 8b) and termination (line 31); repetition of phrases (lines 14 and 15, 23a, and 23b); and parallelism (the beginnings of sections one and two; the linking of the ending of section two with the beginning of section three and the end of section three with the beginning of section four; the similarities between the linking phrases). Moreover, the first four sections of the chant fall into a pattern that is expressive of the basic Hawaiian world view.

The same pattern is discernible in the well-known prayer to Laka. In lines 1–5, the goddess is identified with the high mountain regions, the rain-forest wateriness of which evokes fertility and sexuality (*'ohu* "mist" in line 3 recalls the mists in line 16 of the previous chant discussed).

The pig, a traditional symbol for the sexual male, is introduced in lines 6–9. The pig is the offering for the ceremony: "*Ua 'ailalo i ka pua'a hiwa*, taking part in the ceremony marking the completion of training by eating a portion of the head of an entirely black pig." The meaning of the pig in the ceremony is clearly stated in lines 8 and following: the pig is connected to the god Kane "Male," and is thus "A male for Laka."

Just as in the previous chant, male and female gods are invoked. Their sexual union is indicated in line 10 (Pukui and Korn 1973:45). The result of their union is the growth and flourishing of the plant, expressed stereotypically in lines 11–14.

That plant, which recalls the rain forest at the beginning of the chant, is given a mythological reference in lines 15 and following: the Makalei tree that attracted fish. The allusion leads to a second layer of meaning. Laka is not only the source of fertility, the *kumu* "stalk" from which the root sprouts (line 11). She is also the *kumu hula* "the hula source/master teacher" (line 4). That is, the attractive plant corresponds to the attractive dancer, for Laka's power is made manifest in both (lines 22f.), the dancer fitted in the plants from Laka's forest.

The pattern in the farming prayer is, therefore, found in this chant as well: male and female gods unite and from that union comes the power of life. Indeed, the different sections of this chant are difficult to relate to each other unless that underlying pattern is recognized.

The chant also contains cosmogonic and mythological references. The *pa* of lines 16 and following corresponds to that in line 15 of the farmer's prayer (Pukui and Korn 1973:47), and the Kahiki of line 27, to that in line 22 of the latter chant. Moreover, in lines 25 and following, Laka is pictured mating with the god Lono, who is specified as a sky-rain god. Thus line 26 can urge that the sky—Lono—join with the earth—Laka, the union that initiated and perpetuates the universe. The chant ends with the *ola* that concluded the pattern in the first chant discussed.

The same pattern is used by the composer of *The Kumulipo* in the fifth *wa* or period of
time. In this section, the three main levels of the chant—cosmic, human, and cultural development—are coordinated to connect the emergence of the pig, male puberty, and the invention of wet taro agriculture. The basis of the connection is the sexual symbolism of the pig, especially its phallic snout, and of the lo'i "wet taro patch," which represents the female genitals. The male parent of this section, named Kapōkanokano "The Night of the Male Erection," digs into the earth (line 486):

'O ke kanokano o ka ihu muku 'ele homua,
The great erection of the nose snout that digs the earth.13

By doing so he creates the wet taro patch, and the kama a pua'a, "the male child of the pig" is born (line 490).

That child goes to the upland forests and wallows in the taro patch of the taro patch god (lines 491f.), an activity again symbolic of sexual activity.14 From that wallowing comes the great fertility of the land (lines 493f.).

In this passage the composer of The Kumulipo follows his practice of raising to a new intellectual level the traditional literature he knows so well—reminding me of the way the writer of the Gospel of John elevates the Synoptic-type tradition he received. The essential pattern used in the farming chant is extracted and used sequentially15 and must be recognized for the passage to be intelligible.

Recognizing the pattern identified in this article is essential for understanding the structure and meaning of the chants in which it is used. The pattern is not, of course, the structural principle of the majority of published Hawaiian chants. It is, nevertheless, particularly interesting for its demonstration of how Hawaiians created literary expressions that mirrored their religious thinking.

Notes

1 Form Criticism describes the structures and functions of oral literary forms. Redaction Criticism describes how shorter forms are combined into larger complexes. Form and Redaction Criticism have proven essential in the interpretation of occidental and oriental literatures based on oral transmission. For a fuller description, bibliography, and the application of these critical methods to a Polynesian literature, see Charlot 1977.

2 Kamakau 1976:30f. My remarks are not, of course, intended as an exhaustive analysis of this or the subsequent texts discussed. I have changed several line divisions. The original chant would have been transmitted orally. Its reduction to print requires editorial judgments, with which one can differ. Beckwith (1932:182ff.) seems to be based on this and other chants. Compare Green and Beckwith (1928:5).


4 Beckwith (1972:187, line 10); Charlot (1977:498f.).

5 Thompson 1955–58:A625. World parents: sky-father and earth-mother as parents of the universe. See also Kirley (1971:A625), who follows Thompson's system with additional materials from Polynesia. The most complete Hawaiian example of such a cosmogony is The Kumulipo (Beckwith 1972).

6 'Ele'ele (line 30) is also used stereotypically in prayer conclusions. Line 30 falls somewhat out of the pattern of the previous lines in its section.

7 Parallelism is recognized as pervasive in Hawaiian literature and thought (see Elbert and Mahoe 1970:10ff.; Fox 1977:64). A basically dualistic cosmology—based on the use of the genealogical
model—stimulated the organization of elements into pairs best described as antithetic complementaries (compare Fox 1971:246ff., 1977:62, 81). In certain genres, such as the so-called “Refrain of Generations” in The Kumulipo (Beckwith 1972:50-54), true canonical parallelism is achieved, “a standardized body of fixed word pairs by means of which verse forms were composed” (Fox 1977:61, 60-69, 77-80, 1971:passim). Hawaiians, however, used all traditions and devices with great creative freedom. For instance, the use of the genealogical model stimulated the expansion of the male-female parallelism to the third member resulting from their union, creating the pattern discussed in this article. That pattern is in fact contained in the first two lines of the “Refrain of Generation” and in the use of parent-pairs to initiate each of the first eight ‘o’ “periods of time” of The Kumulipo. The vast subject of parallelism in Hawaiian culture awaits a major study.

* Emerson (1909:16ff.); Pukui and Korn (1973:42-47, 206ff.). Emerson states that the chant “was recited while gathering the woodland decorations for the altar” (1909:16). But lines 6ff., 19-23, suggest that its primary setting was the ‘a‘i‘ilo‘i ceremony (Pukui and Elbert 1971 at ‘a‘i‘ilo‘i: “Ceremony marking the end of training, so called because the student ate ‘ai a portion of the head, and especially the brains (i‘olo), of a fish, dog, or hog offered to the gods . . .”; Emerson 1909:32-35; Pukui and Korn 1973:47). In this chant, the ‘a‘i‘ilo‘i ceremony is closely connected to the ‘a‘i‘ikī (Pukui and Elbert 1971 at word: “Graduation exercises, as for hula . . .”; Emerson 1909:35ff.).

* F.g., Pukui and Elbert (1971) at pua‘a laho and pug: Charlot (1982:31). Kirtley 1971:A1871, Creation of hog (pig); B15.1.5, Eight-eyed hog; B16.1.4, Devastating swine; B29.3, Man-hog (also B29.3.1); B871.1.2, Giant boar (swine).

* Pukui and Elbert (1971) at ‘a‘i‘ilo‘i. I would interpret the p(o)‘o pua‘a (line 7) as the head of the sacrificed pig, rather than the “pupil priest” (Pukui and Korn 1973:46). The phrase is parallel to i ka pua‘a of the previous line. The interpretation of Pukui and Korn would normally require e instead of i, which is, however, possible.

* On this chant and the cosmic sexual attractiveness of the dancer, see Charlot (1979:56). On fish in images of sexual attraction and response, Charlot (1979:50); Judd (1930:15, no. 107, 17, no. 135); Pukui and Elbert (1971) at pua‘a 2. The connection between the plant and the dancer is expressed by the linking word luna “above” at the end of line 18 and the beginning of line 19: the plant thrusts i luna “upwards,” and the dancer is He luna “above” in the uplands to fetch Laka. Such a double use of the word creates a strong link between the two objects in Hawaiian poetry.


* Compare Fornander (1919-1920:380, line 192):

He ke‘a makaio helepa, he pua‘a ‘ehu ikaika,
A wild-eyed, fence-jumping stud, a powerfully rooting pig.

See also Kama‘akau 1976:33.

* The symbol is probably based on observation (Kramer 1971:197f.). The sexual reference is obvious in the story transmitted orally by the contemporary Hawaiian religious teacher Kalahikiola Nali‘ielu: Kamapua‘a finds a dry taro patch in the uplands and roots up and down inside of it. At the end of his final furrow, he sees a beautiful woman and ejaculates, overflowing the patch. Mr. Nali‘ielu explains that the taro corm is the penis of Kamapua‘a and its leaves, his pubic hair. On the telling of the story, see Charlot (1982:33ff.).

* For a parallel to this technique, see Charlot (1977:490).

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