THE FIRST TWO THESSES FROM THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAMME IN HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT HILO

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Ka Haka ‘Ula O Ke‘elikolani College was established in 1998 at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo to provide undergraduate and graduate courses in Hawaiian language, literature, and culture. The MA programme is the first in a Native American language. Classes are taught entirely in Hawaiian, and all papers and theses are in that language. The programme is laying the foundation for an authentically Hawaiian and contemporary scholarship that joins Western academic and traditional Hawaiian methods. The programme’s first two MA theses, completed in 2002, fulfil these hopes. (I was on the thesis committee of the first and an outside referee for the second.)

Hiapo Perreira has edited, with diacritical marks, the text of a 1909 newspaper series on the Hawaiian hero Kawelo – by an important author known only by his euphonious pseudonym, Ho‘oolumāehieie-I-Ka-Oni-Mālie-A-Pua-Lilia-Lana-I-Ka-Wai, and provided it with an introduction and voluminous notes: Ke Kālai‘ai Mo o-meheu ‘ana i ka Mo‘olelo Hiwahiwa o Kawelo, Ka Hiapa‘i‘ole a ka Ikaika, Ka Moa nāna i Ho‘oha‘aha‘a ke ‘O‘ole‘a o Kauahoa, “Ka U‘i o Hanalei“, ‘O ka Mea nāna ka La‘au Kaulana ‘o Ku‘ika‘a, a nāna ka Wahine Ho‘olei Ikoi ‘o Kewahineikiaoha. Perreira’s wide reading in Hawaiian literature has acquainted him with a wealth of linguistic and cultural detail, with which he is able to illuminate the text. In so doing, he is faithful to the message of David Malo and other Hawaiian writers as well as living elders that there is no short-cut to understanding Hawaiian culture. As in classical studies, the gods are in the details.

Perreira’s has enabled him also to absorb the wonderfully fluid style of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers as well as the innate poetry of their thinking. His interpretation thus shares the sensibility of his subject, and his articulation is free of the language barrier, the mental gap, found in English-language secondary sources. The student has the happy impression that author and interpreter think alike.

The second thesis from the programme is Larry Lindsey Kimura’s Nā Mele Kau o ka Māhele Mua o ka Mo‘olelo ‘o Hi‘iakaikapoliopiole o Joseph M. Poepoe: He Kālailaina me ke Kālele ma luna o nā Ku‘ina‘iwi Kaulua (The Poetry of the First Part of the Ancient Hawaiian Epic, Hi‘iakaikapoliopiole, as recorded by Joseph M. Poepoe: A Structural Analysis with Emphasis on Devices Linking Paired Utterances). Kimura is considered the greatest contemporary Hawaiian poet and is a valued professor in the Hilo Programme. Indeed, as one of its founders, he has helped set the goal of uniting Hawaiian and Western erudition and shares with his colleagues the desire to develop an appropriate Hawaiian language for this purpose. He is careful, therefore, to define his terms and provide a glossary. Those terms are clear and employ the traditional image of the body. Kimura conscientiously reviews the scarce secondary literature, evaluates his primary sources, and indicates further areas for research.

The subject Kimura addresses is the sequential structure of Hawaiian chants, whose difference from Western structures has bewildered scholars and prompted inaccurate conclusions about Hawaiian thinking. Linked assonance has already been recognised as a means of connection between verses. A close analysis of his set of chants enables Mr. Kimura to identify a large number of other links - for example, the traditional pairs luna/lalo and lamihomua. These links reveal the skeleton or deep structure of a chant.
and the logic of its sequence of ideas. The character and craft of the Hawaiian chanter is brought to light. Such a study could be done only by someone with Kimura’s extensive knowledge of Hawaiian literature and culture. Equally important, I believe, are his own poetic genius and experience as a literary creator.

Kimura’s visual analysis of the chants and tabulation of his results will be valuable aids for students and scholars of Hawaiian literature. His work is also an essential contribution to the major subject of Hawaiian thinking. As he states eloquently in his conclusion, his work enables us to see into the mind of the poet and experience the very process of his thought. Hawaiian poetry uses the connections between words to reveal the connections between things, to understand them as parts of an interrelated cosmos. Hawaiian language is, therefore, the perfected instrument of the Hawaiian’s search for truth, and its power derives from its successful unification of word, thought, and observation.

Kimura’s work is historically important. He fulfils our shared quest to coordinate the intellectual legacies of our two cultures in order to expand our understanding, not only of Hawaiian culture, but of human thinking altogether. These first two MA theses from the Hilo programme thus encourage our hopes for the potential contribution of Polynesia to world culture.

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