

John Charlot, *The Hawaiian Poetry of Religion and Politics: Some Religio-Political Concepts in Postcontact Literature*. Monograph Series, No. 5. Laie, Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1985. Pp. ix, 86, notes, appendixes. \$8.00.

Reviewed by Serge Dunis, Université d'Avignon, France.

In this tersely written monograph, John Charlot forcefully demonstrates the importance of chants and songs in the study of postcontact Hawaiian history. Focusing on the political and religious status of chiefs and leaders, he first reminds us of their cosmic role to show how this theme remains cogent throughout the monarchy period and our times. Then he stresses how Kamehameha I successfully met the challenge of the contact period by uniting the islands and reforming Hawaiian culture so that it could endure:

I mua, e **nā pōki'i**, a inu i ka wai'awa'awa, 'a'ohē
 hope e ho'i mai ai.
 Forward, younger brothers, until you drink the bitter
 water; there is no retreat into which to return. (P. 6)

Literature played a major role in this struggle for identity under **Kalākaua**. Indeed, "The Four Chiefs"— **Kalākaua**, his sisters Lili'uoka-

lani and Likelike, and his brother Leleiohoku-constituted a real Academy. The resulting renewal of chant and dance bears all the characteristics of classicism: recurrence of the same themes, terms, and patterns. As an example of introduced literary form, the national anthem illustrates this process of singling out elements of traditional culture for the purpose of perpetuating them, despite or thanks to oversimplification.

A specialist in Polynesian culture myself, I appreciate John Charlot's concentration on the value of language proper, which is an obligatory way to gain access into cultures that were formerly oral. Lunalilo uses the important Hawaiian poetic device of ambiguity in his anthem *E Ola ka Mō'i i ke Akua* (p. 16). This anthem can be read in two different ways. Charlot has already aptly broached this subject in *Chanting the Universe* (Hong Kong and Honolulu: Emphasis International, 1983). Like word games, poetry was instructional and gave opportunities for brilliance and the display of learning (p. 13):

I ka 'ōlelo ke ola, i ka 'ōlelo ka make.

In the word, there is life, in the word, death.

(*Chanting the Universe*, 42)

It is one of John Charlot's great merits, not only as a scholar but as a translator, that he shows the strong power of Polynesian words. Three and four different levels of meaning can be expressed in the same line: a

Haele pū ka hua'ōlelo me ka nane.

The word goes together with the riddle.

(*Chanting the Universe*, 43)

In my own reconstruction and interpretation of pre-European Maori society (*Sans tabou ni totem. Inceste et pouvoir politique chez les Maori de Nouvelle-Zélande*. Paris: Fayard, 1984), I repeatedly unfold this astonishing versatility of Polynesian words, which can express a whole rite, a whole myth, a whole practice on their own. Therefore, I fully agree with Charlot when he concludes that poetry has been overlooked by historians (p. 29). *He Himeni* is clearly abandoning the theocentric view that all good comes from Cod and returning to a traditional Hawaiian view of the chief. The anthem resembles not a Christian prayer but a chant in praise of a chief. **Kalākaua's** victory in the election is described as a conquest that resembles those of Kamehameha I: he unites the islands to establish order. This warrior theme—standard in the **Kalākaua** literature—is the direct opposite of Lili'uokalani's empha-

sis on Christian peace. All these characteristics identify *He Himeni* as an example of the **Kalākaua** propaganda literature (p. 20).

Religio-political chants and songs of the postmonarchy period take over the same tradition while adapting to the new circumstances. Isn't the right chief necessary for the well-being of the community and the cosmos? **Kalākaua** becomes the *makua* of the genealogy the same way as Kamehameha I in *Hawai'i Pono'i*. The theme of the dependence of the chief or leader on the people, first used to rally them behind the monarchy, now helps win elections. Hawaiians being "ka po'e i aloha i ka 'āina, 'the people who love the land,'" Charlot elucidates:

'A'ole mākou a'e minamina
I ka pu'ukālā a ke aupuni.
Ua lawa mākou i ka pōhaku
I ka 'ai kamaha'o o ka'āina

We do not value
The hill of dollars of the government.
We are satisfied with the rock,
The wondrous food of the land.

Thus:

In my opinion, it is based on the expression 'ai pōhaku 'eat rock,' used for someone who has nothing else. The Hawaiians have been dispossessed and are reduced to what, for the non-Hawaiian, appears to be worthless. But the poet transforms this pejorative expression into a positive description of Hawaiian culture. . . . The Hawaiian eats the rock and is formed by it into a pua of Hawai'i. He brings the land inside of himself and thus becomes one with it. (Pp. 27-28)

True to his holistic theme of the Hawaiian chief, Charlot concludes thus:

The strong poetic bent of important public figures might not have been without influence on their views and policies. Indeed, my study of religio-political chants and songs indicates that poetry was felt in that field, just as it was in others, to be the most congenial form for the expression of feelings and philosophy. Only by achieving some appreciation of that poetry,

would argue, will we be able to understand the concerns and coherence of certain Hawaiian policies and tendencies. (P. 29)

In his lush appendixes Charlot makes a series of good points. For instance, do we have clear evidence for the early use of *akua* for living chiefs? Well attested for the short period from Kamehameha I's death through the early missionary period, this use is difficult to demonstrate from earlier literature and might well go back to Kamehameha I's own restructuring of Hawaiian culture. The reader will also enjoy having the full version of the Hawaiian texts.

In his detailed notes, Charlot comes up with treasures like the example of Lili'uokalani speaking of the *'ō'ō* bird: "this bird sucks the honey on which it subsists. They are true Hawaiians; flowers are necessary for their very life" (p. 75).

My last comment is actually a compliment: this monograph is too short. I am looking forward to enjoying a more complete survey of the available literature.