
REVIEW

A *Kumulipo of Hawai'i*. John Charlot, Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2014. Pp. 173. ISBN 9783896656452.

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IN THIS MAJOR PUBLICATION FROM AN ESTEEMED PRESS, John Charlot begins his self-described “notes” on the *Kumulipo* (KL) with: “The *Kumulipo* is a supreme work of world literature and a testament to the genius of the Hawaiian people: their combination of learning, poetry, and cosmic thinking.” From the author of *Classical Hawaiian Education* (2005) and a classically trained scholar of religious literature, this is carefully considered appreciation.

Charlot thinks that the *Kumulipo* is worthy not only of literary but also of “scriptural” analysis. He takes the notion of scripture seriously, and the *Kumulipo* is treated as if it were scripture by many of those who know it. His breadth of scholarship reveals that he has dealt with two types of scriptural traditions: one that privileges its scripture as *true* and *complete*, as *inspired words by the only God*; and traditions with wisdom literature that serve as a different type of scripture, human, constructed, even ambiguous. This second type has less problems accepting scientific study of its composition and generally welcomes critical analysis.

Charlot was trained in Germany to use many scientific methods to study literature (historical, form and redaction analysis, motif analysis, symbolism studies, comparative folklore, linguistic analysis of original languages, etc.) for any scripture despite theological claims.¹ Wisdom literatures (when a text is singled out as “scripture”) such as the *Kumulipo* were appreciated by their

educated audiences as honoring the traditional materials that were embedded within the creative material of the composer. Charlot identifies the poet who assembles the *Kumulipo* as the “redactor” (using a classical term for its poet/author/chanter/literary weaver). Form criticism discloses ancient or originally independent literary units that the redactor builds into a complex that might be compared to a leaf mat (see below). Just as the first hearers were able to be *silent* and to identify the various pieces that the redactor skillfully wove together, Charlot parses the *text* to make these insights available to us.

First, he identifies how an oral chant has come to us as this particular text, *He Kumulipo*. This *Kumulipo* was saved for posterity by King David Kalākaua. The king showed the only extant manuscript, *He Pule Heiau* (A Temple Prayer), of this chant (*He Kumulipo*) to the Polynesian specialist, Adolf Bastian (1826–1905). Bastian copied much of it and was the first to publish a partial text, translation, and interpretation in 1881. King Kalākaua published his arrangement and transcription of *He Pule Hoolaa Alii ...* in 1889. Charlot carefully explains his reasons for starting with Martha Beckwith’s later version of the text (1951). However, we are reminded that there has been no academically established text that would reveal so much more. Parsing, modern orthography, versification, arrangement of sections, scribal errors, dating by language and ink, etc., must be established before there is stable interpretation of any text.

Many have published their findings on the *Kumulipo*, and Charlot is in dialogue with them (Kalākaua, Bastian, Beckwith, Kukahi, Malo, Elbert, Pukui, *et al.*). He not only benefits from their work but also is unafraid to correct them in precise and articulate argumentation that will help establish Hawaiian literary studies as a mature discipline.

This study is not a commentary on this “origin chant,” *He Kumulipo* (A *Kumulipo*). It is a prolegomena to its study, Charlot maintains. Because the original was composed and recited orally, the first problem was the transcription: creating an accurate text without modern orthography for Hawaiian. Then came the double problem of retaining the differences of an oral literature and how it is parsed into written Hawaiian. Charlot is a master in presenting and illustrating these difficulties using problematic verses and sections of the received text. There is almost commentarial depth in the way that Charlot uses examples for each problem, idea, and word studied.

A *Kumulipo* is the single extant Hawaiian example of this oral genre: an *origin chant* that was composed around 1700 CE, in 2,102 lines by an unknown poet–redactor. Thus, it is a pre-Western contact work. As mentioned before, Charlot has chosen the term redactor to emphasize how this genre of origin chants (mentioned as a body of chants by Malo) has survived

as what has come to be seen as the crowning achievement of Hawaiian oral literature. This genre's very nature combines traditional materials (histories, genealogies, stories, riddles, lists, myths, etc.) with the poet-redactor's own contributions. Thus, it is an anthology as well as a history of Hawaiian oral literature. That is so, if its complexity and its purposeful ambiguities can be unpacked.

Charlot's "notes" represent a lifetime study of the *Kumulipo* that has led to this wealth of understanding about its depth and richness (values, language, literary forms, education, etc.). It has persuaded Charlot and others who have carefully studied the *Kumulipo* to conclude that it is the finest example of precontact Hawaiian traditional and creative literary efforts. Charlot affirms that it is perhaps for this reason that it receives near scriptural status. Or stated differently, wisdom literature at this level of literary perfection is a different type of scripture: composed by masters of the tradition without the claim of a scribe receiving their God's words. Thus, there should be no fear of the use of scientific investigation of wisdom literature to unpack its multilayered meanings.

Quite early in the study, Charlot refutes the notion that the *Kumulipo* is a creation chant, with the rest of the study substantiating this conclusion. Of the three known Hawaiian and Polynesian philosophical notions for origin chants (mentioning David Malo's memory of other examples)—birth (*hānau*), creation (*hana lima*) and growth (*ulu wale*)—the poet-redactor of the *Kumulipo* is shown to leave out only the creation model.

The chant combines a "plaited *lauhala* or pandanum leaf mat" structure with traditional lists of vocabulary and concepts, quoted cultural pieces, genealogies, fill-in-the blank segments, and other known Hawaiian chant devices to implement this model. Charlot demonstrates the level of mastery of the *Kumulipo* redactor, the complexity of the chant's composition, and the difficulty of vocabulary with wordplay and linguistic inventions. And the births proceed as if they were a mat with four (or possible five) horizontal levels woven together with sixteen vertical divisions (*wā*) that are also divided roughly in half (*pō/ao*, night/day). They move from night to day in awe inspiring complexity. In fact, the complexity is greater in the first *wā* (with its 122 lines) and declines by the eighth *wā* to twenty lines. This leads Charlot to wonder whether the poet's complexity was just too great to continue in all its horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Charlot's goal is to demonstrate this structure by focusing on the redactor's identifiable imprint. By understanding how the author-redactor has woven together the horizontal levels (cosmic, genealogical, human development, cultural history, year, and possibly day—and with hints of hula and martial arts that might suggest that the redactor even alluded to other horizontal

levels that are now impossible to reconstruct) with the vertical structure of sixteen developmental periods, the birth of the universe is revealed as inter-related genealogically and cosmologically right down to the birth of the newest member of the ʻĪʻohana.

Charlot has previously shown (in *Classical Hawaiian Education*) that completeness of one's education (vocabulary, history, tradition, genealogy, stories, proverbs, lists, etc.), level of memory, mastery of literary forms, and the art of chanting are loved and appreciated by all levels of Hawaiian society. The poet-redactors depend on their knowledge of this literary tradition. But they also offer their audience some surprises in the arrangements of the literary elements and their ambiguities. These ambiguities have been criticized as contradictions, such as, Charlot illustrates, the false problem of Kāne being mentioned in an earlier wā before his birth in a later one. Charlot points to the Hawaiian love of completeness and ambiguity, multiple accounts of varying traditions, not as error but as richness and depth.

Once Charlot has demonstrated the complex structure and its logic, he argues for a return to the vertical structure of the original, placing Kalākaua's lines 273–377 before lines 123–272, the 3rd wā before the second, and a new (and tentative) translation of the first eight wā. However, the translation is in an appendix calling for others to continue this project until a “professional academic edition” is achieved.

Charlot's work contains a richness that honors his subject. It includes comparison with other chant forms (Pele, name, sacrifice, death, trickster, combat, hero, origins, etc.); demonstrates the physicality and explicitly sexual character of the birth model of cosmic origin; identifies words used in the *Kumulipo* that are not found in modern dictionaries with some solutions for their translation; reminds us of the orality of chants (their sounds, beauty, rhyming, and original “reduplicatives”); parses the sounds of the chant into the poet's intended words and meanings; and suggests solutions to syntactical elements that have been intractable (see especially the section of syntax, pp. 15–19). This is an accomplishment worthy of a “supreme work of world literature.”

Charlot's *A Kumulipo of Hawai'i* should be required reading for everyone interested in Hawaiian and Polynesian studies. It is an example of mature scholarship in a field of study that is coming of age.

NOTES

1. Charlot asks the reader to refer to his publications that detail analysis of texts, available at http://www.johncharlot.me/John_Charlot_SITE/Books_and_Journals.html. Lost in his humble references to these studies is the fact that Charlot has a prestigious record of

scriptural and literary publications that, indeed, invites the reader to use his entire corpus, because he maintains a focus that tolerates little repetition of his previously published findings.

LIST OF A FEW SUPPLEMENTAL STUDIES

- John Charlot has made most of his publications available at http://www.johncharlot.me/John_Charlot_SITE/Books_and_Journals.html. Most are available without cost on his website.
- 1970 *New testament disunity: Its significance for Christianity today*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- 1977 The application of form and redaction criticism to Hawaiian literature. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 86 (4): 479–501.
- 1983 *Chanting the universe: Hawaiian religious culture*. Hong Kong: Emphasis International.
- 1983 A pattern in three Hawaiian chants. *Notes, Journal of American Folklore* 96 (379): 64–8.
- 1985 Four Society Islands creation texts. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 41 (81): 169–84.
- Errata: Society Islands creation texts.
- 1986 Towards a dialogue between Christianity and Polynesian religions. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 15 (4): 443–50.
- 1990 Aspects of Samoan literature I: The structure of the Samoan single story form and its uses. *Anthropos* 85 (1990): 415–30.
- 1991 Aspects of Samoan literature II: Genealogies, multigenerational complexes, and texts on the origin of the universe. *Anthropos* 86 (1991): 127–50.
- 1992 Aspects of Samoan literature III: Texts on historical subjects and bodies of literature. *Anthropos* 87 (1992): 33–48. Errata: Samoan literature I–III.