

## *Ka 'Oihana Oli*

The Art of Hawaiian Oli

by

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*Mele* is defined as a “song, chant of any kind, poem; to sing, chant” (Puku'i & Elbert, 1986). It was and continues to be interwoven in Hawaiian culture influencing many aspects of the political, social, and religious institutions of society. *Mele* was often expressed as a means of religious devotion and personal emotion, as well as a formal documentation of *mo'okū'auhau* (genealogy), *ka'ao* (mythology/epics) and *mo'olelo* (history) (Tatar, 1982). *I ka wā kahiko* or in ancient times, the power of the word through *mele* had immense *mana*. An old saying, “*Mana i ka leo*” or literally the power of the voice depicts the importance of the spoken word. Furthermore, language when spoken and moreso when chanted had significant implications pertaining to life and death. The following ‘*ōlelo no'eau* (proverb) expresses this thought, “*I ka 'ōlelo ke ola, i ka 'ōlelo ka make*” or literally in the word is life, in the word is death (Puku'i, 1983). The underlying *kaona* (hidden meaning) implies that spoken words have the ability to heal as well as to cause death.

Plews (1965) describes poetry or *mele* as “a transfiguration of life, an imaginative presentation of it - that is, a picture of life - addressed to our nobler emotions, and expressed in language of appropriate rhythmic form. The music of the words and the beauty of the images they bring to mind move our feeling and give us delight.” Roberts (1967) further highlights that the primary charm of chanting lay in the words due to the exquisite imagery conveyed and the ability to paint the beauties of nature. *Mele* refers to a creation of either a poetic chant or song and the *haku mele* (composer, chanter) is thus the creator of such poems and or chants. Rhythm, melody, originality, and vivid imagery are essential elements that underly the thought of a great composition. There are four principal meanings associated with the interpretation of *mele*, they are:

- the ostensible or literal meaning
- a vulgar double meaning \*
- a mythological-historical-topographical interpretation
- the *kaona* or deeply - hidden meaning Colum (1924, in Plews, 1965).

For those linguistically competent in the native tongue, especially *ka po'e kahiko* or people of old, it is expected that one should know the *kaona* without being told once the theme of the *mele* was understood (Roberts, 1967).

\* There has always been a negative stigma connected with Hawaiian music. The idea or concept that Hawaiian music has a “double meaning which is usually vulgar” is a preconceived notion based on the foundation of Christianity and a “western” perspective on what their belief and culture deems as being moral or *pono* (righteous).

*Oli* on the other hand is a chant that is not danced to and recited in prolonged phrases done in one breath (Puku'i & Elbert, 1986). It is a chant or intonation generally recited without musical instruments. The *oli* can also be considered a solo performance, although group chants were commonly performed for certain religious rituals (Wong, 1965). *Oli* therefore is not only a means of which to express *mele*, but it simultaneously highlights the important attributes of the *mele's* context. Early Polynesians relied on trained memory and language skills in oratory to recite mythology, traditions, history, customs, and rituals (Buck, 1965a). The importance of *mana'o* or thought expressed by *oli* enabled the *haku mele* (chanter) to communicate the significance of the person, place, thing and or event being honored.

This distinguished class of professionals (*haku mele*) were skilled in the art of '*apo* or the ability to receive and hold the spoken word. Such skill required listening to a chant, memorizing it verbatim, and reciting it again. This was the method by which all chants, traditions, beliefs, myths, history and religious customs were passed from generation to generation. The title of *haku mele* is derived from the original term of *haku* which means, "to sort out feathers of different qualities and colors, and to arrange them into bundles to be used for feather cloaks" (Plews, 1965; Tatar, 1982). As mentioned earlier, *mele* refers to poetry, a song or particular chant. Therefore, a *haku mele* is an individual who arranges words to a *mele*. Roberts (1967) indicated several grades of *haku mele*; a) *haku mele maika'i* or *akamai loa* (exceedingly skillful & considered the highest class), *haku mele olioli* (composers of common chants), and *haku mele paeaea* (bards of low vulgar *mele*). Hence the *oli* may be considered a true art because of the skill level, knowledge, and *mana* required of the *haku mele*.

### ***Oli* or Chanting**

Many cultural historians have indicated there are at least two major divisions of chanting, they are:

1. *Oli* or an unaccompanied solo sung in variation by two to three tones. The *oli* encompasses all of the *mele* (actual chants or songs) not composed for hula or dancing.
2. The *mele hula* or hula chants are characterized by marked rhythms to accompany dances typically chanted with a range of four or five tones. Additional instruments and or percussion implements were commonly used to carry the rhythm. (Mitchell, 1992; Winne, 1965, Tatar, 1982; Wong, 1965).

Although it is accepted that a chant is an integral part of the tradition of *hula* and is a comprehensive topic in and of itself, it is not the intent of the author to provide an in depth account of *mele hula*. For the purposes of this paper, the following discussion shall focus on the art of *oli* with reference to *mele hula* to illustrate historical origins and or points for clarification. For further understanding

of the history and legacy of *mele hula* refer to Barrere, Puku'i, and Kelly's, Hula: Historical Perspectives (1980).

### ***Nā Papa Mele (Categories of Mele)***

Extensive documentation refers to Hawaiian chant encompassing different types and or forms that vary depending on the context of the *mele* and its purpose(s). A survey of chant literature indicates that there are several general categories of *mele* divided by subject matter into approximately nine classes of *oli*. They are:

1. ***Mele Kaua*** (aka *mele ka'i kaua*) or war/battle chants.
2. ***Mele Ko'ihonua*** or genealogical chants often glorifying the achievements, deeds, and or exploits of ***nā Akua*** (gods), ***nā 'Aumākua*** (ancestral deities), ***nā ali'i*** (chiefs), and ***nā me'e*** (legendary heroes). Also referred to as ***mele kū'auhau*** or ***mo'okū'auhau***.
3. ***Mele Kūō*** or chants of praise.
4. ***Mele Olioli*** are chants with lyrics and or odes.
5. ***Mele Paeaea*** or provocative songs. Supplications chants associated with fishing. The authors Winne and Tatar refer to this style as a vulgar type, a chant in derogation of an individual also known as ***mele haku-kole***.

Particular *mele (s)* require a specific *oli* style. It is presumed that the pairing, of the appropriate *oli* style with the *mele* category was and continues to be vital in the expression of *mana* being conveyed. For example, extensive ***mele ko'ihonua*** and or ***mele mo'okū'auhau*** (genealogical chants) are chanted in the ***kepakepa*** style, ***mele kanikau*** (lamentation chants) are often done in the ***ho'ouwēwē***, and ***mele ho'oipoipo*** (love chants) recited in ***ho'āeāe***. However, it is important to understand that the *oli* styles and their application often varied across professions, ***hālau***, geographical region, and individual orientation (Tatar, 1982).

***“'A'ohe pau ka 'ike i ka hālau ho'okahi.”***

All knowledge is not taught in the same school.

One can learn from many sources.

(Puku'i, 1983)

- Tatar, E. (1982). Nineteenth Century Hawaiian Chant. Number 33 Pacific Anthropological Records. Department of Anthropology Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum: Honolulu, Hawai'i.
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- Wong, K. (1965). Ancient Hawaiian Music. The Kamehameha Schools 75th Anniversary Lectures. The Kamehameha Schools Press: Honolulu, Hawai'i.