Reader: What, exactly, is Kumulipo?

Thomas: *Kumulipo* (“beginning in deep darkness” or “in the far past”) is a sacred genealogical prayer and creation chant that describes the familial relationships that exist among the Hawaiian *ali‘i*, or ruling chiefs, the *akua*, or Hawaiian gods and goddesses, the *maka‘ainana*, or common people of ancient Hawai‘i (e.g., the farmers, fisherpeople, and craftspeople), the heavenly constellations and stellar bodies, and the plants and animals that inhabit the earth and its vast oceans. Queen Lili‘uokalani, the last monarch of the sovereign Hawaiian Kingdom, described *Kumulipo* as “an ancient prayer for the dedication of the high chief Lono-i-ka-makahiki to the gods soon after his birth.” (Her Majesty, Queen Lili‘uokalani, 1897, as cited in Beckwith, 1972, p. 7). Queen Lili‘uokalani believed *Kumulipo* was composed by Keaulumoku in 1700 AD and transmitted, orally, from one generation to the next.

Professor of Hawaiian Studies Haunani-Kay Trask (1999) observed that the *mo‘olelo*, or history, of the Hawaiian people, can be found in traditional genealogical chants, and that the Native Hawaiian identity is derived from the “great cosmogonic genealogy, the *kumulipo*” (p. 140). Native Hawaiian scholar Lilikala Kame‘eleihiwa (1992) noted “the essential lesson[s]” of *Kumulipo* are “the interrelatedness of the [pre-colonial] Hawaiian world and the inseparability of its constituent parts…the genealogy of the Land, the Gods, Chiefs, and people intertwine with each other and with all the myriad aspects of the universe” (p.2). She wrote

in traditional times, the telling of any Hawaiian history began properly with traditional beginnings. A *mo‘olelo* (history) would begin with the hero’s
immediate antecedents or several generations further back along the ancestral lineage. In some instances, it would start at the very beginning of time, as when Kalani-nui-‘ia-mamao, a Hawai‘i island Chief, was born. His birth chant was the Kumulipo, that distant dark beginning of the earth:

\[
O \text{ ke au \ i \ kahuli \ wela \ ka \ houna}
\]
At the time of changing, the earth was hot

\[
O \text{ ke au \ i \ kahuli \ lole \ ka \ lani}
\]
At the time of changing, the heavens unfolded

\[
O \text{ ke au \ i \ kuka \ iaka \ ka \ la}
\]
At the time when the sun appeared in shadows

\[
E \text{ ho‘omalamalama \ i \ ka \ malama}
\]
Causing the moon to shine

\[
O \text{ ke au \ o \ Makali‘i \ ka \ po}
\]
At the time when the Pleiades were seen in the night

\[
O \text{ ka walewale \ ho‘okuma \ honua \ ia}
\]
It is the slime that establishes the earth

\[
O \text{ ke kumu \ o \ ka \ lipo, \ i \ lipo \ ai}
\]
At the beginning of the deep darkness, darkening

\[
O \text{ ke kumu \ o \ ka \ Po, \ I \ po \ ai}
\]
At the beginning of the night, only night

\[
O \text{ ka lipolipo, \ o \ ka \ lipolipo}
\]
In the unfathomable darkness, dark blue and bottomless

\[
O \text{ ka lipo \ o \ ka \ la \ o \ ka \ lipo \ o \ ka \ po}
\]
In the darkness of the sun, in the endless night

Po wale ho‘i

Indeed, it was only night

Hanau ka po

The night gave birth

Hanau Kumulipo i ka po, he kane

Kumulipo [foundation of darkness] was born in the night, a male

Hanau Po‘ele i ka po, he wahine

Po‘ele [the dark night] was born in the night, a female…

From that moment onward, the world and everything in it would unfold in genealogical sequence, from creatures of the sea to those of the Land, from the Land itself to Gods and Chiefs, and so on until the present time. The Chief’s birth chant proclaimed him or her to be an inseparable part of an ancient procession of life. It also defined the Chief’s relationship to the Land. (Kame‘eleihiwa, 1992, pp. 1-2).

According to Kumulipo, the union of Papa, the “earth mother,” and Wakea, the “sky father,” resulted in the birth of the Hawaiian islands. From the offspring of Papa and Wakea came kalo, or the taro plant, and from the kalo came the Hawaiian people. The Hawaiian people, therefore, consider themselves to be the younger siblings of the ‘aina, or land, and the kalo, or taro plant (Kame‘eleihiwa 1992; Trask, 1999).

Kame‘eleihiwa (1992) described the epic tradition of Wakea and Papa, the sky-father and earth-mother, who by the Opukakonua lineage were half-brother and half-sister. These two were said to be
the parents of islands, Hawai‘i and Maui (and later Kaua‘i, Ni‘ihau, Lehua, and Ka‘ula), as well as the ancestors of Ka Lahui Hawai‘i [the Hawaiian people]. According to tradition, their first human off-spring was a daughter, Ho’ohokukalani (to generate stars in the sky), who matured into a great beauty. A desire for his daughter welled up in Wakea, but he hoped to gratify his desire without his sister and wahine (woman, or wife) knowing of it.

… Wakea was … alone with his daughter, and he seduced her. Being a faithful daughter, Ho’ohokukalani told her mother what had occurred. After a dreadful row, Papa left Wakea in anger and took other lovers, although they were eventually reconciled and she would bear him other islands. The first child of Wakea and Ho’ohokukalani was an unformed foetus, born prematurely; they named him Haloa-naka (quivering long stalk). They buried Haloa-naka in the earth, and from that spot grew the first kalo plant. The second child, named Haloa in honor of his elder brother, was the first Hawaiian Ali‘i Nui [Great Chief] and became the ancestor of all the Hawaiian people. Thus the kalo plant, which was the main staple of the people of old, is also the elder brother of the Hawaiian race, and as such deserves great respect. (Kame’elehiwa, 1992, pp. 23-24)

The original text of Kumulipo was first printed, in the Hawaiian language, in Honolulu, in 1889, from a manuscript belonging to His Majesty, King David Kalakaua, Hawai’i’s last king. The 2102 line epic poem was published as a 66 page pamphlet titled, He pule ho’ola’a ali‘i. He Kumulipo no Ka - I – i mamao a ia Alapai - wahine (“A Prayer for the Consecration of a Chief, a Kumulipo for Ka I i mamao and [passed on] to the Woman Alapai”). The manuscript was translated into the English language by Her
Majesty, Queen Liliu'okalani, and titled, *An Account of the Creation of the World According to Hawaiian Tradition*. Translated from original manuscripts preserved exclusively in her majesty’s family, by Liliuokalani of Hawai‘i. Prayer of Dedication.
The Creation for Ka I i mamo, from him to his daughter Alapai wahine, Liliuokalani’s great-grandmother. Composed by Keaulamoku in 1700 and translated by Liliuokalani during her imprisonment in 1895 at Iolani Palace and afterward at Washington Place, Honolulu; was completed in Washington D.C., May 20, 1987. Beckwith (1972) described *Kumulipo* as the principal source of information regarding the mythology, cultural traditions, sociopolitical structures, and cosmological understandings (i.e., the worldview) of the indigenous Hawaiian people before the arrival of Captain Cook and the Calvinist missionaries, beginning in 1778.

**Reader**: Well, O.K. But why the emphasis on *Kumulipo* in a research study about an Adolescent Day Treatment Program Student Services Delivery Team that provided special education and related services to Native Hawaiian youth with emotional disabilities and challenging behaviors?

**Thomas**: The team members believed that the AAADTP students and their families had been damaged by American colonialism in Hawai‘i. The team members believed that the results of American colonialism in Hawai‘i (i.e., the loss of land, language, and cultural identity among the Native Hawaiian people) contributed to the high rates of poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and incarceration that plagued the AAADTP students and their families.

After conducting the initial in-depth interviews with the team members, I formulated a number of questions about what existed in Hawai‘i, and in the minds of the
Hawaiians, prior to 1778, the year Captain James Cook became the first European to “make contact” with the indigenous people of Hawai’i.

*What were the Hawaiian people like before they lost their land, their language, their cultural identities?*

*How did the Hawaiians perceive themselves? And how did they perceive their place in the cosmos?*

*What was the nature of the pre-colonial Hawaiian universe?*

*What did colonialism destroy? What was lost? What was disrupted? What was transformed? What was replaced?*

The answers to these questions, according to Kame’eleihiwa (1992), Trask (1999) and other Hawaiian scholars, lie embedded within the 2,102 lines of *Kumulipo*. I, therefore, decided to construct a textual collage that juxtaposed the stories of the AAADTP team members with the 122 lines that comprise Chant One of *Kumulipo*. In doing so, I hope to: (a) position the stories of the AAADT team members within the larger story of American colonialism in Hawai’i; (b) provide the reader with opportunities to experience the traditional Hawaiian universe as depicted by Keaulumoku in the early 18th century; and (c) invite the reader to move back and forth through time, from the cosmogonic beginnings of the traditional Hawaiian universe (a universe inhabited by ‘akua, or gods and goddesses, ‘aumakua, or ancestral spirits, and kumupa’a, or spiritual guides, as well as demi-gods and mortal heroes) to a contemporary Hawai’i inhabited by people from many ethnocultural backgrounds (i.e., a Hawai’i characterized by multiple constructed realities and competing ideologies and ontological constructs, as evidenced by the competing experienced realities of the four AAADTP team members).
Reader: Kumulipo sounds like a very powerful story. How can the stories of the team members compete with gods and goddesses, heroes, and the cosmogonic beginnings of the Hawaiian universe? Aren’t you worried that Kumulipo will “crowd out” or “overpower” the stories of the team members?

Thomas: No. Not really. The experiences of the team members are vivid and intense. I think the reader will find their stories compelling and interesting. And I don’t think that Kumulipo and the stories of the team members are “in competition” with one another. Rather, I think they complement one another and form a holistic “picture” of what was (i.e., a traditional Hawaiian universe characterized by fluid boundaries between the natural and supernatural realms and an interdependent, interconnected, and genealogical relationship among the Native Hawaiian people and the ‘aina, or earth, from which they descended), what is (i.e., a Hawai`i characterized by ethnocultural diversity and competing ideologies and ontological and epistemological constructs, and by a Native people, Ka Lahui Hawai`i [“the Hawaiian Nation”], many of whom have been damaged by the loss of land, language, and cultural identity), and what can be (e.g., a public education system that honors, respects, reinforces, and reflects the ontological and epistemological understandings and related cultural values of the Native Hawaiian people, and educational polices predicated on a deep love and reverence for the ‘aina [“land”], kai [“ocean”], and wai [“fresh water”] of Hawai`i). Truly, I believe in the viability of this research project as surrealist collage. Each component of the collage, every story, every chant, represents an ontological understanding, a knowledge construct, an experienced reality; every story, every chant, invites the reader to experience the
1998-1999 school year at the AAADTP, and to consider what was, what is, and what can be regarding public education in Hawai‘i.

**Reader:** O.K. I think I understand why you chose to use Kumulipo as a conceptual framework for this study. But what about the issue of language? Postmodern theorists such as Derrida and Foucault believe that language determines culture, and that a person can never really understand the worldview of another cultural group unless he or she speaks the language associated with that culture. Do you speak Hawaiian?

**Thomas:** No. I cannot read, write, speak, or understand the Hawaiian language. And I agree with the postmodern assertion that language determines culture. Hence, I do not claim to have a deep understanding of the ontological and epistemological constructs of the pre-colonial Hawaiian people. The limited understanding I do have is based on the work of contemporary Native Hawaiian scholars (cf., Ah Nee-Benham & Heck, 1998; Kame‘eleihiwa, 1992; Trask, 1999), and on English-language translations of *Kumulipo* (cf., Beckwith, 1972). Furthermore, I did not analyze, or even attempt to describe, the ontological or epistemological constructs of the Native Hawaiian people. Rather, I attempted to provide the reader an opportunity to construct his or her own knowledge regarding the traditional (i.e., pre-colonial) Hawaiian universe by embedding the stories of the team members within Chant One of *Kumulipo*. 