

LYRIC VERSE AND RITUAL IN THE SANTA CRUZ ISLANDS

William Davenport



1 Dressing a member of the choir. The designs of the face represent the frigate bird. Hair whitened with powdered lime, but sometimes blackened with charcoal, or half blackened, half whitened represents the black and white heron. See lyric XXX. (1960 photograph)



In the translation of the lyrics, the material in brackets has been added by the author to clarify the meaning.

I

The men's house of the single men,
Located at the village of Bumalu,
Many single girls come to sleep over [for the
dance];

The men's house. . .

II

The sacred dance baton draws them from
Mamini [a haunted reef],
A conch shell announces their arrival,
Tengaviti [a deity] awaits them, the sacred
dancers, with money [to pay them for
dancing];

The sacred dance. . .

These two freely translated triplets are from the lyric poetry of Santa Cruz Island, Melanesia, southwest Pacific. The verses refer to the periodic dances, which are also songfests, that are often held on the island and which are, at one and the same time, the most-enjoyed social occasions, a deeply mysterious and religious event, and an occasion for the display of the most distinctive Santa Cruz art forms. The two art forms which are merged at these celebrations are the lyric poetry and the elaborate costumery in which some of the featured performers are decked out.

To the museum goer, the southwest Pacific islands, Melanesia that is, usually conjure up images of one of the great sculptural regions of the tribal world. Melanesian artifacts and *objet d'art* make superb gallery displays, not only in the University Museum but also in any ethnographic museum that is fortunate to have extensive collections from this region. However, not all Melanesian communities, and there are a very large number of distinct societies and cultures in Melanesia, use sculpture alone to convey their religious concepts. In many Melanesian societies various kinds of regalia, costumery or body decoration are an adjunct art form to sculpture, but representations of such human adornments are not often seen in museums. Santa Cruz Island has a distinctive sculptural style, but traditionally it is regarded as something less important than the costumes worn by some participants in the great ritual dances. Moreover, the elaborate costumes are donned only for performances involving the singing of songs such as those translated above.

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lyrics of this kind. Most of them are in the triplet form, as above, but a few are doublets. The most distinctive stylistic device is to be found in the ordering of the lines. The meaning of the initial line alone stands ambiguous, something like a subject without predicate or predicate without subject. The second line either amplifies or compounds the ambiguity. In the third and final line the missing element of meaning is supplied. However, the verse is sung over and over again so that, in repetition, what was in the first instance the final line becomes the initial one.

III

Seizing the northeasterly wind at night,
The sun rises, *iei yei!*
Nabeni [a man's name] sails for Lura [islands
to the north];
Seizing. . .

Lost in translation, of course, is the meter which, suffice to say here, is not limited to a fixed number of syllables, but the lines must conform to one of several possible length ratios. There is no rhyme; the syntax is quite different from ordinary speech. What is usually missing are the grammatical particles (such as our prepositions); word order and juxtaposition become all-important in conveying complex imagery with a minimum number of linguistic forms, and even some of these forms are contracted. In other words, the poetic form is achieved by economizing rather than by embellishment.

IV

You cry, I [You and I cry in despair]
It comes up, [The wind comes up]
Toward the Sea of No Return, the confused
seas; [From another direction, causing
confused seas, we are headed for the Seas
of No Return!]

Before going further into the thematics of the lyrics, let me explain more about the setting and context of the celebration in which the songs are featured. The dance, or songfest, takes place in a dancing ring which is specially constructed for these dances alone. The ring is always located near a men's clubhouse, of which there may be several in a village, that always serves as a focal point for all rituals. Dwellings, which are considered to be primarily the domain of women and children, are some distance away.

The apparent leaders in the affair are costumed men, who are always handsome young adults. The young men must also have superb physical stamina, for a single celebration always commences late in the afternoon and continues without pause until well into the next morning. If general enthusiasm endures, the singing and dancing may continue



1

for a full twenty-four, even thirty-six hours; in any case until exhaustion finally takes over. The young men constitute a choir and a rhythm section that regulates the tempo and the beat of the singing and dancing. While the affair is always referred to as a dance, there are no real dancing steps. All participants merely stamp their feet in unison, or occasionally in offbeats, while taking small steps ahead. The choir leads the movement, behind follow the senior men also in some special garb, followed by women and children also festively gotten up. The entire crowd in the ring moves slowly in a counter-clockwise direction around and around. When the ring is filled with participants, as it usually is for most of the event, the last of the women and children are, in effect, just ahead of the male choir. The beginning and the end of the crowd become merged, just as the last lines of the songs become the first through repetition. Movement and song are joined in circularity.

The choir sings in two-part harmony and half sings one line while the other half answers with the next line. Since nearly all songs are three lines, with each repetition of the verse the two halves of the choir alternate singing lines. The participants divide also, following the two halves of the choir. As tension and excitement mount, the tempo is accelerated and the choir introduces a syncopated lag between the beat of the feet and the singing. Forward movement may stop while all participants bear down on their stamping. As the climax is reached some participants introduce an offbeat stamp. Movement away from the tight climax is signalled by a lessening of tempo and force, as

1
Placing feather plumes in the hair, one further emphasis to represent the head as a bird. Because birds, particularly sea birds, seem to travel effortlessly and are unerring fishermen, some of their attributes are greatly admired. Some deities are believed to have the same characteristics. Young single men are often flattered by referring to them as birds. See lyric XXXI. (1974 photograph)

2
A pair of fully costumed choir members. Choirs are always composed of pairs of young men, never singles. This is explained as being due to their extraordinary seductiveness which attracts dangerous female deities to them during the dance. One of the pair is always to look after the other so that an alarm can be sounded if one is seduced in this way. The pairing also has to do with singing alternate lines of verse. (1960 photograph)



2

shouts, yells and grunts of enthusiasm and encouragement rise up. These may incite a movement back up to another climactic peak of excitement.

In the construction of dance rings special attention is paid to the quality of the earth floor of the ring. It must be pliable, not soft, but most of all it must respond to the stamping with a pronounced resonance. The stamping on a good dance floor can be heard for a mile or two away on a still night.

A single song lasts as long as there is enthusiasm for it, and this is quite variable. If a song does not arouse much excitement, it is quickly aborted after four or five minutes. But if enthusiasm for a song is awakened, it will be continued through several climaxes for as long as an hour or more. The main objective is to keep spirits and enthusiasm as high as possible for as long as possible.

Although the costumed choir carries the beat and leads the singing, its members usually do not select the songs. After one song is brought to a conclusion, there is only a brief

pause until one of the senior men leads out in solo voice with another. This is picked up by the choir as soon as it is recognized, which may be immediately for a favorite evergreen number or it may take more than one repetition if it is new or unfamiliar. New songs are introduced in this way, with great attention paid to timing of the introduction. A person who wishes to introduce a new song may have planned it secretly for months ahead. He may have composed it himself; or he may have gone to a person noted for his or her facility in composing songs and paid to have one composed on a given theme.

The entire population of Santa Cruz Island is less than 4000, yet there are more than a dozen distinguishable dialects which group into four languages (with a degree of difference as that between Dutch, English, German and Icelandic). However, with respect to the lyrics, which are known by speakers of all dialects, one of the four languages is dominant. All songs are usually sung in the language of the northern and

western shores which has the most speakers.

The elaborate costumes worn by choir members consist of a dozen or more kinds of clothing, adornments, accessories and cosmetics. The principal one is the delicately carved nose pendant. The pendant is called *nelā*, which is also the word for pearl shell out of which it is made as well as for the wearers of pendants, and in some contexts the entire dance-songfest is called by this name. Some of the accoutrements, such as the nose pendant, earrings, breast ornament (plus another smaller replica at the back of the neck), armbands, neck bag, belts and breech clout, are finely crafted versions of what a few years back every senior man wore all of the time. Some accessories, such as the knee rattles and the bamboo tube carried in the right hand, are related to the music and dance. Some parts of the costume, such as the hair plumes, the hair coloring, upright nose skewers, face painting, shell necklaces, flags and decorations tucked beneath armbands, wristlets and anklets, are adornments worn only on this occasion. Every piece has deep symbolic significance over and above the fact that many are heirlooms and that in combination their manufacture represents some of the most valued traditional crafts of the society. Over and above all of this is the firm belief that this costume, this singing and dancing event, even the form of the songs, are all inventions of the deities who control the destinies of living persons. There are numerous charter myths that explain just how knowledge about the costume and the event, just a few generations ago, was imparted to humans. For each object of the costume there is, or was until recently, a prototype somewhere on the island which is claimed to be the original received from the supernaturals and of which all others are copies. There are prototypic lyrics too, which were accidentally overheard by certain humans who chanced to stumble upon the deities singing and dancing in this fashion in remote haunts of the islands. Lyric II is one of these. Another is:

V

The fan palm tucked in my belt at my back
shakes [from my dancing]
I stand at Meenūni [a haunt of the deities]
The sacred batons are raised [in the dance] at
Cape of Death [the eastern point of the island,
a place associated with deities].

The prototype lyrics mention deities by name or by place, because they were composed by supernaturals who were celebrating their own lives and activities. They are especially sacred and are sung only at certain times. All other lyrics are concerned with the activities and personalities of humans, because they are composed by humans. They are not especially sacred and can be sung at

any time, even in contexts totally removed from the ritual event for which they were composed.

Lyrics composed by humans are mostly about a limited number of cultural themes. A favorite one still is fighting. Feuding and warfare were rampant on Santa Cruz Island until the British established firm administration of the island in the mid 1920's.



VI

My kinsmen fight, everyone is frightened,
I watch closely the bow aimed at me,
I take my body there [I must not run from the
aimed bow].

VII

As I avenge the injustice [carry on the
vendetta]
Dopwe [leader of the enemy] defends firmly,
Nendung [village defended] I want to burn it
to the ground.

VIII

Give me a pillow,
I want to lie down, wish to sleep,
I am exhausted from fighting.

IX

I want to run from the village,
Run away like the women do, but no,
I hold back.

Another favorite theme is wealth, ways of gaining wealth and status achieved by wealth. Here are the lyrics about currency, money that is, itself.

X

Many women ask from whence it comes, *eiaa!*
Money comes from the men's house [where
economic plans and transactions are made]
My brother has strong magic.

XI

A men's house with many single men [who
can earn wealth]
They murmur behind their fathers' backs,
Who has sneered at them for their lack of
wealth?

XII

Exchanging feather currencies in the men's
house,
The two currencies are changed on the
comparison bar [where currencies are
compared for exchange; each men's house has
one]
The presence of great wealth awakes Mwakia
[a man who has been sleeping through
the transaction].

In this vein are some of the important ways of earning money. Noosing sharks, which is a very dangerous but lucrative skill is one.

XIII

The shark is attracted by Aūei's coconut shell
rattle,
He lets the shark noose down [over the head
of the passing shark]
He heaves the beast toward the canoe.

XIV

The shark club [for beating a noosed shark to
death] falls into the sea,
As the shark pulls the canoe completely
under water,
Meinaū [name of the shark catcher] cries out
to his mother [in other words, he is
a coward].

XV

Always waiting for sharks,
Making the coconut rattle [that attracts the
sharks] cry out
Tekala [a man's name, also the albatross] a
bird that sleeps at sea [Tekala, the man, is
always hunting sharks, he virtually sleeps
at sea].

Catching turtles is another way to earn money.

XVI

Letting down the net of Opla [a man's name,
name of a deity, also the word for currency]
At the place of turtles, *eiaa!*
The conch shell blows at Point Lūova [When
turtle or shark are delivered to a customer
by canoe, it is conventional to blow a
conch shell off his men's house and
announce the event. Here, it means the
catcher got his turtles and delivered them
for payment].

Another profitable specialty is catching a species of red birds, the feathers of which are used to manufacture the currency used in all transactions.

XVII

Swing across the flowing river,
Holding his snaring perch,
Menanga [a man's name] searches for
currency.

XVIII

A bird flies in,
It hangs from the adhesive on the perch by
one leg,
Meanga [a man's name] fingers [to remove the
bird] the bird lime of Opla [currency, deity
of that name].

A very romantic way toward wealth is by overseas trading by canoe. Wealthy traders had special large cargo-carrying canoes called *tepūki*. Lyric III is of this sort.

XIX

Hold it true by the steering paddle,
The wind snaps tree branches ashore
Bonagi [the steersman] is buffeted by the
strong gusts.

1
A senior man leads the fully costumed choir from the men's house where they dressed, into the dance ring at the start of a celebration. The senior man is the sponsor of the ring. He will retire behind the choir once the singing and dancing commence in the ring. [1960 photograph]

2
The senior men fall in behind the choir. Each carries some implement—here a canoe paddle or bow—to signify his occupational role in the society. [1960 photograph]



1 Youngsters and women dance behind the senior men. The staffs are to lean on so dancers can stamp the floor of the ring all the more strongly. (1960 photograph)



2 Many participants carry freshly-cut saplings with leafy tops. Often a crowded ring is almost entirely covered by a canopy of leafy branches, and the dancing crowd appears to be a pulsating and slowly-moving grove. (1960 photograph)



3 The final dance at the closing of a ring. A pair of women are sent into the ring carrying coils of red-feather currency, the traditional currency used on Santa Cruz Island, and lengths of cotton cloth on their heads. Note, too, the one-pound note hanging over the feather currency. This is the signal to the participants that the dancing is over, the ring is about to be closed and the women are to be recognized for their years of work in providing food for the guests at many celebrations. The entire night of this closing was devoted to singing lyrics about red-feathered currency. (1974 photograph)

XX

During the passage waves sweep the craft,
I feel sorry [possibly relieved]
As the *tepūki* nears Nidu [Santa Cruz Island].

Another strong theme is the praise of young men, the pride of the community, and these lyrics contain many love and sexual themes. Lyric I has this theme.

XXI

Single girls cry for their village.
A young man in a canoe appears [they want a ride home]
They watch him fade into the distance [he pays no attention to them].

XXII

You are a handsome single man,
But I must cover my head and avoid your gaze,
Soon I am to become your taboo relative.
[This refers to the fact that some relatives by marriage of opposite sex cannot speak or look at each other. In this case she really likes this one, not the one she is to marry].

But not all are so flattering of the young men.

XXIII

They say I am a handsome young man:
But when I stand in the dance ring of Luli,
eiaa!
One of my legs is gimpy [and I look ridiculous].

XXIV

At night your body looks beautiful,
Single man of Nonia village,
But studying it now [in the morning] no!

There are songs about rivers.

XXV

I walk down to the river,
The rush carries away my skirt,
The tattoos on my thighs are all I wear.

XXVI

I come at the time the insects sing [sunset]
To the headwaters of the River Obwe, place of the supernaturals,
I keep an eye [out for them] on the path, *eei!*

And stars:

XXVII

Slowly paddling at sea,
Venus rises, *eei!*
I wait for the woman's canoe [Orton, to rise].

Finally, there are many lyrics about the parts of the costumes worn by the members of the choir. The armbands are made of fiber that must be collected in the high uninhabited mountains. Some, even, comes from other islands.

XXVIII

I look for it in the mountains,
It grows with the *nibu* bush [which looks much like the proper fiber]
The fiber is hidden by it [my eyes are confused by the *nibu*].

XXIX

Walking along the mountain heights,
I look down on a strange sea [the opposite side of the island]
The leaves of the armband fiber plant stand up from my hair [I placed the leaves there to signify that I had found the fiber].

The lime used to powder the hair and paint the face markings:

XXX

Bringing it from the assemblage of single men [who are preparing their costumes for the dance]
The lime dust which falls down [as my hair is powdered],

This young girl covers her cropped hair with her shawl [she is bashful as the young man tries to catch her eye and flirt with her].

And about the dance event itself:

XXXI

Stomping vigorously around the dance ring,
You see my footprints there,
I, the rooster of Tēmōtū Noi [an islet off the south coast of Santa Cruz Island] have come.

XXXII

On the path to Tēmōtū Neo [a village]
He stands not knowing which path to take,
The young man's feet miss the correct way.



1 Arranging the payments to the women. The dance ring is cleared and the sponsors lay out on mats a pile for each woman who worked. The large leaf-wrapped packages contain cooked pork, a highly valued present. On top are lengths of cloth for clothing. Finally, red-feather currency and cash are added. (1974 photograph)



2 The crowd regathers around the dance ring to witness the payment of the women. The name of each woman to be paid is called out; she goes to her pile in the ring and carries it away. The prominent roof in the background is the men's house associated with this dance ring. Note the lines stretched over the ring over which leaves appear to be draped. Not clear in this picture is the fact that these leaves are folded into the shapes of canoes, rolls of red-feather currency, shark-catching gear, nets, and other tools of the trade associated with ways in which men of this village have traditionally earned wealth. This repeats the same theme that is found in many of the lyrics. See lyrics X through XX. (1974 photograph)



3 A carving representing a Santa Cruz Island deity. Images of this kind and the costumed members of the choir represent the same supernatural beings. In this case, the image even wears a miniature woven breechcloth of the same type that is worn by the costumed singers. The shell on the image's wrist represents a conch shell, a symbol of renown, because wealthy and important men (and supernaturals are these even more than mortals) are associated with the blowing of a conch which always announces the purchase of valuable commodities. See lyrics II and XVI. (Image is in the possession of the author, collected 1959)

In the dance ring the lyrics are not selected for singing just by whim and personal preference. A theme is always followed. This may commence in a straightforward manner, say, by selecting fighting songs. Even here, there will develop a subtheme, such as fighting songs that stress place names or that convey only fear and bravado. Or the sequence might follow the general theme of single men, with a subtheme of activities or frustrated love. Themes can be shifted because many lyrics can be classified more than one way. A lyric may be sung because its subject is rivers, but a subtheme of traveling may be introduced by singing of rivers as though traveling from one place to another. Following a lyric about one river, someone may call out a song about catching sharks in the vicinity of that river, and this leads off in another thematic direction. Cleverness in this respect always heightens enjoyment.

There are only a few tunes and variations to which the lyrics are sung. These are classed into three types: the main one is termed "horizontal" or "prone" because of its chant-like melodic line; in contrast to this is a type termed "upright" or "vertical" because it has true melody; the third type might be called "lively," because it is always sung in a fast tempo and it has a catchy melody. The horizontal form is used during the night only; the vertical is for day singing, and the lively type is used as a relief of the other two whenever singing begins to drag and the occasion needs an infusion of new life.

Not all lyrics are considered to be appropriate for all three types of melodies, but the majority of the popular themes, such as fighting, money and wealth, single men, shark fishing, and sailing are suitable for any melody. More contemplative themes such as stars, paddling, bird catching and rivers are to be sung in the horizontal mode alone. Topics such as the fragrant leaves worn by men at the dances, mirrors (which have a mystical quality because a reflection is related to the soul) are suitable for either horizontal or vertical modes, but never put into the lively melodic frame.

The dances do not just take place spontaneously, because each all-night event is a party that requires preparations. The host group, who own the dance ring, must provide gracious, sometimes lavish, hospitality to the participants in the dance, who are always from another village. This means special feast foods which require the best ingredients and take time to prepare. The host may invite a group from another village to come and celebrate or the hosts may give notice that anyone may come on a particular day for an open house, so to speak. It is also perfectly acceptable for a village to invite itself to come and dance and even specify what special foods they want to be served. These foods are

usually a dish that the host village is noted for and is pleased to serve. Thus, maintaining a dance ring is an expensive and labor-consuming affair.

Some prestige and social appreciation does accrue to the persons who organize and pay for the maintenance of a dance ring. It is also understood that social reciprocity prevails; that is, when a group is entertained by another, in due course the hospitality will be returned in kind. But the main-spring of the motivation for carrying the responsibility of a dance ring is more concerned with self interest than with promoting pleasure and entertainment for others. All dance rings are built anew, refurbished for reuse and maintained only after the sponsoring group has experienced a disaster or calamity of some kind. When, after a series of untoward deaths, an epidemic, loss of livestock, bad crops, or even a narrow escape from disaster at sea, it is determined (through spirit mediums) that these events were caused by angered deities, then a ring and its cycle of entertainments is established. The entire affair is an atonement for some human transgression that caused deities to cause misfortunes. It is assumed that since these dances, lyrics and costumes were copied from the deities, their enactment by humans will please the supernaturals.

The costumed men of the choir are impersonations of the deities themselves. As such, they are invitations to the deities to come and participate. While humans enjoy these events, and the human participants are treated as honored guests, the most honored guests are the deities who are supposed to be pleased by human imitations of their favorite pastime.

A group maintains its dance ring for a number of years until it appears that the transgressions which caused the deities to censure the community in the first place have been atoned for. When it is felt that good relations between deities and humans have been reestablished, the ring is closed. The closing not only calls for a specially lavish and expensive celebration, it also calls for settling of many business accounts. During the life of a dance ring women had to grow extra staples in their gardens, feed livestock consumed at celebrations, cut firewood and spend hundreds of hours preparing feast dishes. They must be paid for this work and paid in local currency (nowadays augmented with cash). Men outside the group of sponsors who have provided fish or other services must also be compensated in the same way. But it is the women who have carried the main burden and who are specially honored with compensation. So, the final closing ceremony is both a celebration of the usual sort, but with more lavish food given out, and it is a public settling of accounts.

Returning once more to the lyrics, it will be recalled that some (II and V, for example)

are believed to have been composed by deities for their own celebrations, while the hundreds of others are composed by humans for human celebrations. Only at the celebrations for opening and closing a ring, when the deities are being addressed directly, are the lyrics composed by the deities sung.

In summary, the lyric verse of Santa Cruz Island is embedded in an extensive ritual petition to the deities. The ritual events are at the same time the most enjoyed social celebration for humans. Taken together, all parts of the ritual portray a total picture of Santa Cruz Society. The participants are divided into three groups: the costumed imitators of the deities who lead and exert supernatural power over humans; the mature men who control secular power over the human sector; the women and children who support the men and the deities. The three are merged into a single body that performs the endless imitative round of social life. Some lyrics acknowledge the separate ways and powers of the deities, but the bulk of the lyric repertoire extolls the values of everyday human existence: the quest for wealth and prestige, defense of life and property, occupations and hazards, loves and frustrations, mysteries and banalities. 24



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Suggested Reading

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