Expedition

LYRIC VERSE AND RITUAL IN THE SANTA CRUZ ISLANDS

William Davenport

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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 breast. See lyric XXX. (1900 photograph)

Since the bacteria responsible for various yogurt cultures vary, the yogurt also vary and a yogurt connoisseur will find a trip through the Near East absolutely fascinating. The best laban has to date came from a hotel at Antakya, ancient Antioch, on the north Syrian coast. Driving out to Jerusalem for an autumn dig, a friend and I stopped for a plate of this at some impossible hour, like 10:30 a.m., because we couldn't bypass it even though it spoiled our timetable and spoiled our lunches, too. This Antiochene laban was so thick as to be almost cheese and had a beautiful sour tang.

Driving on toward the Holy City, with the yogurt tang still alive on our taste buds, we were conscious once again of the "eternal past." How many generations of bacteria had left their mark on that particular yogurt culture? Man makes food; food makes man. Wars migrations, cataclysmic ecophasms—all touch a swaying goatskin in the sun. We are the inheritors. "Al hamdu lillah rabbi al'ummun." Praise be to God the Lord of the beings of the whole world.

In the translation of the lyric, 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 Brotul. 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, Tenggaviil [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, and west Pacific. The verses refer to the periodic dances, which are also songstanzas, 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 southwestern Pacific islands, Melanesia that is, usually conjure up images of one of the great sculptural regions of the tribal world. Melanesian artifacts and object 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 doubles.

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.

II
Seizing the northeastly wind at night. the sun rises, ini yi! Nabi [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. [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 themes 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 provides 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 and often ina. Their must also have superb physical stamina, for a single celebration always commences late in the afternoon and may not pause until well into the next morning. If general enthusiasm endures, the singing and dancing may continue 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 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 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 and back they sway 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

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 the 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 grow 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 ‘nel’, which is also the word for pearl shell out of which it is made as well as for the weavers of pendants, and in some contexts the entire dance-songfest is called by this name. Some of the accessories, such as the nose pendant, earrings, breast ornament (plus another smaller replica at the back of the neck), armbands, neck bag, belts and breast 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 carved 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 chance 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 Meesindy [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. Casual warfare were rampant on Santa Cruz Island until the British established firm administration of the island in the mid-1820’s. For example:

My kinnam fight, everyone is frightened,
I watch closely the bow aimed at me,
I take my body there: I must run from the
aimed bow.

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

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

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.

Many women ask from whence it comes, say.
Money comes from the man’s house [where economic plans and transactions are made].
My brother has strong magic.

A man’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?

Exchanging feather currencies in the man’s house.
The two currencies are changed on the comparison bar [where currencies are compared for exchange]; each man’s house has one.

The presence of great wealth awakes Mvakiia [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.

The shark is attracted by Ane’s coconut shell rattle.
He lets the shark nose down [over the head
of the passing canoe].
He heaves the beard toward the canoe.

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

Always waiting for sharks.
Making the coconut rattle [that attracts the sharks] cry out.

Tekula [a man’s name, also the albatross] a bird that sleeps at sea [Tekula, the man, is always hunting sharks, he virtually sleeps at sea].

Catching turtles is another way to earn money.

Letting down the net of Opla [a man’s name, name of a deity, also the word for currency].
At the place of turtles, eina.
The conch shell blows at Point Léova [When turtle or shark are delivered to a customer by canoe, it is conventional to blow the conch shell off his man’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.

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

A bird flies in.
It hangs from the adhesive on the perch by one leg.
Menanga [a man’s name] throws the ‘fingers’ to remove the bird the bird line 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 tepli. Lyric III is of this sort.

Hold it true by the steering paddle.
The wind snaps tree branches asho.
Bonagi [the steersman] is buffeted by the strong gusts.
During the passage waves sweep the craft. 
I feel sorry [possibly relieved]
As the teepiki 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 have this theme.

**XX**
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].

**XXI**
You are a handsome single man, But I must cover my head and avoid your guaze.
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, elon, One of my legs is gimp[py and I look ridiculous].

**XXIV**
At night your body looks beautiful, Single man of Nomia 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 tutus on my thighs are all I wear.

**XXVI**
I come at the time the insects sing [sunset] To the headwaters of the River Ohwa, 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 [Oron, to rise].

Finally, there are many lyrics about the parts of the costumes worn by the members of the boat. 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 against 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 ensemble 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 footsteps there, I, the rooster of Tëmoiti Nui [an island off the south coast of Santa Cruz Island] have come.

**XXXII**
On the path to Tëmoiti Nui [a village] He stands not knowing which path to take, The young man's feet miss the correct way.
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. Usually there will develop a dominant subtheme, such as fighting songs that stress place names or that convey only fear and torment. Or the scene group is entertained by the general theme of single men, with a subtheme of activities or frustrated love. Themes can be selected because they are needed for the performance more than one way. A lyric may be sung because its subject is rivers, but a subtheme of trading by young boys may be set aside for the occasion. All rivers as though traveling from one place to another. Following a lyric about one river, another is sung 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 choose from. The basic style is divided 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 community 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 mode. 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 reputed to be seen in 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 well-fed. The host group provide all food which must be good and eaten in public. The food must be 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 in exchange for cash. Men outside the group of sponsors who own from another village. This is called feasting and the food must also be compensated in the same way. But it is the women who have carried the main burden and who are specially honored when the ceremony comes to an end. The final closing ceremony is both a celebration of the usual sort, but with more lavish form than usual 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 communal celebrations. Only at the celebrations for opening and closing a ring, when the males are being addressed directly, are the lyrics composed by the deities themselves.

In summary, the lyric verse of Santa Cruz Island is embedded in an extensive ritual of 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 present a picture of Santa Cruz Society. The participants are divided into three groups, the costumes, the deities of lower rank who lead and express supernatural power over humans; the mature, informed as an extension of 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 end of the ritual round of social life. Some lyrics acknowledge the separate ways and powers of the deities, but the bulk of the lyrical repertoire extolls the values of everyday human existence: the quest for wealth and prestige, defense of life and property, occupation and hazards, loves and frustrations, mysteries and banalities.

Suggested Reading

Davenport, William

Koch, Gerda

William Davenport, Curator of the Department of the History of the American Indian and professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Davenport first worked in the Santa Cruz Islands, part of the British Northern Islands, in the Pacific Ocean. His current year away from work is being spent in the other islands in the southwest Pacific. In the year 1974, he plans to return again to Santa Cruz Island to complete his study of the society and, in particular, the adaptations and changes in human relationships that British Administration has wrought brought about in the culture.