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THE CHANGING FUNCTIONS OF A FOLKSONG

BY LINTON C. FREEMAN

THE study of folklore has too frequently ended with the publication of collections of oral narratives which "often moulder on our shelves waiting for the professional folklorist, or someone else, to make use of them in a dim and uncertain future."¹ Despite the vast array of folk materials which has been amassed, there is a real need for conceptual organization. If studies of folklore are to provide systematic generalizations, classifications must be established and hypotheses must be developed and tested.

The entertaining or recreational aspects of folk expression have long been understood, but relatively little attention has been given its other functions.² In a recent article, Bascom has suggested a functional analysis of folklore which would provide a means of integrating its study with the mainstream of anthropological theory.³ This would provide studies of folklore with some much-needed conceptual organization.

The functional significance of a folksong should be revealed through its interrelationship with other aspects of the social-cultural system within which it finds expression. A particular type of folk expression should be associated with a particular kind of social organization. And changes in the social organization should engender changes in the nature of the associated folklore. The present study is designed to uncover such interrelationships; an attempt is made to develop a set of hypotheses concerning the changing functions of a folksong.

The verses reported in this study were sung in Hawaii before, during, and after World War II. This was a period of marked social change in the islands. Therefore, if the functional hypothesis is correct, these social changes should be reflected in modifications in the fundamental orientations of the verses. It is this question which will be explored. Old and new verses will be compared and an attempt will be made to assess their functional significance in terms of the social matrix in which they were developed.

All of the verses collected were sung to the same melody. They exhibit a high degree of formal variation and little adherence to rhyme pattern. Collectively, they are known as "Lei Ana Ika" or "U.S.E.D." The origin of the melody is unknown but, according to informants, the first words appeared just before the war.

The most common, and reportedly the oldest of these verses, was developed shortly before World War II. It describes some of the widespread hostility which was expressed toward the United States Engineers Department before and during the war.⁴ The U.S.E.D. was famous for its arbitrary actions and its inefficiency. However, it employed large numbers of island men on construction projects, and this verse was sung by the men en route to and from work each day:



U. S. E. D. Suckers ev-'ry day. Fif-ty cents an ho-ur. Four bucks a day.



U. S. E. D. Suckers ev-'ry day. They make you whis-tle for your mon-ey.

When the war started the song gained currency. New verses were composed and sung at beach parties, drinking parties, *luaus*—wherever people got together. One informant described their popularity thus: “‘Lei Ana Ika,’ as far as I know, had no set or one singer or writer. It was more like a folksong. At every party someone would start the first verse and then each person in turn would add a verse—maybe a new one he had thought up, or an old one. The verses usually fit in with the party, or something new that had happened in the war effort, or change in politics.”⁵

In the following, which are typical of verses that emerged during the war years, (2) is a protest against the blackout. (“Lau Yee Chai’s” refers to a popular restaurant in Honolulu; “Lei ana ika” is apparently a nonsense phrase used to keep the meter.) Verse (3) has reference to the barbed wire on the beaches. (Makapuu is a beach on Oahu; the phrase “Awe na hoi” is an expression of pain.)

(2) Before time

At night you could go out.
Go Lau Yee Chai’s
And really get about.
Now to make hay
You got to make it in the day.
Lei ana ika, the blackout!

(3) Body surfing at Makapuu

Used to be very fine.
You don a pair of trunks
And plunge into the foaming brine.
You catch a rolling swell
Then you let out a yell,
“Awe na hoi! Barbed wire!”

Verse (4) notes a sentiment concerning the quartering of large numbers of Caucasian troops on the island of Hawaii, while (5) ridicules the spy scare. (“Baby donkey” is slang for half caste.)

(4) The marines landed

In Kailua Bay.
The girls go crazy
About what they say.
Nine months later
They feel the pain,
Lei ana ika, baby donkey.

(5) Took my girl

For a buggy ride.
The moon was shining
Up so bright.
Step on the gas;
The jalopy fell apart.
Lei ana ika, sabotage.

Verse (6) satirizes tire rationing; verses (7) and (8) are two of several which comment on the traffic situation in downtown Honolulu during the war. (“Mauka” and “makai” are opposite directions; the line “Make pia the eye” refers to going blind; “Holo holo” means to ride; H.R.T. stands for Honolulu Rapid Transit.)

(6) I went down town
To buy a car.
I went down town
To buy a Ford V8.

I step on the gas,
Four tires flat.
Lei ana ika, tire ration.

- (7) Before time
When you go to town,
You could go Bethel Street
And go all around,
But now you go to town
The cop he say,
"Open your eye bull, only one way!"
- (8) Fort Street mauka,
Now Makai.
Go so many ways
Make pia the eye.
You can take your car,
But not for me.
I holo holo with the H.R.T.

Some verses were concerned with public figures. A popular one ridiculed a territorial hero, Duke Kahanamoku, a former Olympic swimmer, who temporarily became a rather unpopular figure as the director of gasoline rationing during the war. Other verses championed favored political candidates or ridiculed the opposition, as in those below which point out the stupidity of an unpopular candidate, condemn an unfavored nominee, and eulogize a favorite.

- (9) Duke Kahanamoku,
The champion of Oahu.
Duke Kahanamoku,
The swimmer of the islands.
Duke Kahanamoku,
He swam to Los Angeles,
And now he's pumping gasoline.
- (10) You vote for mayor Crane;
You eat mountain apple.
You vote for mayor Petrie;
You chew sugar cane.
You vote for Ichinose,
Muscles on the body,
Superman for supervisor.
- (11) You vote for Tommy Lee;
He makes you go on a spree.
You vote for Bobby Lee;
He gives you all the whiskey.
You vote for Herbert Lee,
And then you will see
The very end of democracy.
- (12) Lester Petrie,
He runs the town.
The local graft
Is now going down.
He runs the town
To perfection,
So give him your vote bull, next
election!

These verses proliferated during the war—at a time when the people of Hawaii were inflicted with some special hardships. They had the usual blackout, and food, gasoline, and tire rationing, but in addition to these, the islands were surrounded by barbed wire, overrun with military personnel, and rumors of sabotage were rampant. Furthermore, citizens of Hawaii were deprived of their franchise. A curfew was imposed, self-government was abrogated, and martial law was instituted. They were restricted by an enormous set of wartime regulations. Life in a community which was traditionally free from many of the restrictions of urban existence suddenly became very circumscribed.

Under these circumstances, many frustrations were engendered at the same time that the usual mechanisms of political expression were unavailable. The early verses, dealing as they did with the hardships of wartime existence, probably functioned as outlets—as channels into which aggression born of this frustration could be directed. Then, too, they served as a means of informal social protest, allowing people to make their desires known. The wartime verses are almost all alike in this respect; they are

songs of social protest. As long as the restrictive situation existed, such verses were bound to be prevalent.⁸

It was not until after the war when restrictions were removed and such verses were inappropriate that the younger people began to create a new type of verse. Protest continued, but it could now be expressed through political action, public demonstrations, strikes, and the like. With this return to the status quo the meaning of the old verses was lost, and the post-war innovation were more often entertaining or nonsensical than expressive of social protest. For example, here are a youngster's meaningless version in which "U.S.E.D." is changed to "U.S.C.D.," a nonexistent organization; a nonsense verse based on (8); and a variant of (12) in which the original meaning is lost:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(1a) U.S.C.D.
Suckers every day.
Fifty cents an hour;
Four bucks a day.
U.S.C.D.
Suckers every day—
Lei ana ika, no mo' money.</p> | <p>(8a) You vote for Mayor Wilson
You get plenty muscles.
You vote for Mayor Wilson,
You get plenty muscles.
You vote for Mayor Wilson,
You get plenty muscles—
Aloha Ia no dice.</p> |
| <p>(12a) Fort street mauka,
Ewa, makai.
Too many stop signs
Maka pio the eye.
Humu Humu nuku nuku
Ding dong bell—
Lei ana ika, pussy in the well.</p> | |

There are many other such confusions in the verses provided by younger informants, and there are a large number of apparently new recreational and nonsense verses among this group. These verses include words in Hawaiian and Japanese, they sometimes have vulgar reference, but they tell no story—they are entirely recreational in import. These are typical examples:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(13) R-A-T,
Iole makes a rat.
C-A-T,
Popoki makes a cat.
M-O-N-K-E-Y,
Lei ana ika, keko—monkey.</p> | <p>(15) Ichi san shi go
Roku shi chi hachi
Gu ju
Upu upu
Tamana ah
Ding dong bell,
Lei ana ika, pussy in the well.</p> |
| <p>(14) Some people say
(Name) looks like Tyrone Power.
Some people say
He's tough as Eisenhower.
Why all the buildup?
To me its a disgrace,
Lei ana ika, prune face!</p> | <p>(16) Haina ia mai
Ana kapu ana la
Ichi ni san shi
Go roku shichi hachi
Uku uku tamana
Ding dong bell,
Lei ana ika, pussy in the well.</p> |
| <p>(17) E-N-D
My song has ended.
P-A-U</p> | |

My song is pau.
If nobody here
No like my song
Come kiss my ku and roll along.

These younger informants also report a great number of post-war verses which are concerned with sex. Such verses are understandable as manifestations of youthful frustration and conflict in the area of sexual expression. They serve as outlets for frustration generated from conflicts of needs or cultural demands. It must be noted, however, that these verses are not expressions of protest. They all tell stories of attempted sexual escapades, but in each case the outcome is the socially acceptable one. Thus, they may be viewed as verses of a stabilizing type which function to reinforce the cultural norms, and most of them are variants of the two basic patterns reported below. However, a single informant will often sing as many as three or four variants of the same verse:

(18) I took my girl
To Makapuu.
I told her, "Honey,
Let's pitch some woo."
The next day
When I go to school,
Lei ana ika, black and blue.

(19) The higher the mountain
The cooler the breeze.
The younger the couple
The tighter they squeeze.
Opu opu tamana
O ding dong bell,
Lei ana ika, no dice.

From the description above, a trend may be detected; although a song began as an expression of social protest, currently it is concerned chiefly with recreation and sex. The only exception to this trend is found among young Hawaiians in the Army who have composed new verses and modifications of old ones, still retaining the protest idea. Verses have dealt with the Korean War, Army food, work details, etc. So protest verses are again found in association with a restriction of personal expression—this time in an Army setting.

This paper has examined some historical changes in the expressed content of verses of a modern Hawaiian folksong. It has attempted to uncover the basic forms of expression and to relate these to the changing aspects of the social milieu. Such an analysis does not provide definitive answers, but it does suggest some hypotheses relating folksongs to other socio-cultural content.

From the present analysis three basic categories of folk expression may be generalized. Each of these is associated with a specific set of socio-cultural conditions, and each is representative of a different function. In the first place, social protest verses emerge when the members of a society are deprived of other mechanisms of protest. Such songs will be found in any disfranchised segment of society and will persist as long as these individuals are deprived of other more direct techniques of action.⁷ These verses represent an attempt of the members of the society to cope with unacceptable social conditions. On one hand, they may diminish frustrations—they allow the individual to "let off steam" in a congenial group setting and thereby to adjust to social conditions as they are. On the other hand, they may accomplish social change through mobilizing group sentiment. In either case such verses function to reduce societal imbalance and to integrate the society.

Secondly, when there exists a long-term frustration or conflict in personal needs or cultural demands which is tied in with the mores of the society, stabilizing verses will be sung. These will describe the conflict, but they will not end in protest. Rather, they will provide the solution which is sanctioned in the mores. Thus, stabilizing verses permit the person to "let off steam" and they tend to validate the mores; they function to reinforce the norms of the culture and to stabilize the social system.

Thirdly, when conditions allow other institutionalized modes of personal expression and when long-term moral conflicts are not predominant, verses of a purely recreational type will be evident. Such verses will serve strictly entertainment functions.

In summary, results of the present study suggest that a folksong may function not only as a form of recreation, but, depending upon social conditions, as an agency for integrating society or as a technique for maintaining the social order.

NOTES

¹ A. I. Hallowell, "Myth, Culture and Personality," *American Anthropologist*, XLIX (1947), 544.

² W. R. Bascom, "African and New World Negro Folklore," in *The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach (New York, 1949-50), p. 22.

³ W. R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *JAF*, LXVII (1954), 333-349.

⁴ G. Allen, *Hawaii's War Years* (Honolulu, 1950), pp. 234-237.

⁵ This report is documented by the fact that the investigator was able to collect a different set of verses from almost every informant. Furthermore, many different versions of the same verse were often gathered—sometimes as many as fifteen variants.

⁶ See also R. Ames, "Protest and Irony in Negro Folksong," *Science and Society*, XIV (1950), 193-213.

⁷ This has been demonstrated for citizens of Hawaii during the war, for Hawaiians in the Army, and, according to Ames, for Negroes in the United States.

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