

Sex and Slander in Tikopia Song: Public Antagonism and Private Intrigue

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Tikopia, a small Polynesian island community in the Solomon Islands, has had a great tradition of orally communicated song. This song tradition has had several marked features. It was very largely a choral tradition. Individual singing occurred in the chants of some traditional tales, in a few ritual chants, in laments of emotional release as in farewells or abandonment of mourning, and in practice sessions when a new song was being learned. But such occasions were relatively uncommon; the great mass of Tikopia singing was done in chorus. Correspondingly, there was no virtuoso singing, by a soloist performing for an audience. Nor was any great importance attached to the quality of a voice; memory for songs and vocal power were the criteria of a *purotu*, an expert.

Traditionally, no songs were performed simply as musical occasions. Every song, and the poem which was its base, was part of a more general action field. Dance songs, funeral dirges, songs of praise, ritual songs—each was performed as an accompaniment to some social action, usually with bodily movement, such as dancing, wailing and other physical expression of grief for the dead, and presentation of food or other positive acts. Some modern Tikopia have adopted a convention of purely recreational singing, as in schools or at evening parties, often with ukulele accompaniment. But the traditional forms still persist side by side with these modern developments. Traditional Tikopia song also has had no instrumental accompaniment except percussion; there were no stringed or wind instruments. The most usual accompaniment to dance was hand clap or more generally the beat of a sounding board, struck with two sticks or a coral stone. Rarely, laments of a ritual kind were accompanied by a swishing rattle of dried palm-leaf ribs or a stamping tube of bamboo with palm fiber tied over its mouth.

Another marked feature of this oral tradition was that it was a *moving* tradition. An idea sometimes current is that tradition is

“immemorial,” unchanging, handed down with no modification from one generation to another. But this Tikopia song tradition was dynamic in two ways. It had depth in that many of the songs chanted were known by the name of the composer, often a man or woman who had lived several generations before. But as these songs came to be repeated in the course of time, the text often altered, as memory lapsed and changes of wording entered the singing. Secondly, the songs that came to be preserved were only a fraction of those composed. Every generation, indeed every new dance festival, added fresh songs, often discarded immediately after recital. Only the “catchy” songs, or those of special historical or sentimental interest, remained in the repertoire. So it may be said that while the *form* of this oral tradition remained intact, the *content* was continually changing—a point which can have wider theoretical implications for concepts of social stability and social change.

Traditional Tikopia song has had two major divisions: *mako*—dance songs—and *fuatanga*—laments. (A category of *pese*, or unspecified songs, formerly applied to a few ritual and narrative chants, but now covers a range of modern “pop” productions, indigenous and imported, as well as Christian hymns.) Dance songs and laments are usually short, following a conventional division into two or three stanzas (*kupu*), each of which is composed of several “lines” marked off by caesura. The first stanza is termed *tafito*, or base of the song; the second stanza is *kupu i roto*—middle stanza, if there be a third, or simply *kupu* if there be only two; a third stanza is *safe*.¹

The themes of both dance songs and laments vary widely. Those of dance songs, with which I am dealing here, range from events of everyday life through celebration of technical operations such as fishing or turmeric extraction to boasting of achievement in a dart match, welcome to a visitor from another island, praise of a friend, or complaint against theft.² Dance songs in Tikopia are highly differentiated. Each song is classed according to the type of dance for which it is composed. There are some twenty

¹ So in each of the examples cited later, the first verse is normally called *tafito* (base), the second is *kupu* (stanza), the third (when it occurs) is *safe* or sometimes just *kupu* also. The songs in the present paper have all been taken from my notebooks of 1928-29, and can therefore be regarded as “traditional.” Sixty years or so later, most of those taunting songs will have been forgotten, but as far as I know, the custom of composing them for dances still persists. Elsewhere in my records I have relatively modern examples. Detailed analysis of Tikopia songs, including the structure of Tikopia music, is given in Firth and McLean 1990. This work also discusses the nature of Tikopia poetic language, including the common transformation of vowel *a* into *o*, with which there is no space to deal in the present paper.

² For an example of such songs, see Firth 1930, 1936 (1957), 1939 (1965), 1940 (1967a), 1967b, and 1981.

dance types in all, using different rhythms, choreography, and ancillaries such as wands or clubs. By far the largest category of dance songs, however, belong to the dance type known as *matāvaka* (see photograph 1) if accompanied by sounding board or *ngore* if accompanied by handclap.



Young men singing a taunting song in a *matāvaka* dance.
They toss their heads to and fro as they advance with sliding steps.

Photo by Raymond Firth

Within this general dance type, of fairly simple rhythmic form, traditionally the Tikopia have recognized a special class of dance songs, marked not so much by their theme as by their style. These are songs of protest, taunting, or insult. They are termed *mako tauangutu*, which may be interpreted literally as “dance songs in a war of the lips”—sometimes quite an apt description, as will be seen. It is interesting that the Tikopia have made a convention of what elsewhere is usually only an occasional or sporadic practice—the satire or lampoon in song. Tikopia protest songs are a recognized means of public expression of private outrage. If offended, a man or woman may compose a song, teach it to a group of friends, and then introduce it onto a dance ground some evening as a rousing chorus. Such songs may be composed if a person has had coconuts or areca nuts stolen from an orchard, if a promise has been broken or a personal slight offered. The offender is hardly ever named, but the Tikopia theory is that he or she will feel ashamed at the criticism so publicly if indirectly hurled. Actually, such effect is dubious. What the

taunting song does do is to relieve the feelings of the composer and, in the more extreme cases, to lessen the possibility of violence and so help to maintain public order.

An important sector of these taunting songs deals with relations between the sexes. The Tikopia have recognized the passions that sway men and women, particularly young men and young women, and have built this recognition into an overt set of rules. Marriage is the dividing line. Before marriage, men and women have been virtually free in their personal relations, subject to incest prohibitions and to the norms of their peer group. After marriage, they should ideally remain faithful, and nearly all women and most men appear to have done so. Stringent rules of polite speech and behavior, especially in sexual matters, also applied to married people, as to relations with any people to whom one was closely connected by marriage. In contrast to the sobriety of married people in public discourse, the conversation of the young unmarried has been full of sexual talk and innuendo; this has come to expression markedly in their dance songs. Many dance songs of *matāvaka* type have had innocuous themes. But many have been of a sexual, even scabrous nature, as response to fancied insult or a product of erotic imagination.

Sex in Song

The Tikopia have not been romantic about sexual relations (Firth 1936:511-18). A custom of individual sweet-hearting has obtained, the passion of desire is admitted, but love in the sense of intense affection for someone of the opposite sex is hinted at rather than expressed. A few songs have uttered the longing of one person for another, but even this may be a matter for jeering rather than sympathy from others in the peer group. Early in this century a young man was sent abroad for an offense, and his sweetheart mourned for him bitterly. The companions of the young man composed a song which derided the young woman for her tears:

*Tangi pakū ko nau taka
Tangi semu ki o nga tamāroa*

*Sorosoroi nga roimata
Tangi kai kere ki nga tamāroa.*

Wailing with sobs is the maiden
Weeping entreatingly for the young men

The tears keep on trickling down
Crying in a frenzy (eating earth) for the young men.

The song repeats a conventional jibe of young men against girls—that they are tearing their hearts out for men. As in many of these songs, the successive images are not very consistent, nor do they refer to different phases in the event—the girl wails, but also weeps quietly; and she is slandered by being accused of wailing for bachelors in the plural. Whatever may be the facts of a case, a common charge in these songs is to accuse a person of seeking the other sex indiscriminately.

Note also that no names are mentioned. Nearly all such songs are leveled anonymously. This is partly to avoid the scandal of a personal public reference, which would involve family ties, possible links with kin of rank, and embarrassment when in due course the named parties might marry. In confidence I was given a couple of songs which freely cited personal names of men and girls. But my informant was very reluctant to tell me the texts. He said the girls mentioned were now married, so was it good to make the songs known? I reassured him as to my discretion, and his scruples were overcome by his companions. But I was told that these two songs, by young men of different districts in opposition, had been learned for dancing, but that the elders had forbidden their performance because the women would have been ashamed. Dance songs involving proper names did seem to have been extremely rare (cf. Firth 1936:308). Again, many such dance songs conveying sexual insults were no more than generic charges—part of the banter between the sexes with no personal reference. Even where a composer might have a particular individual in mind, as an adamant object of desire or a rejected lover, the allusion was indirect; his or her friends would know at whom the song was aimed, but when the song was chanted in public most people would be ignorant of the particulars. So slander was legitimized and could flourish.

By slander here is meant public pronouncement of unfounded or unproven allegation of defect. A large number of these taunting songs relied upon the impossibility of public proof of accusation. Moreover, by an extensive use of figurative language, there was often enough disguise of the slander to claim innocence if challenged. For example, one use of slanderous songs was to allow young men to score off one another in their competition for girls. Virginity in girls was greatly prized as a public ideal, and young men of ambition prided themselves in having been the first to obtain a girl's favors. To marry a virgin was something to boast about (cf. Firth 1936:518-23, 559). A taunting song then might accuse a man of having taken to wife a woman who was no longer a virgin, but had been the mistress of another man.

Here is one composed by my old friend Kavakiua, later Pa Vangatau, a prolific song-maker, sneering at another man whose bride had already lost her maidenhead:

*Te rarongo monongi
Ko ai e ko nai fotio
Kua poi vakivaki pouri mai e!*

*Ngongoro ko te tupurongo
Te tāra o te unga mero
Ku riokino.*

The lower leaves of the aromatic shrub
Who is he then who plucked them
And has gone rejoicing in darkness oh!

Snorting (with laughter) are the generations
The garment-changing of the red hermit crab
Has been rejected.

The imagery here is complex. In the first stanza the aromatic shrub is a metaphor for a woman. For decoration, the leaf tips of the shrub are plucked, the soiled lower leaves being rejected. The implication is that the woman's present lover has taken other men's leavings, though he plumes himself that he is her first man. The second stanza refers to the scorn in which such a recipient of cast-off favors is allegedly held by young and old (the "generations"). The last two lines have an involved sexual reference. The hermit crab is a common metaphor for a flaccid penis, and redness suggests tumescence. The composer explained to me the background to this song. He had slept with the girl for a time, then abandoned her, alleging that he had objected to her large, pendulous breasts. Then along came another man—whom the composer named to me—and carried the girl off as his wife. The composer said that she was the only girl this other man could get, but there may well have been an element of jealousy in this charge. He also said that this man tended to avoid him, knowing that he had had first access to his wife. I had no idea how accurate this story might have been, but thought it plausible. What the song revealed was the composer's unsentimental use of a personal episode of emotional quality as a basis for an aesthetic exercise.

Another old song has some similarity of theme and imagery:

*Pe ko ai ke fokomumua
I o raro nga manongi
Ne poi kamokamotio
I roto te oro*

*Tenea fetaukario i te taka
E nga tamāroa
Te tumutumu o te manongi
Te kovopui toto
Pe ko ai noi ifotio?*

Who may it be who preceded him
 Among the lower leaves of the aromatic shrub!
 As he went he was slyly winked at
 In the middle of the path

She who was pursued among all the maidens
 By the young bachelors
 The tip of the aromatic shrub
 The blood-red ginger flower
 Who may it be who plucked them?

The song jeers at a man married to a woman for whom he was not the first lover. The first stanza asks rhetorically who this first lover may have been, and then describes the husband as being an object of some contempt for having taken such a sullied wife. The second stanza states that while yet unmarried the girl was eagerly sought after in competition by the young men, and inquires again who may have been the man who in the end was able to take her virginity. The song uses a great deal of floral imagery. The leaves of the aromatic shrub and the ginger flower are the symbols of virginity. The ginger flower symbolism is somewhat complex. A spray of this plant (*Hedychium flavum*) is commonly worn as a back ornament for dancing by men. Traditionally, it was also worn occasionally by a husband as a token of rejoicing at having found his wife a virgin on their marriage night. So the reference to the plucking of the ginger flower is again an indirect allusion to the taking of the girl's maidenhead.

These two songs have dealt with marital situations, but most sexually slanderous songs relate to the unmarried. The sexes accuse each other in general of unbridled desire, of unchastity, of boasting baselessly about sexual prowess, and of eagerness to marry despite all claims about the delights of celibacy. The songs are vigorously frank, full of sexual imagery, in a style of high exaggeration calculated to tease and irritate the other sex. Yet a marked characteristic of these taunting songs is that they avoid explicit mention of the physical aspects of sex—genitalia or coition. Although long familiarity has made the highly allusive language of the songs pretty plain in meaning to all listeners, the songs remain within the bounds of *taranga laui*, proper speech. (A sub-category of songs using gross sexual terms, *taranga pariki*, improper speech, is mentioned later.) So the songs can be chanted in public where elders or people constrained by the obligation of marriage need have no embarrassment.

Varieties of Sexual Imagery

A variety of floral imagery conveys sexual reference, especially to women. Here is a traditional song, the authorship of which was unknown

even in 1929, but which was probably composed by a woman:

*Te foi tiore
Fu i te toko
Ko ai ka poi ono ki oi
Au fatu roi ki ei*

*Te nofo mamao
Sē rafi ki oi e!
Totoro ki te manongi
O te toko.*

The gardenia flower
Hidden in the maiden
Who will go and look at it
Then come and make up a tale about it?

He who is living afar
Why not draw near to her oh!
Come crawling to the sweetheart
Of the unmarried.

This is a song against men. The theme is that while young women preserve their virginity, young men come crawling after them without success and lie about their supposed conquests. In the first stanza the girl's maidenhead, still unbroken, is likened to a beautiful aromatic flower, hidden in her body, and a man's claim to have cast eyes upon it is derided. The second stanza is ostensibly an invitation to the man to approach the girl, but it is made with a suggestion of scorn, that he is too timid to carry out his desire. The term *totoro* bears multiple imagery. It is a continuative extension of the verb *toro*, to creep or crawl. In general, when applied to human beings it indicates some degree of inferiority, in some contexts an attitude of apology. But it has also been a mode of approach of would-be lovers to sleeping girls whom they wished to seduce, and as such was a matter treated with some disdain by the girls. So the implication of the song is that men are rather contemptible creatures given to unrealized passion.

Songs composed by men take a different line. They use imagery of opened buds and soiled leaves to display their charge that the young women are no longer virgins. They also use metaphors from ordinary technology to denigrate the status of young women. One such song from the male side is quite blunt, while remaining within the canons of "proper speech":

*Rongo ko Tikopia
Rongo fafine taka e mingimingi*

*Na ka peke ake i raro
Na ka peke ake te kuoni fokoAnuta.*

Let Tikopia hear
 News that the unmarried girl is very tiny
 Now she'll shrink up below
 Now she'll shrink up, the Anuta bag-net.

The slur here refers to a girl's sexual parts. The word glossed as "tiny" refers to something very thin or narrow, the implication here being that the woman has a very small orifice, shrunken from much intercourse. The second stanza repeats the slander, using the metaphor of a hand-operated bag-net for deep-sea fishing. The Anutan form of the net may be smaller than the local Tikopia form, but the insult lies also in the general analogy of a woman's organ to a bag-like receptacle. The song was probably not directed against any particular girl; it expresses a common male denigration of a woman's sexual equipment.

Another common metaphor in male songs is that of a woman as canoe. This allows of many elaborations of sexual imagery, about the condition of the vessel, boarding it, stretching out on the deck, steering it, and so on. A frequent accusation in song is that the vessel is in poor condition, that is, that the girl has lost her virginity. A song of this type is:

Ono atu ki te vaka
Ku samusu
Tou fakanapara
Kua kā pe se ofi

Tu moi, tu moi kove
Ke tau oro masike
Mosike moi kove
Ke tau oro i tou
Fia fai rongorongō.

Look at the canoe
 Got into a bad state
 Your slot (in the holding chock)
 Has become burning like fire

Stand up to me, stand up to me, you
 That we two go and rise
 Rise up to me you
 That we two may go in your
 Desire to make a reputation.

The first stanza of the song puts forward two common propositions advanced by young men against young women—that they have lost their maidenheads, and that they are hot for sexual intercourse. To do this, two separate metaphors are employed. The first is simply a broad assertion that the girl's canoe is imperfect, in need of repair. The adjective here is

unusual. Tikopia composers have been fond of using foreign words to embellish their songs, and I was told that *samusu* was a Fijian word meaning “bad.” Then the metaphor changes. A canoe at rest on shore is kept stable by its keel sitting in slots cut in timbers holding it off the ground. This slot is an obvious synonym for a woman’s vulva, and a further metaphorical twist, familiar also to Western poetry, uses the image of “burning” with sexual desire. The second stanza is a challenge: let the woman stand up and face an inquiry into her reputation. She wishes to appear as of unblemished virtue, but the truth will be otherwise if she be put to the proof!

Akin to the symbol of the unopened bud of the gardenia or frangipani, is the smooth, white, small gasteropod shell of a species of *Polinices*. Traditionally, this was often worn in the nose septum by young people, especially as a token of virginity by girls. A constant charge in the songs of young men has been that this is a lying token. An old song refers to this in the context of the *pea*, a privilege ceremonial (now abandoned) for girls of rank who were presumably still maidens (Firth 1967b:62-68):

*Fokotu tiu ki te pea
Ke tou savaina
Ke tou makoa
Kumikumi rei a tatou ke tua
Ko tatou ku lesia.*

*Te matarafi mai te vaka
O nau toko
Ke fau manga ko te oa
Masāra kesekese ki tua.*

Set up the nose shell for the *pea*
That we may gesture at it
That we may dance at it
And squeeze straight our backs
For we have been deceived.

The wedge from the canoe
Of the unmarried woman
To secure with cross-lashing the topstrake
Release it and put it aside to the rear.

The basic meaning of this song is that if the girl puts up her nose shell as a token of virginity for the *pea* ceremony, then the young men will deride her. This song, as is so often the case, has two main metaphorical images. The first stanza is the image of the dance which was a prominent feature of the *pea*. The stereotype of such a dance is of young men moving along rhythmically, swinging their arms vigorously and occasionally making series of formal display gestures with fists and open hands, bending and straightening their backs in male pride as the dance proceeds.



Vigorous dance by men using hand and arm gestures.

Photo by Raymond Firth

Here, it is implied, these male gestures are made in scorn against the false claims of the principal girl. The men straighten their backs as an affirmation of the truth of their allegation that she is no longer chaste. The second stanza is a variant on the canoe metaphor. Wooden wedges are important in holding firm the cord lashings of a sea-going canoe (no nails or rivets being used), so if a wedge is removed the upper timbers of the canoe become loose. The girl's maidenhead is likened to such a wedge; it is alleged that it has been taken away and her virtue thereby rendered unsafe. In the original, this is a powerful song, and I was told that when it was first sung by the young men the girls felt it to be such a telling diatribe that they could find no effective answer to it!

But the girls have had their own taunting songs against the young men, with plenty of bite. One poetic image propagated by the young women has been that of young men swaggering around in their masculine pride, eager to get girls and boasting of their sexual conquests, but often quite falsely, while the girls laugh at them. Here is one such song of ridicule:

Tangata ka karo mai
 Fakamafatifati ko ona rima
 Ana fainga ki se manongi mōna

*Sā ra atu ou
Tupotu i tou pou
E nofo tiotio i te au toko i Rangi*

*Tongoto kua tara morotofi
Ne fenoke rava ki tou suru uri
Rava ki tou koliko.*

The man will stride here hastily
Jerking his arms to and fro
In his actions to get himself a sweetheart

When I appear
With your back against your post
You sit peering out at the set of maidens from Heaven

The man has donned his orange girdle
You have come clad in your dark kilt
Clad in your calico.

This is quite a descriptive picture of a young man “dressed to kill,” but, alas, not impressing the girls. The first stanza shows him bustling along in search of a mistress, in a somewhat ludicrous way. In the second stanza he is represented as sitting in his house, with his back against a post in Tikopia male style, peering out under the thatch eaves at passers-by. He is attracted by the bevy of girls, but is afraid to appear when they do come close. There is a suggestion in the song that they have materialized “from Heaven” in a mysterious way for him. Finally, even though he puts on his best clothes, the implication is that the girls reject him.

Another girls’ song laughs at the false boasts of men:

*Tangata fia fai rongorongo
Ne muna tou surusuru
Ne fafati i te vao manongi*

*Sē ne rafīrafī ke fenoke
Ku morio ifo
I te fio foi rongorongo.*

A man seeking a reputation
Said that his back ornament
Was broken off in the aromatic shrubbery

But he never got near to approaching us
He’s been carried away
In his wish for renown.

The accusation here is plain. A man pretends that his symbol of sexual conquest, his leafy back ornament, was plucked from the aromatic shrubs; in other words, the implication is that he had culled the virginity of a

young woman. But he merely wanted to make a name for himself—he never came near the girls, and was lying, and his reputation goes for nothing.

Some songs are vividly descriptive of the physical effects of passion. One composed by young women evokes a picture of a young man moved by frustrated desire—and rather an absurd sight:

*Ou manava āke
Ke moe ma fofine*

*Ou kaponga te tongoto
Na ku manavanava
Fifiti ake ku rarapa
Kua ukauka tou ua.*

There's a feeling rising in your belly
That you want to sleep with women

Your male throat pulse
Has begun to throb there
(Your veins) have swollen up and stood out
Till your neck has become a mass of cords.

The alleged uncontrollable sexual lust of young men is thus held up to ridicule. (Any notion of response by young women is carefully kept out of consideration by the female composers!)

Many of these taunting songs have been quite ephemeral, and completely forgotten. But some have endured as stock dance songs, ready to be sung as standard responses in the continual challenge of the sexes. One such, by an Ariki Kafika, father of the chief Sivoia whom I knew, was composed in the late nineteenth century; it was still in vogue as a dance song in 1929, when it was chanted during the religious rites of Uta:

*Tou fiofio maino
Tou fiofio taurekareka
Te kovi o Raro
Tekā i Nukuātea*

*Ne poi muno i te raki e!
Ne kau rotoa
Ne kau pukea
Moku taina ke iroa*

*Totosi e totoni
Ki te oro
Ke tofokino
I oku fare i Murifenua.*

Your desire to be like the moon
Your desire to be beautiful

You ugly one of Tikopia
 Fallen in the rubbish place

You went and tattled in Faea oh!
 That I desired you
 That I embraced you
 And my brother whom you know

You've been dragged, dragged down
 Into the path
 To be trampled upon
 In my house in Murifenua.

I heard this song chanted at the Uta dance. The grandson of the composer, who gave me the text, said that only the first two stanzas had been sung because the crowd did not know the third stanza. He told me the name of the woman against whom the song had been directed. It was said that she had claimed falsely that the composer had planned with his brother to carry her off as his wife—in accordance with Tikopia custom, but possibly here a ploy on her part to try to force his hand. Angry at what he declared to be a lie, the composer replied to her story in this song, accusing her of vanity and loose morals. The song is full of idiomatic allusions. *Raro* is an Anutan name for Tikopia; it means “Below” and refers to the position of Tikopia southwest of Anuta. Its use here is an instance of Tikopia composers’ liking for foreign words. *Nukuātea* is literally a “place outside,” where things are thrown away. But specifically, as used here, it refers to a place of excretion in Faea, and implies that the woman is no more than a bit of excrement. The second stanza details the composer’s complaint against the woman. In the third stanza he gives vent to his anger by imagining her being degraded in public, particularly in his own territory—Murifenua being an orchard and house of his in Faea.

Formal Exchange of Insults in Song

For much dancing the young folk of both sexes join together, roaring out in chorus some popular chant, irrespective of its theme. But on some occasions the young men and young women separate, and sing and dance alternately in groups against each other. Here is a striking phenomenon, the formal exchange of musical insults. One side or the other will begin to sing a taunting song. This is listened to very carefully by the other side, in silence. They then reply, either with an apposite old song, or with a new song freshly composed on the spot. As one of my informants said, “If you make a song, and I listen to it, my song will be ready as soon as yours is finished; it will not be delayed.” That this facility of composition was true I could confirm from attendance at various dances.

The improvised songs usually follow fairly well-worn musical and linguistic paths. By long training, a great store of conventional metaphors was available to would-be composers, and their quick sense of analogy made them very alert at composition on the spur of the moment. Usually, one or two leaders supplied the main inspiration, and some of the reply songs showed a quick wit. The formality of this traditional system of song and counter-song is shown by the use of the term *tongoi* for it, indicating an exchange comparable to a formal exchange of food. Sometimes the exchange of taunting songs has been simply restricted to a pair of songs, but often it has gone on in a series, each sex finding a reply to the taunt of the other.

Here is a sample of four songs chanted as part of a larger exchange. The young men begin:

Fofine tena kua nofo
Sopo ra ki tou voko
Motokā poi taritari
Tāngata, tere i te roto fenua

Taukirokiro tāngata ki ai ra
Taukirokiro tamāroa ki ai ra
Tou vaka te lelu
Na kua poi fakorikoriko
I a tofo o tomōroa.

Woman who has been sitting there
 Jump up then onto your vehicle
 The motorcar which goes carrying
 Men, rushing along through the countryside

Men gaze at it from afar there
 Young men gaze at it from afar
 Your vehicle with its running load
 Which has gone revolving
 At the side of the young men.

This song jeers at young women by likening them to a motorcar which carries men; the sexual metaphor is obvious. But, it is alleged, the young men look warily at the vehicle from afar and refuse to enter, though it rolls invitingly near. In other words, they are chary of a relationship with promiscuous young women. The imagery is reinforced by the term *lelu*, which at first sight is obscure. The word means “running,” but in a special sense, of kicking with the legs, as in a game in which someone is dragged along while he kicks out in a running movement. The imagery, not very precise, is intended to suggest the ridiculous sight of a woman, in her lust for young men, running alongside them, although rejected by them; the notion of her legs vigorously agitated has a sexual reminiscence.

The reply of the girls, composed on the spot, did not take up the

theme directly, but reversed the idea of a sexual approach, so that it is the young man and not the girl who is rejected:

*Ka fakapiripiritia moi
Riele te tama
Au ku fokomotukutuku*

*Tou vaka ku poi pouri
Ku ngoro ku vini i te taka
Ngongoro ki oi.*

He'll keep on drawing nearer to me
Hurrah! the lad rejoices
But when he comes he takes fright

Your canoe has gone in the dark
It has been snorted at and whistled at among the girls
Who keep on snorting at it.

The first stanza accuses the young men of sexual cowardice. When a lad approaches a girl he is overtaken by shyness and retires. The second stanza pursues this theme, with the metaphor of the young man as a canoe. He and his companions go in the darkness in the shadow of the trees, skulking there and mocked by the girls after having been discouraged in their fumbling approaches.

The answer of the young men immediately to this song was a renewed attack on the reputation of the young women:

*Ie! Te vaka rakarakafio
Ie! Te vaka rakarakafio
Au i te ara sē maleku
Ngaope mai*

*Tou tiu futikaki
Ke tu ki rungo
Ku ngoroa e tamā roa
Fakato tuku ki raro.*

Ho! the canoe that's been hurried around
Ho! the canoe that's been hurried around
Comes in the path, not invisible
Dangling toward us

Your noseshell that persistently
You set up above
Has been laughed at by the young men
Let it drop and lay it down.

This song picks up the "canoe" term from the previous song, the notion of the vessel having been "hurried around" implying that it has been much

used, that is, that the woman has had many relations with men. The image then changes, to a more immediate one of a woman with dangling breasts advancing in the path, again suggesting that sexually she is well experienced. The image then changes again, to the common symbol of chastity worn, whether merited or not, by many young women. The assertion here in effect is that its use as an ornament is unwarranted, that it provokes the scorn of young men and should be abandoned.

To this song the young women replied with spirit, exulting in their virginity (*sic*) and stigmatizing the young men as a lot of rubbish:

*Ma te atua te tama
Ki a nga ātua peia
Te Vai Rokupenu*

*Kau vakivaki toku ra teki
Kau sava rima rua toku foi tiu.*

But the lad is a goblin
To the spirits thrown
In the Pool of Tossed-out Rubbish

I rejoice in my flower-bud twig stuck (in my hair)
I gesture with both arms (in the dance) in favor of my noseshell.

The composer of this song was the daughter of the local mission teacher, an assertive young woman, unmarried, and already with a reputation of some freedom with men. But she and her companions stoutly maintained their purity. The first stanza accuses the young men of being nothing more than spirits—in other words, not true men—fit only to be consigned to the traditional rubbish pool of the after-world. The second stanza returns to the theme of the symbols of chastity, alleging that flower-bud and nose-shell are rightfully worn, and that the girls will demonstrate this in the formal open-armed gestures of pride in dancing (incidentally, such gestures have been traditionally a male prerogative, so whether the girls actually did make them or not, they were challenging the men in a verbal display of female aggression.)

In such interchange of songs between the sexes the slander is sometimes quite gross, or very pointed. A song composed by some young men against the young women is very blunt:

*Oie! Te oi e pā
Te fafine ku tunua ki te afi*

*E au o mako mate mai
Ko tafito iū malulu.*

Oh! Oh! a moan explodes
As a girl is roasted by the fire

Now she comes here and dances furiously
But most obvious are her soft breasts.

This is a direct accusation that the girl has had an abortion—one method said to have been the application of hot stones to the belly, a very painful process. The second stanza describes the sequel. The girl comes and dances vigorously (“to the death”) as if nothing has happened, but her soft dangling breasts—traditionally men and girls were bare to the waist—betray that she is no longer a maiden.

The girls’ reply to this was ingenious. They took up the theme of soft breasts and developed it in a witty retort:

Fererei oke o tutu
A rākei o te taka
Tu mai fakamanīnia
I ke fatu ki a ū e!

Kokove te nea
Ne ora i take vosia!

They grow and stand up
As ornaments of maidenhood
Standing as objects of envy
And yet you slander breasts indeed!

You were the one
Who lived (as a babe therefrom) at a former time!

To this neat reply, mingling boasting and reproach, I do not think the young men found any answer.

For the most part, these taunting songs avoided any mention of the specific coarse terms for either genitalia or the sex act that are often heard in ordinary life. In addition to the images already set out, a man’s song may refer to the *Hernandia* berry of a woman, pink, often holed by children to whistle through. A woman’s song may complain that she has been deceived by a tiny bird’s beak, that of the swiftlet (*Collocalia* sp.), instead of receiving the stout male member she expected. These and many other such picturesque metaphors were appropriate to any public dance occasion. But a special category of taunting songs was provided by *feuku*, in which inhibitions were cast aside and the crudest sexual words were used.

Generally, these bawdy sexual songs, composed by men and women alike, served the dances of young people when the night was far advanced and the elders had retired. Then restraint could be abandoned, and the young men and girls reveled in the exchange of highly titillating and blunt sexual words. Yet these songs also had traditional validation of another

order; they could be sung at an advanced stage of the religious dancing of Uta. Although even there the *feuku* should be sung only in the presence of unmarried people, both sexes took part in the chanting and dancing, and they were given the sanction of an established ritual context. Indeed, some Tikopia elders justified them to me on the grounds that they served to educate young people in sexual matters—which I thought a very dubious argument! The poetic value of such songs is usually not very high, so I give only two examples here.

The first is a song composed by a man of rank in Ravenga, in boasting strain:

*Tu ko te ure toa i Ravenga
Tokatokai ki te ngaru
Sē ne fetiri*

*Au mai ko te rongō
Ka mai te roki
Ku sorosoroio
Ko te lala ku konio
Ko te lala rei ku konio.*

The ironwood penis stands up in Ravenga
Thrusts and peers into the waves
But does not disappear

When the news is brought
They will come from the west
They've been scraping along
The cunts that have been fucked
The cunts indeed that have been fucked.

The claim here is that the composer's massive organ has been so attractive to women that they have streamed in from the other district (of Faea in the west) for copulation. The term for penis, *ure*, is still rather more formal than the ordinary coarse term *laso*, but the terms for female genitalia and sexual intercourse, *lala* and *koni*, are the ordinary vulgar words. So the song was classed by my Tikopia informants as a *feuku*.

A *feuku* composed by young women against young men was of stronger challenging texture:

*Sakiri ki vere reu
Te vere tau uo te tangata
Toku foi mimi*

*Toku mimi fu ke sakiria
E takatakai te kokona
O te vere reu.*

Seek for the ripe *Barringtonia* fruit

The *Barringtonia* hung round the necks of men
My personal vulva

My hidden vulva that you seek
The pungency is pervasive
Of the ripe *Barringtonia* fruit.

This was rather a shocking song, even to Tikopia men. The young man who gave me the text of the song broke out ruefully into cursing when he had done so. "Set of she-devils eat filth!" he said. The reason was that the ripe *Barringtonia* fruit, of a purple color, has a very strong, not particularly pleasant smell. It is used as a decoration by either sex in dancing, held at the breast or around the waist in a garland. But to associate it with a woman's vulva, and suggest that it be hung round a man's neck, was an image that did not please the men. The song is an index of the women's toughness, that they could make such an identification publicly, and of the tartness of some of their song-challenges to the men.

But on occasion even Tikopia women could be silenced. An elaborate song (with an involved text unnecessary to give here) composed by a young man depicted a girl in the spirit world. There she was scrutinized by the guardians, not so much of morality as of status, and rejected for her loss of virginity. In accord with traditional lore, the song portrayed her as being thrown into a rubbish pool of the afterworld. "Ashamed are your folk; your virgin bud droops down" ran the song, meaning that her flower symbol of maidenhead had wilted. It was said that to this song the girls found no reply in the song exchanges. But, I was told, colleagues in the spirit world came to their rescue. A dead sister of the composer, seemingly moved by the embarrassment of her living former companions, composed a song in reply. Then, it was said, she communicated it to her brother among the spirits, and he in turn issued it through the mouth of his human spirit medium. This man, in trance, then sang the song on behalf of the girls. It scarified the young men. A young bachelor was depicted as standing among the rubbish in the after-world, his own symbol of sexual prowess with virgins having been falsified, and so he was laughed at by all the spirits. This song thus evened things up in the musical sphere.

In actual fact, of course, the real composer of the song was the human medium himself, evidently stirred by the charge leveled against the young women. In his ordinary life he was a prolific song composer, but he often went into trance, in which his subliminal self also was capable of song composition and delivery. The Tikopia seemed to see nothing inconsistent in what was putatively a girl's song being the product, in effect, of a male composer, since their theory of spirit behavior gave a cogent explanation of this phenomenon.

A notable feature of these exchanges of musical insults has been their

formalism. This is demonstrated by what may seem to outsiders to be an odd custom. When a dance festival using taunting songs has been planned on some scale, with folk from more than one district involved, a curious interchange may take place. The young men of the visiting side join the young women of the hosts in singing their songs, while the young women of the visitors likewise assist the local young men in their chants. This arrangement helps to give the occasion an institutional stamp of an impersonal aesthetic order, and to lessen the friction that might otherwise occur if two bodies of men and women were opposed to each other in simple sexual confrontation.

I conclude by emphasizing two general features of these song exchanges of young people. The first is the complex implications of this open eroticism. Some Tikopia argued that it was instructional—but this left me unconvinced. What did seem clearer was that it helped to channel sexual impulses into a relatively acceptable form, allowing public expression of frustrations and resentments with less danger to private relations. It is true that sometimes lovers and their mistresses fell out in private over some particularly outrageous musical slander against men or women. But the public insult in song could always be claimed as merely a general joke, without personal reference. There appears to have always been a lot of sexual talk among the unmarried. But the institutionalization of erotic language in song in standardized, traditional form before marriage may, from a speculative viewpoint, have contributed to the subsequent relative tranquility that many marriages seem to have enjoyed.

The second notable feature of these song exchanges is the freedom which they allow to young women. In general, Tikopia society has been male-oriented, with few official roles given to women, and in ordinary public life unmarried women have played an almost insignificant part. But the equality of the sexes in the unmarried state has been remarkable, especially in the sphere of dance-song composition (cf. Firth 1981). The tone of many of the songs composed by unmarried young women is an indication of the independence of thought and firmness of action shown by many Tikopia women in the conduct of ordinary affairs in later life.

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