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### Chapter 11, Songs in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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## XI CEREMONIES of COMMUNITY LIFE

There is a long-debated issue about the consequences of modernization, both in Western societies and more recently in non-Western societies. In social theory there was a definite ambivalence about these processes which can be seen as liberating individuals from the shackles of tradition and ascribed social expectations and at the same time setting them adrift into a fragmented world of isolated individuals and meaningless instrumentality. Weber wrote about the "disenchantment" of modern instrumental rationality which deprives people of any wonderment and spirituality; Durkheim wrote about the anomie of highly differentiated and specialized social systems; Marx described the "alienation" of industrial systems of production. At the same time, all these writers were clearly fascinated by the opportunities offered by industrialization and what might be termed, modern life. This ambivalence about modernity continues to the present, both in the academic discourse and in people's everyday discussions. As I discussed earlier, the Sikaiana people themselves have entered this debate. They are ambivalent about the changes they have seen in their lifetimes. They claim that there is fragmenting in their social relations and less happiness, but at the same time that they enthusiastically participate in new institutions.

In the next two chapters, I will discuss some ceremonial events, songs and drinking, which maintained the Sikaiana community. Both are ceremonies are unique to the Sikaiana and separate them from the outside world. Both ceremonies reflect the intimacy and familiarity of the Sikaiana community. Songs describe Sikaiana individuals and events. Sometimes songs contain hidden meanings which create smaller groups of people among the Sikaiana with shared understandings. Sikaiana drinking is the ultimate occasion for camaraderie, allowing types of intimate interactions which are restricted in sober relations. These ceremonies create a re-enchanted, non-alienated, albeit temporary, world of intimacy and familiarity. But these are not stable activities and the manner in which these ceremonies are integrated into Sikaiana life reflects important changes.

### SONGS

Before I went to Sikaiana, I had very little interest in songs or song composition. I have never been able to play an instrument or carry a tune and I had read very little about ethnomusicology. But songs are an important part of Sikaiana social life. In earlier chapters, I have already described the controversy about pre-marital sex and the dances of young people, and how this controversy was incorporated into the themes of songs in the 1981 *puina*. Songs and dances are performed as part of the celebration of holidays. People often explain concepts or describe historical events by referring to songs. The formation of the Vania sports association was in large part due to the desire to practice and perform traditional songs and dances. In song composition, individuals and their activities are recorded and interpreted in terms of shared values. Songs composed in traditional genres describe many important themes in Sikaiana social life. They often include the ridicule and taunting that is a form of social control. Important

events and activities are recorded in them. Moreover, the manner in which new song styles have been incorporated into Sikaiana life and the redefinition of their traditional song genres reflect the major processes of change in their society.

Early in my stay, I began collecting information about songs. During my first year on Sikaiana, I collected traditional songs with the help of my neighbor, Reuben Tenai. At the end of that first year, I participated in the *puina*. During the Easter holiday in 1982, I sponsored the performance of traditional songs by offering to supply beer and toddy to the women who sang them. Fane Telena led a group of women who spent about two weeks rehearsing traditional songs for this recording.

I also enjoyed composed songs for personal reasons. Song composition is an area of Sikaiana life which is creative. The Sikaiana are not especially artistic. They carve bowls, pestles, and sometimes foot stools. Men are competitive about the aesthetic qualities of their canoes. Women are critical of weaving and plaiting which are not straight, and of mats which do not lie flat on the ground. But aesthetic expression is limited by the utilitarian aspects of these objects. The Sikaiana have no elaborate tradition of painting or decoration. Most body adornments, including necklaces, bracelets, braids are bought in stores. The Sikaiana make flower garlands for their heads, *hau*, which are attractive, but they do not require much imagination and do not last long. In songs, however, the Sikaiana have an opportunity to express their hopes, fears, sorrows, joy, and humor in a manner that is creative. Their songs became a part of my emotional experience of Sikaiana, just as another group of songs from the 1960s are part of my college experience. Perhaps the best way to get to know the Sikaiana is to get to know their songs.<sup>i</sup>

## Song Composition

There are many Sikaiana songs which are associated with their traditional ritual life and recreational activities which have no recognized composer. They have been passed down from previous times and mostly associated with ritual activities. But there is another group of songs, *mako hatu*, which are composed by specific individuals. These composed songs and describe events and personalities in terms of general Sikaiana values. They are a continuing commentary which expresses the personal nature of this community.

One traditional genre of composed songs is the *tani*, literally meaning to 'cry' or 'mourn.' These were funeral dirges are composed after the death of a loved one to commemorate his or her life. These songs are no longer composed, but some old ones are still remembered. These songs reflect the kind of intimacy of a community where everyone is known: the songs often describe personal details about the deceased's life or the circumstances of death. One song, composed by a mother for her deceased daughter, asks how it is possible that a daughter can die before her mother. The song laments that the daughter will no longer call out to her mother or come running into the house. Another song written for a deceased younger brother recalls his determined efforts to help his older brother win their canoe races and fishing contests against other young

men. The younger brother will never again wake the composer and urge him run to the shore and paddle out to sea to compete in the contests.

There is one sad funeral song that recounts the mourning of TePeau for his sister, Peia. Peia was the insane woman who killed her husband and whose death by drowning was recounted in Chapter III. Recall that TePeau, her brother, ordered that Peia be killed because she had murdered her husband. He composed the following song in which he decries his decision to have his sister die and asks for others to share the responsibility. Why did none of Peia's other brothers came forth to make him change his mind.<sup>ii</sup>

My sister, you and I are separated because I gave the order that you should die.

My sister, you and I are moved apart because I gave the order that you should die.

I grieve in my heart, I gave the order for you to die.

No man came to try to dissuade me from my decision.

How is it that none of my brothers came forth to try to keep me from ordering your death?

I grieve that I gave the order for you to die.

Why is it that I never saw our cousin Taukalo come forth to prevent you from dying?

Other genres of composed songs are concerned with the living and current events. In a previous chapter, I described how song composition in the *puina* both reflected the pervasive division between men and women, and also expressed specific social values and events. Since the late 1960s, the Sikaiana have been composing songs to the guitar which also discuss specific events in terms of general values.

In composed songs, the Sikaiana, like poets everywhere, find it is better to express themselves by not directly saying what they mean. They frequently use metaphor or figurative speech, *hulihulisala*, to describe people or events. The term, *hulihulisala*, is made up of two words, *huli* 'to turn' and *sala* which in this context means 'differently' or 'unexpectedly'. Sikaiana metaphors turn meanings in unexpected ways. The priest explained *hulihulisala* to me by referring to the parables told by Jesus in the Bible. Like parables, metaphors are often used in songs to provide figurative illustrations for proper behavior.

In everyday speech, speakers use metaphors to refer to people, especially to children, when they want to make a comment without being understood. Upon my arrival, before I had a command of the vernacular, Sikaiana people referred to me by the names for various species of fish which, like me, are white in color. As I became more familiar with the language, more elaborate metaphors were developed. When Kilatu's wife referred to me as a gecko who sticks to walls and ceilings, she was using *hulihulisala*. Because the meanings of metaphors are often contextualized in specific interactions, it is sometimes difficult to determine when they are being used.

Sometimes, especially in traditional songs, the entire song is structured around a central metaphor. A man who laments that his canoe is missing certain crucial parts is really complaining that he is a bachelor without a wife. The very fastidious captain of a steamship in another song is actually a reference to a man known for his compulsive cleanliness. A song about a canoe that has not appeared is really an allusion to man who does not have a son. Other times, especially in the guitar songs, metaphors are used in specific verses. The constantly fuming smokestack of a boat describes a woman who chain smokes. The movement of stars across the horizon is a metaphor for the elopement of lovers. A species of fish noted for being immobile alludes to a lazy person. A grave without a coffin refers to an empty mosquito net at night, whose occupant, a jealous mother, is constantly watching the activities of her mature daughters lest they involve themselves in some illicit romance; in this same song, a channel in the reef that has gone dry alludes to the fact that a young man is having difficulty in arranging a meeting with one of these daughters or, in some explanations, that the mother is no longer capable of bearing anymore beautiful daughters.

In addition to enlivening meaning, metaphors challenge people to interpret a song's message. Sikaiana people are well known to one another and enmeshed in relationships based upon kinship, exchange and past experience. The composer has the satisfaction of understanding the song's meaning and shares this satisfaction with those to whom he or she reveals the song's meaning. Even though someone suspects that she or he is being criticized in a song, metaphors make the songs inherently ambiguous. As discussed in a previous chapter, this shared knowledge creates membership in a distinct informal social group. Others use their knowledge of community events and figurative meanings to suspect (*sanosano*) the intent of the song. Often, the composers (or those who claim to know the composers' intent) say that some songs, which seem to be straightforward, are really highly elaborate metaphors. In other cases, the composers claim that various interpretations deviate from the song's original meaning. Although some metaphors are easily interpreted, others are more opaque because the composer intends to hide his or her meanings. Metaphors and figurative speech are sometimes described as 'to make covered' or 'to hide', *hakalilolilo*. The Sikaiana describe the difference between apparent meaning and inner messages in complex metaphors by using the word *nnoto*, which literally means 'deep' as in the deep areas in the sea.

## Songs of Change

Songs composed earlier in this century used traditional tunes and stanza form to discuss many of the changes taking place in Sikaiana life. In form and content, they are

closely related to the songs sung at the *puina*. In the following song, probably composed in the 1930s, a person describes how his passionate love for a young woman overwhelms the recently adopted Christian morality proscribing sexual relations outside of marriage. The young man meets a woman along a path and is overcome by passion. In the view of the church, they sin and fall from grace. In the last lines the young man describes sneaking up to his love's house in order to be near her. Hearing the rustling of branches, his lover's mother mistakes him for a pig that had broken away from its fence. The song is intended to be a humorous look at love and passion.

The people of my age follow the teachings of the church.  
 And what happened?-- You and I sinned on account of me.  
 And what happened?--You and I fell from grace because of me.

I am surprised by myself.  
 We meet by chance along the path.  
 I lose control, I reach out and pull you to me.  
 We kiss deeply, our lips opening together.  
 My heart trembles, my voice quivers,  
 Our love is so deep, there is nothing else.  
 We part but my thoughts go with you  
 We have sinned because of me.  
 We have fallen because of me.

I stood at the side of your house to hear your soft voice.  
 Snap! A branch crackled underneath my foot.  
 Your mother called out from the house, "shoo-- pig-- shoo."  
 She thought I was a pig who had strayed.

The following song was probably composed after the arrival of missionaries. Composed by women, it takes an amusing look at a man's fickle interest in a love affair:

Oh, young man, I still hold our promise of love.

Where do we stand?  
 Why do you move away from me now?

It's your fault  
 that I am alone.  
 It's your fault  
 because my love is still strong.

Oh, young man, we are like the lightning:

It flashes once and we are standing together;  
It flashes again and you have left me.

It flashes once and we are hugging;  
It flashes again and you are somewhere else.

It flashes once and we are kissing;  
It flashes again and you forget all about me.

The excerpts from the following song, probably composed in the 1950s, describe a young student in the new school who keeps thinking about a certain girl. The song begins with his foster parent admonishing him to keep up with his studies so that he can have a good job when he grows up. The foster father says:

I promised your mother that I would make sure you would go to school.  
Study hard so that you will grow up to be something better than a cook for some white man.

The song now shifts perspective to that of the young student and his futile efforts at his studies because of his romantic interests.

The bell rings to start classes.  
I enter into the school.  
I sit down in my seat.  
The teacher gives us our examination.

My hand wavers all around the page writing nothing at all.  
I'm not interested in school lessons,  
The only thing I want to learn about is my sweetheart.

## Guitar Music

Sikaiana people often learn and perform songs and dances from other cultures. They like to perform many songs and dances which were learned by their grandparents when they travelled to other islands while working on government ships in the 1920s and 30s. The fact that many of the words in these songs are not understood does not inhibit the Sikaiana people's enthusiasm for performing them. In fact, many of the dances that the Sikaiana perform as their traditional "*kastom*" dances, including those performed by the Vania sports association, were first learned from other Pacific peoples. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Sikaiana people are enthusiastic about learning Western music and dance styles. Learning Western songs and music is entirely consistent with their own cultural tradition of incorporating songs and dances from

other cultures.

Present-day, 2020, examples can be found on YouTube by Island Boy. Some of his songs are not familiar to me but some were sung, during my stays in 1980-93, including the one below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RICKLvQQjwA>

Young men learned English school songs while attending missionary schools in the 1930s. During this time, some of the young men were composing songs in the Sikaiana language using the tunes they learned in schools. At present, the Sikaiana men sing English language songs that I assume were learned at school, on labor plantations, and from soldiers during World War II. Favorite songs include "You are my Sunshine", "Pack up Your Troubles", "There's a Church in the Valley", and the "Halls of Montezuma". A few Pijin songs are sung, including a well-known favorite in the Solomon Islands, "Walkabout Chinatown," and occasionally a song from World War II which ridicules the Japanese, "Japoni haahaa". Most of church hymns are sung in English from the Church of Melanesia's hymnal.

In the 1960s, some young men attending school in Honiara learned to play the ukulele and guitar from other Solomon Islanders. Tunes were taken from a variety of sources including the national radio, and commercial cassettes of Western and neo-Oceanic music. One young man attending a training course in Australia composed a song using a tune he heard on a television show. Although many of these songs use tunes from Western music, their lyrics are always in the Sikaiana language.

At about the same time, young men and women began dancing with each other face-to-face in the Western style. By the time of my arrival in 1980, there were always four or five guitars on the atoll. Many young people, both male and female, could play the guitar, and almost everyone knew at least some of the guitar songs. Dances between young men and women were held once or twice a month, usually as part of holiday festivities or the goodbye parties for people leaving on the monthly boat. At these dances in 1980-1983, guitar music is always played, even though the Sikaiana own tape recorders.

Traditionally, the Sikaiana did not have this kind of intersexual dancing. Some people claim that visitors, such as American servicemen in World War II, first introduced this type of dancing. These dances are called the *hula*, a term that is cognate with the name of the famous Hawaiian dance. But on Sikaiana, it does not refer to the erotic hip-swinging dances of Hawaii. These dances are always accompanied by guitar music and Sikaiana songs.

In many respects, the themes and style of Sikaiana guitar composition are derived from traditional song composition genres. Like traditional songs, guitar songs describe romance and taunt inappropriate behavior; they also use metaphor both to

camouflage and enrich their meanings. Guitar songs, however, use Western stanzas and tunes from Western or commercial music. Traditional songs have a distinctive stanza organization and rely upon traditional tunes and composition formats.

Guitar songs are associated with the life of young unmarried males and females. When a person marries, he or she usually stops composing and playing the guitar. Even many of the best Sikaiana composers stopped playing after their marriages. Some older people do not approve of guitar songs. Several times older people questioned my interest in modern songs by describing them as *mea pio*, 'false or silly things' (closest to the English, 'bullshit'). Adults often complain about the comparatively lax sexual morality of younger people and attribute this, in part, to the *hula* dances that provide opportunities for physical contact between young men and women. When we were working on the language, Kilatu often complained to me that the lyrics for many of the guitar songs were "incorrect" in their use of Sikaiana words and grammar. Guitar songs, nevertheless, like popular music in the United States, express important themes in Sikaiana life. Moreover, since the 1960s, they have been an important expressive medium for every Sikaiana generation.

Throughout 1981, I had made a point of collecting guitar songs, recording them, transcribing them, and whenever possible talking to their composers to learn about the song's meanings. In late 1981, Duke Laupa arrived on Sikaiana to spend his holidays. Duke is recognized by the Sikaiana as one of their most accomplished composers. Unlike most composers, he was married at the time.

Many evenings during that month, Duke and a group of young men gathered to talk about ideas for songs, compose them and then memorize them. We met in the house of a young bachelor, James Sinahenu. Sinahenu, like many of Sikaiana's bachelors, lived in his separate house. Sometimes one or two other young men also stayed there. Almost every night, a group of five or six young men gathered to describe themes and then Duke would compose the tune and lyrics. It was during this time that I composed a song and Duke provided the tune. Some composers work out their lyrics first and then find a tune for them. Duke prefers to find the tune first and then compose the lyrics, although the song I composed with him was an exception.

At Duke's composition sessions in 1981, all the songs were composed to describe a specific event or incident. One young man described a romance which was opposed by his lover's parents. Duke composed lyrics to describe the incident. He composed another song, also based upon a real incident, that described the reconciliation of two brothers who had a long-standing feud. Finally, he composed a song which commemorated a young man's impending departure from Sikaiana. The songs were composed and rehearsed in secret; Duke wanted the first presentation of the songs to surprise everyone, especially the young women.

In explaining the themes of the songs which he composed, Duke was quite explicit about his intent. He composed songs about specific events which illustrated feelings and occurrences that were part of every Sikaiana person's experiences. Duke explained that, after hearing his songs, the Sikaiana people would recall times when they

had similar experiences to those described in the song. Duke, who was a high school graduate, told me that unlike Western societies, Sikaiana has no written history. Songs, he explained, served as Sikaiana's history of events.

### Themes in Guitar Songs

In Sikaiana guitar songs, there are several recurring themes: romance, separation, family ties, and ridicule for not following important social norms and values. Many songs combine several of these themes. Although Western institutions are important in present-day Sikaiana life, they are not important themes in these songs. Guitar music focuses on specific Sikaiana events and concerns.

There are some recurrent metaphors found in these songs. Rough seas, strong currents or high winds refer to adversity, and often the gossip and hostility of others. Another frequent metaphor describes the experience of being scattered or set adrift in the currents of the ocean. In a society which emphasizes social ties through kinship, association and exchange, such images of separation, isolation and lack of control are potent symbols for the breakdown of important social relationships. Sweet smelling fragrances, beautiful flower garlands, or attractive clothing are images which refer to happiness, friendship or romance.

Many of the songs are about romance. One of the first songs composed for the guitar, recorded on a tape collected by linguist Peter Sharples in 1967, describes the common feeling of shyness, *hakanapanapa*, many Sikaiana men experience when making advances to a woman. The prose is simple and repetitive. Admittedly, I am not good with tunes, but this tune is the same as the American song, "She's Coming Around the Mountain." The first two verses describe the woman's beauty. In verse three, the woman is going to work in the gardens. This is an opportunity for the young man to make his advances. But, alas, he is too shy.

The woman I love is nearby, nearby  
The woman I love is nearby, nearby

Her skin is fair, her hair is black  
The woman I love is nearby, nearby

She is going out to work in the taro gardens  
She is going out to work in the taro gardens

I am afraid, I am afraid to approach her  
The woman I love is nearby, nearby

Sikaiana parents prefer that their children marry another Sikaiana person. In part, this preference reflects a desire to maintain their cultural traditions. Marriage into non-Sikaiana groups, especially for a woman, will involve major adjustments to a

different culture. It often results in some isolation and separation from other Sikaiana. But in Honiara, many young Sikaiana people meet and fall in love with people from other ethnic groups. The following song describes this opposition to marrying non-Sikaiana. The first two stanzas present the viewpoint of a young woman's parents and other conservative Sikaiana: a daughter is criticized for wanting to marry a Melanesian. The Melanesian, whose skin color is darker than the Polynesian Sikaiana, is described by metaphor as a "black lizard." In the last line, however, the song's composer shifts perspective and presents the viewpoint of the young woman. She is explaining to her relatives that they will benefit from the marriage.

Mother, instruct your child  
To obey you  
So she will understand  
Why we are ashamed of her.

Your proper Sikaiana husband has been left by you  
Because of your desire for the black lizard.  
Your mother is sad as a result of your behavior  
Which is different from the other women of Sikaiana.

The daughter's reply:

Mother, Guardian, this will be for your well-being.  
Don't try to dominate me.  
I will go to seek a new place  
For us at the best place in Honiara.

Separation is also a common theme in love songs. There is separation on the atoll because young men and women cannot be seen together in public and must arrange their meetings secretly. There is also separation because many romances are conducted over extended periods of time and the lovers become separated by hundreds of miles as they and their families move around the Solomon Islands. The next song was composed by Sikaiana's young women for a lover who is living far away.

I sleep every night  
And I always dream about you.  
Please come back to me  
Lest you forget me.

When sleeping, I always cry to you,  
My spirit searches for you.  
Please come back to me  
Lest you forget me.

When I sleep in the evening,  
Your name is not forgotten by me.  
Please come back to me

Lest you forget me.

Young men often feel loneliness when they are away from other Sikaiana while working or studying in school. The following song was composed by some young men and describes this feeling of loneliness at being separated from Sikaiana. Several young men who matured in the 1970s talked about this song with special poignancy. In the first stanza, a young man laments that he is forgotten by the people of his age during his sojourn abroad. Often times, Sikaiana residents send baskets of taro, *haahaa*, back to relatives living in Honiara. This variety of swamp taro is a favorite of the Sikaiana people and they prefer it to the taro grown in other parts of the Solomon Islands. In the second stanza, the young man asks his friends to recall their youthful playing during the school holidays at Muli Akau on Sikaiana.

Oh, The young man who lives abroad,  
There is no basket of taro sent to him  
Because you have forgotten him.  
He is forgotten by his friends on Sikaiana.

Remember the play of our youth  
During our school's vacation at Muli Akau.  
Nothing wrong ever happened  
In our youthful play.

Now you no longer see  
You have forgotten me  
In your hearts.

I will never forget you,  
Even though I live far away.  
I remember you, my friends,  
It is not possible for me to forget.

Since the early part of this century, separation has been part of Sikaiana life. The monthly arrival of the *Belama* to Sikaiana is a time of both excitement for reuniting with those arriving and sorrow for those who are separating. The next song is one of the most popular on Sikaiana. Although it was originally inspired as a result of a young man's love for a departing young woman, it has become a popular song known to all Sikaiana and often sung when a boat is departing. The song describes the time in the afternoon when a person paddles in a canoe out to the *Belama* shortly before its departure. This is indeed a sad moment for many Sikaiana, because family and lovers become separated. At the time that the boat is ready to depart from Sikaiana, canoes carry people out to say goodbye. Some people stay on the *Belama* to talk with relatives, perhaps make eyes with a loved one, and then jump off and swim to a waiting canoe when the boat starts pulling away from the reef.

Take me to go with you

So that we can go together  
 On the boat that has just arrived.  
 To go together will end my sorrow.

My friends do not feel pity for me  
 On account of my paddling and crying.  
 My sorrow will end and the time will come  
 When my love and I will reunite.

Tell me, my love, so that I will know  
 What time you will return.  
 So that I can prepare for you  
 When you are facing towards shore on your arrival.

Ridicule and criticism are common themes in guitar songs and many Sikaiana songs have nasty edges, often expressed in metaphors, which are highly critical of improper behavior. Some Sikaiana young men are notorious for "creeping," or "night-crawling", the practice of sneaking into a young woman's house at night and trying to have intercourse with her while she is asleep. The following lines are from a song which compares such young men to a storm which blows down houses.

The wind shakes  
 the heart of the island  
 It swirls around like a cyclone  
 that destroys houses

Concerns of kinship and family are frequent themes in the songs; most often these songs describe and lament the breakdown of these relations. In the following song, the composer complains that her family, which is angry at her, misunderstands her motivations and actions. The last stanza includes a common metaphor to describe isolation and loneliness.

What is my mother doing?  
 She misunderstands me.  
 She does not follow those very teachings  
 Which she gave to me.

There is so much gossip about me.  
 Why do you believe such rubbish?  
 I can't understand how.

You left to live with your sister,  
 Leaving your true child  
 To be blown around like the wind.

Most men told me that they feel most comfortable and friendly, not with their

natal brothers, but instead with their cousins. There are several reasons for this. Sikaiana is an egalitarian society, but the oldest brother is often considered to be the leader of his natal siblings. Younger brothers often want to assert their independence and equality. Moreover, natal brothers feel responsible for one another's proper conduct. Brothers are closely allied in their projects and usually mutually supportive, but in one another's presence, they may behave in a manner that is reserved. The following song is an admonition from an older brother to his younger brother about proper behavior. This is a very popular song, especially among the people who matured during the late 60s and early 70s.

Watch carefully my brother  
 Lest you make any mistakes,  
 Because the people of Sikaiana watch for those  
 Who treat their people well.  
 Do the things that are good for the people  
 So that you will have a good reputation.  
 No matter what kind of person you are,  
 Just make sure that your reputation is good.

Do not desire for everything.  
 Material things don't last.  
 The two of us will live only for happiness  
 For as long as we live in this world.

The final song is one of my favorites. Although most Sikaiana knew it and performed it when I requested them to do so, it was less popular than other departure songs. But the following verse summarize many of my feelings toward my own stay with the Sikaiana.

Sorry, my people  
 The time has arrived;  
 There is nothing that can be done-- I must leave.

I will remember  
 How you helped me  
 During my stay here.

Forget  
 The things that I did wrong;  
 Your teachings remain in my heart.

I recall all  
 Your kindness.  
 We must say good-bye.

Although they use borrowed tunes and are a recent genre, guitar songs are an activity which supports a distinctive Sikaiana identity. They describe specific Sikaiana

events and people in terms of Sikaiana values. Moreover, all songs are composed in the Sikaiana vernacular, never Pijin. Younger men claim that, in casual speech with one another, they prefer to speak in Pijin rather than in the vernacular. Nevertheless, they always compose in the vernacular. By composing in the vernacular the audience for the songs is limited, excluding non-Sikaiana people who would understand songs composed in Pijin. Although the songs use Western music and accompany Western style dancing, they remain directed to the Sikaiana people.

### **Song, Dance and Community Identity**

When I first arrived on Sikaiana in November 1980, several of the mature men organized special sessions in which the atoll's young men, who were often described as hopelessly indolent, were taught traditional dances and songs. These songs were then performed as part of the holiday ceremonies accompanying Saint Andrew's Day in November and then during Christmas. Fearing that Sikaiana traditions were being forgotten and supplanted by guitar music and *hula* dancing, older men led these sessions. (My arrival and interest in traditional culture may have been another stimulus.) Although many young men attended these sessions, they preferred to play the guitar or listen to Western pop music on their tape recorders.

There were several other revivals of traditional song performances. In November 1981, most of the atoll's population participated in the *puina* described in chapter VII and it was a frequent topic of conversation and interaction for several weeks. In 1982, Solomon Mamaloni, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, decided to take a tour of the different provinces and localities in the Solomon Islands. The trip to Sikaiana is a long one and Sikaiana is one of the smallest and most remote places in the Solomon Islands. The Sikaiana prepared to greet him with ceremonies, dances and a feast. They decided to perform several of their traditional rituals for him, including certain parts of the *Teika Llee* and the *Kaitae Hakateletele*.

The *Teika Llee*, literally meaning the 'fish flies,' was performed in traditional Sikaiana society when a very large fish or whale washed ashore on the reef. According to Fane, this fish represented the anger of a spirit of the sea, *Aliki Moana* (literally, 'ruler of the seas'). The fish brought disease and harm unless it was ritually purified. When the fish was found on the reef, everyone stopped working for several days. They performed a series of dances, songs and ritual activities while bringing the fish ashore and purifying it.

The *Kaitae Hakatele* was performed whenever the chief felt that the central spirit house, *Hale Aitu*, had to be rebuilt. Inside the spirit house were the wooden statues of the atoll's founder heroes. Periodically these statues, along with the mats in the spirit house, had to be replaced because they were beginning to rot. These occasions, which Fane and elder people described as times of great excitement, were accompanied by dancing and chants.

Following their conversion to Christianity, neither ritual was performed as part of

a religious ceremony. The Sikaiana, however, had re-enacted the ceremonies for visiting dignitaries, such as the Resident Commissioner when the Solomon Islands was still a British Protectorate. These re-enactments were meant to be displays of Sikaiana traditions or *kastom* and were performed for the amusement of the visitors. The Sikaiana rehearsed for several weeks before the Prime Minister's arrival. Their performance for him combined elements of both the *Teika Llee* and the *Kaitae Hakatele*, although in traditional Sikaiana society they were completely different ceremonies.

The performance of these songs, dances and activities reflects an important change in Sikaiana social life. Activities that were formerly displays of commitment to the atoll's pagan spirits are redefined and recontextualized to be displays of commitment to a separate ethnicity in a modernizing multi-cultural nation. The sacred rituals of former times are now rites of community and ethnic identity which are displayed to foreign dignitaries.

When I returned to the Solomon Islands in 1987, I expected that the performance of traditional songs would be rare. It had been difficult to perform the *Kaitae Hakatele* in 1982. Fane and several other older women had to straighten out the wording and explain the proper activities which accompanied the songs and chants. By 1987 all these knowledgeable women had passed away. During my stay in 1980-83, young men did not seem to be interested in learning traditional songs. The composition of traditional songs, such as those at the *puina*, is rare and given the lack of expertise in composition forms may not recur.

In 1987 the Sikaiana residents of Honiara were practicing and performing dances. Often, they perform the dances at Sikaiana weddings or fundraising events. Other times, they perform at special dance festivals which include presentations by different ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands. Most of the songs and dances they perform are those learned by their fathers and grandfathers who worked on boats during their travels to other Polynesian islands. The Sikaiana find these dances more pleasing than some of their own dances. These introduced dances are described by the Sikaiana as "*kastom*," the term which refers to customary or traditional practices.

Some readers, including perhaps some anthropologists, will consider these borrowings to be examples of how Sikaiana culture has disintegrated as a result of culture contact. I completely disagree. The performance of these songs is every bit as authentic as the incorporation of Scotch fiddling into American folk songs, or American Negro spiritual music via blues into the performances by rock groups. As I mentioned in describing the development of guitar music, the Sikaiana have always been willing to incorporate another culture's songs and dances. Traditionally and still at present, they value the novelty of new dances and songs.

The context for song and dance performances is undergoing a transformation. Many songs, dances, and ritual ceremonies are now being performed for outsiders as representations of traditional Sikaiana culture. In former times, when Sikaiana was isolated, the songs and dances associated with traditional rituals were performed to

communicate with Sikaiana spirits. The encapsulated world of Sikaiana as an isolated atoll, however, no longer exists. Over the last 60 years Sikaiana has become part of a much larger social system. In the multi-cultural setting of the Solomon Islands with over 60 different major linguistic and ethnic groups, Sikaiana ethnicity and cultural identity are expressed through the performance of the songs and dances which were formerly part of their ritual life. Moreover, songs and dances learned by the Sikaiana during this century (20<sup>th</sup>) are now performed as displays or emblems of Sikaiana ethnicity both at Sikaiana events and for multi-cultural audiences.

### **Song Styles and Social Change**

The forces of regional and international integration are ever present in contemporary Sikaiana social life. Most Sikaiana people own, or have access to, cassette recorders and radios. Sometimes, cassette recorders are used to tape and send guitar song recordings to relatives and friends living in other parts of the Solomon Islands. Cassette players also are used to play commercial folk and rock music which is recorded in Australia, Britain and the United States and which is distributed throughout the world. This international and commercial music is also quite popular among the Sikaiana.

There are several inter-related processes in Sikaiana song performances which are defining Sikaiana identity both within the community and to outsiders. At the performances for the visit of the Prime Minister, pieces of traditional ritual are taken out of their former religious context and redefined to be used as a way to display a Sikaiana identity to outsiders. These "*kastom*" songs represent the indigenous Sikaiana to the outside world. They also contribute to a sense of Sikaiana identity in a multi-cultural setting and are an integral part of the activities of emigrants in Honiara and their sports association. Finally, Sikaiana guitar music is the result of a related process but with a different result: outside traditions are being incorporated into traditional ones to create a musical genre which is distinctively indigenous. The guitar songs discuss Sikaiana persons and events, and then explain them in terms of Sikaiana values. It is significant that none of the guitar songs discuss employment or schooling, except as reasons for people becoming separated. And it is also very significant that they are composed in the vernacular by people who describe themselves as more comfortable speaking Pijin: their choice of language limits their audience to Sikaiana people. Guitar songs, although borrowing from Western musical styles, have become a Sikaiana musical genre. Like so much else about modern day Sikaiana life, it is indigenous, although not necessarily traditional.

Several different musical styles compete on Sikaiana, each representing different processes of culture change and assimilation. Traditional composition style, such as the songs performed at the *puina*, is fading, and may not survive for another generation. Composition for the guitar is a very strong expressive form among young people. But it is possible that eventually this hybrid style of composition will be replaced by a preference for Western rock and folk music cassettes played on recorders and heard on the radio. <sup>iii</sup>

Western rock singers (from Elvis Presley to Madonna) croon about romance, family ties, and separation. They (or their songwriters) compose lyrics from personal experiences that also appeal to the general experiences shared by others. But when we hear their songs, we share only the general experience, we usually have no knowledge of the individuals involved. As long as Sikaiana continue to compose their guitar songs, the audience often knows the personalities and events being described. In their guitar songs, the Sikaiana are not only consumers of music; they are also its producers. Intimacy and personal knowledge, which were embedded in the traditional funeral laments and in the metaphors in the traditional song festivals, are still expressed in the guitar songs.

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i. Sikaiana songs are discussed in several of my papers including (Donner 1987, 1989, and 1992b). Other papers about the importance of music and change in Polynesian societies include Elbert (1967), Monberg (1974) and a volume edited by Nero (1992).

ii The songs are translated by me from the Sikaiana.

iii. In 1993, I had the strong impression that guitar music was no longer so popular among the present *lautama*, group of marriage-age adolescents. **Without sufficient knowledge of the Sikaiana language, it seems unlikely that guitar songs are being composed at this present time (2020), although, again, see the incorporation of guitar songs into present-day social media:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RICKLvQQjwA>