POETRY AS CODED MESSAGES:  
THE KANANGA OF BELLONA ISLAND

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This paper concerns a type of epigrammatic song from Bellona Island, a Polynesian outlier island in the Solomon Islands. The purpose of the presentation is not merely to preserve a body of ethnographic data, but also to show how one society has made use of poetry as a means of sending coded messages that may remain cryptic or be decoded according to specific situations. The songs are brief in their form but rich in meaning and have wide social implications. Their presentation may offer an example of how much can be transmitted in very few words; how apparent brevity and obscurity can be used to channel a specific message from its source direct to selected receivers in somewhat the same way as people in Western cultures transmit coded messages through telegrams or letters.

As an anthropologist, one cannot help feeling some compassion for scholars who struggle with the understanding of content and meaning of written texts sometimes more than a millennium old and from cultures long extinct. The data presented in this paper may show how easy it is to make generalisations about the apparent contents of text even though the intended meaning is quite different from the one which may appear overtly.

Before presenting the messages it may be necessary to mention the difficulties in obtaining the songs and the interpretations of them. For reasons stated below, the Bellonese were hesitant to reveal the contents of poetry now banned by the adherents of the Christian sects which spiritually rule the island (The Seventh Day Adventists and the South Seas Evangelical Church). The little coded messages are nowadays considered "sinful" and "improper" by the Christians, and as far as we could ascertain are no longer composed. Our informants were extremely reluctant to give us the body of texts and explanations necessary for a deeper understanding of these songs. However, four good friends, three men and one woman, agreed to co-operate as informants — on condition that no names were mentioned when the songs were published. I have, in this paper, naturally submitted to these conditions. The texts have been checked with informants other than the teller.

1. Further data on Rennell and Bellona may be found in Elbert and Monberg 1965.
Informants' hesitance may have been proof of the fact that these songs were actually messages in which secrecy is sometimes of importance. I shall deal with this problem now.

**COMPOSITION AND TRANSMISSION**

*Kananga* was the technical term for these little epigrammatic songs. To sing them was called to *ose*. The *kananga* was short and sometimes consisted of one single sentence. Linguistically, the Bellonese distinguished between such forms as: *te kananga kia X* (the *kananga* composed for *X*), and *te kananga o Y* (the *kananga* composed by *Y*). Most commonly, *kananga* were composed by single individuals on specific occasions, as shown below. Unlike songs composed for and sung at more formal occasions such as ritual feasts, the *kananga* belonged within the secular sphere of Bellonese life.

*Kananga* appear to have been casual rather than formal, usually composed on the spur of a moment.

The Bellonese do not compose or sing *kananga* today as they are banned by the two powerful missions; it has therefore been impossible for us to observe directly the processes of their composition and transmission on Bellona, and we have had to rely solely on informants' explanations of the procedures. According to them, typical circumstances under which *kananga* were composed were, for example: A man has acquired a mistress. He wants to convey the message of their relationship, both confirming it to the woman herself, and to such persons who may not take offence. The purpose may be twofold: namely, to cement the alliance and to boast of it to others. This may also be a means of cementing it, although the Bellonese have never expressed this. When he has made his little song, the composer may sing it in the presence of certain friends or kinsmen (although never in front of a classificatory sister or a brother-in-law with whom relations are always very restricted). When people hear the song, the invariable question is: "Whose *kananga* are you singing?" The composer will then explain, and the song will be sung by the listener or listeners to others and gradually spread over the island and finally reach the woman's ears. The point is, however, that the cryptic form makes transmission possible in such a way that the message only reaches those ears for which it is destined, as one can always avoid explaining the content if unwanted listeners are present, such as, for example, the husband or wife of the two secret lovers. A *kananga* could thus wind its way through selected social channels even on a small island where people lived fairly close and where people were often quite well informed about each others' private lives.

When the song had reached the ears of the mistress of the composer, she would often react by composing a *kananga* in reply. Although we have collected a number of such sequences of songs, they cannot be published here, because at least one in a sequence always contains a play on personal names making their source recognisable on Bellona, at least to the composer, the person or persons to whom it was composed, and also to a considerable number of others. Thus publishing the songs is felt by the
Bellonese to endanger the present relationships of persons alive on the island.

But the kananga were not all signs of attraction between members of the opposite sexes. As we shall show in our examples below, they could be used to express a great variety of emotions. Apart from showing cross-sexual desires, the most common use of them seems to have been to express antagonism, sometimes merely through mild teasing, half jokingly, but often as downright insults. The question of why such insults should be expressed in such a subtle way has not been fully explored, and the Bellonese do not seem to have any straightforward answer to this question. A few tentative answers may be given. In the same way as cross-sexual desires were not always expressed through kananga, antagonism was not either. It could be shown in many different ways, from ranging the killing of an antagonist to mild face-to-face teasing; or to the composition of kananga. There might on Bellona, obviously, be situations in which one might want to show one’s antagonism from a distance, and also to hide one’s words from certain fellow islanders; for example, close kinsmen of the “enemy” to whom one oneself might be related as classificatory brother or sister, or as brother- or sister-in-law. It would be bad if they learned who was the source of such songs, at least in some situations. It may, for example, be obvious that a certain secrecy would be necessary if a man accused a woman of smelling badly, especially if she was married to somebody else. Marital jealousy was very marked on Bellona, and the revelation of such intimate knowledge about a woman might well create serious repercussions for the lover. Secrecy might also be called for if a person wanted to keep his taunts on the more personal level, rather than making them a public affair. In a sense, such kananga worked in the same way as did duels elsewhere, and in contrast with large-scale fights between entire lineages or districts.

As with kananga expressing desire, the ones acting as taunts were transmitted through individuals who had most commonly been informed of their meaning, their source, and destination. Listeners then passed the songs on until they finally reached their intended destination.

This was also the case with other types of kananga. Some were concerned with expressing emotions in general, and, as such, were not directed to any specific individual on the island or elsewhere. Nevertheless, some of the emotions contained in them obviously called for a certain secrecy or quasi-secrecy. This may have been the case in situations where people had been temporarily expelled from their churches because of alleged immoral behaviour, and announced that from them on they would revert to the sexual liberty which existed in pre-Christian days. Moreover, these songs may also have been a person’s way of inviting people of the opposite sex to approach him or her freely.

In some cases, we do not know why people expressed their emotions in the form of kananga. In the case of a person discovering his own image reflected in a pool and praising the gods for his own beauty, informants agreed that no secrecy was called for; they stated that the
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composer merely liked the style of kananga and therefore expressed himself in that way.

It has been mentioned above that a considerable number of kananga cannot be published because they contain names of people which are impossible to disguise properly. An example, invented for the occasion, could be a kananga of this type: “The canoe is dragged to sea encountering The Breaking Waves”, where the purpose of the first seven words merely would be to put the name of the desired one, “The Breaking Waves”, in a fairly meaningful context. This latter has been expressed by the Bellonese themselves, who say that it is common in kananga merely to make up a sentence in which the name of the desired one fits meaningfully. The kananga collected confirm this. Many names on Bellona are recognised as having a “meaning”, such as, for example, Te‘usinuku “the bluish/green abode of the gods”, Tengautango “The taro leaf”, Tango‘eha “many taros”, Sauhonu “The divine gift of turtles”.

TIME OF COMPOSITION

The kananga recorded were composed in the years either immediately before the advent of Christianity in 1938 or in the one and a half decades following that year. During the first period of Christianisation, the Bellonese had not been told of the “sinfulness” of these songs. Moreover, literacy was still not very widespread, and the kananga were thus still a convenient way of sending messages across the island. The white missionaries who visited the islands only once or twice a year, and the Melanesian missionaries occasionally stationed on the island, had no knowledge or interest in the language and culture and could not, therefore, have added kananga to the list of Christian sins. This was done later when some Bellonese had been trained as teachers and pastors at Mission stations overseas and returned to work on Bellona.

Although there were no social restrictions as to who could compose kananga, it seems obvious that some persons more than others liked to express themselves in this way. The Bellonese in general were great composers of songs; poetry played a very important part in their old culture, in contrast to the visual arts. Both men and women composed elaborate songs as well as the shorter kananga.

According to the Bellonese, there was free variations as to which tune to use in a kananga. One might even sing the same words to different tunes.

An example of a tune (kananga 34) is given here, as transcribed by Jane Rossen of the Danish Folklore Archives:

![Tune example](image-url)
The Bellonese distinguish as follows between different types of kananga:

1. Kananga expressing attraction between members of the opposite sexes (kananga hakanau).
2. Kananga, the object of which was to tease or make fun of somebody else (kananga babange).
3. Kananga as taunts or spells (kananga hakangau).
4. Kananga showing sorrow or mourning (kananga mangepe).
5. Kananga expressing compassion or pity (kananga haka'aangoha).
6. Kananga honouring the looks or behaviour of somebody else or of oneself (kananga haka'eha'eha).

This system of classification is obviously not very rigid. For example, a song expressing one's desire for a person of the opposite sex might at the same time honour his or her own looks or behaviour. Likewise, a song expressing sorrow may also express compassion or pity. The examples given below will show this.

### Intelligibility and Coding

Intelligibility of the kananga seems to involve problems on several levels. For the researcher who may to some extent master the language and who is able to translate a kananga word for word, its meaning is at least partly intelligible. The crucial question is, however, whether the meaning which he or she extracts from it has anything at all to do with its intended meaning. The point is that even to the persons who, as do Bellonese, of course, "live and breathe" by means of their language, kananga need explanations. To exemplify this we may examine one of the little songs in different ways; firstly, we shall give a text plus its word-for-word translation. Secondly, we shall present a free translation as it may be viewed by the Bellonese outsider who hears it, but who has not been given the actual code to the song. Thirdly, we shall comment on the song as it would appear for a person who knows what it is about:

(a) **The scientist** hears this:

\[
\text{Manga kai ake ma'aunimasi,} \\
\text{Noka tau kake tai toiko!}
\]

Just eat for you some pudding, Don't you climb, lest [you] fall down!

(b) **The relatively uninformed Bellonese** hears the same song. He or she knows what the subject is and is thus able to make a proper interpretation of it on a certain level:

Content yourself with eating the pudding made by others from the ngeemungi (Santiria apiculata) fruits, picked when climbing high trees and hoisted down as whole branches with fruits to be prepared. Because I desire you, I do not want
you to climb the trees with the danger of falling down during this dangerous undertaking.

(c) The person or persons informed about the actual circumstances would know who composed this song to whom and why; thus also knowing that the female composer was addressing her kananga to a certain man whom she desired and whom she did not want to be injured and killed from venturing upon this dangerous task.

In the case of this song, the informants were apparently ignorant about who the female composer was and to whom it was composed. (Since homosexuality was claimed not to exist we know that the composer was a female because women don’t climb trees — or didn’t.) They could thus tell neither whether the song referred to a specific situation nor what the social consequences of its composition were. Their relation to the kananga was the same as that of any other Bellonese mentioned under 2. above.

The coding process of these songs lies in the fact that they do not spell out the names of both parties between whom the messages are sent, but only of one of them. Also they are sometimes coded in the sense that only the composer, the recipient, and others informed may understand the exact circumstances to which they refer.

To understand a kananga, the majority of people thus need not only the song, but also a verbal explanation of what it refers to; and this explanation is given only to the restricted few who may be allowed to know it in order that certain social aims can be fulfilled.

The songs are thus a way of manipulating the restriction on information on the island. Through them one can send a message without endangering certain social relations. Conversely, the song may have the express purpose of exacerbating certain relations, but not others.

DATA ON KANANGA

As mentioned, the majority of songs are concerned with emotional/sexual desires. Two individuals may express their feelings towards one another through kananga.

1. *Toku hata kua sopo kinai*
   
   *a S . . .
   
   Noka ka maokeoke!*

   S . . . comes to my shelf-house.
   
   Don’t make (it) shake!

   The name of the mistress has been omitted, but the song is still fairly easy to understand. The male composer has had a nightly visitor, probably the wife of another man; he does not wish all of Bellona to know about his affairs. What could be worse if his house in the little village shook during their love-making? Yet, what could be better for him than to publicise his conquest, perhaps even making other men envious!

2. *Toku kasanga mai ia M . . ., pipiki aano taakomokomo.*

   *Hatingeboo, hatingeboo
   
   ki roku tobigho!*

   My earring given me by M . . ., (I) kept it and then broke it to pieces.

   Broke it — oh, broke it — oh, into my private parts!
TORBEN MONBERG

This tragic incident, sung out by a woman, tells about a man who promised to marry her. The girl kept his present, an earring. Soon after she learned that the man had acquired a mistress. She then broke the earring and — in an act of disgust — claims to have inserted its fractured pieces into her private parts. This latter is perhaps the worst possible insult on Bellona. The nature of the insult is explained by the pre-Christian practice of magic in which a woman would wrap a stick or another object named after her male enemy into a piece of barkcloth stained by the discharges of the menes, knowing that this would nauseate the supernaturals, who would then punish the man.

   Poo hitu te mata ki te anga.
   M . . . has cheated me.
   For seven days I have been looking down the trail.

This girl wails out her disappointment about the man who has not come to sleep with her for seven days. The song is an attempt to get him back. We do not know whether she was successful.

4. Kua tenge ngoa a Ghongoghaba,
   omaa kungo ghaasi ma S . . . .
   Ghongoghaba point reaches out, this is where S . . . and I went diving for fish.

Geographical reference seem to be key words for identification of the relationship between two persons. This kananga is composed by a married woman to the husband of another woman. It simply refers to their meeting place when they both went fishing at a point on the coast of Bellona. When the song reached the lover’s ears — and the reference was not understood by his wife — it is said that he became very grateful for it, and that he considered it a sign of the woman’s affection.

5. Manga noho o mata ki moana.
   Sahe mu'a ngaa he baka;
   ngua henua kaa hengongo.
   (I) just sit looking at the ocean.
   Because a ship arrives;
   two lands will exchange news.

Perhaps less cryptic than most kananga, this was composed by a woman whose husband had been away, working on another island in the Solomons, for several years. The song expresses her hopes, but also her fears, that he may have changed so much that when they meet it may be like strangers from two different cultures (“lands”) meeting.

The same woman composed the following song under the same circumstances:

6. Tutahi atu i ‘atu henua!
   ’Ai e songo te tuku pake.
   Always in distant lands!
   Indeed it is bad to make false promises.

Although she had written to her husband many times, asking him to return to his island, and although he had promised her to return, he had not yet come. This song is her complaint. (Incidentally, when he finally returned, the husband found that she had befriended other men on the island and as a result of this they parted forever).

7. Tongi hakanau ki Rennell:
   Hoki mai take nga tu na ngenge!
   Longingly I cry towards Rennell:
   Return my dove that flew away!
This is another example of a kananga expressing a woman's yearning for a man who has left Bellona to go to the neighbouring island, Rennell. She likens him to a dove.

8. **Manga boo atu ma te ngiu mai!** Go away, but return!  
   **E songo te tutahi o boo!** It is bad to leave forever!

Even within the small island itself, spatial separation of two persons desiring one another presents problems. Interaction between the districts was scant, especially in the days before the Second World War when the island was plagued by incessant internal fights between districts and lineages. This kananga was composed by a woman whose lover had left to live in the neighbouring district, less than one hour's easy walk from where she lived. She complains about his absence and, through the song, urges him to come back to her.

9. **Sole tuu masi; ko tinau e hoki bangiaghe!** (I) stay (here, and I) am so sad, because my mother has gone back eastward.

This little kananga is a curious example of human relationships. The composer, a man from the Western district of the island, complains that his mistress, who has for some time lived close to him, has returned eastward to the middle district to join her own husband! It will be noted that he refers to her as "my (classificatory) mother". In fact, the mother of the composer belonged to the same lineage as the woman to whom the song was composed. This made their relationship incestuous in Bellona terms, but nevertheless the man does not mind making their relationship public, probably because it was common knowledge on the island anyway. **Sole tuu masi** is the Bellonese way of writing the pidgin phrase "Sorry too much". In the early days of contact with the outside world, knowledge of pidgin English was only scant, and the use of words from this language apparently added to the cryptic flavour of a kananga.

10. **Noho te anga tungei ki bangiaghe.** (Here) lies the trail, turning to the east.

This kananga was composed by a man who was in love with a married woman:

A trail leading up from the coast forks. One leads to the composer's homestead towards the west, the other to the homestead of the desired woman. In a free translation, the meaning of the kananga is: "When I walk up inland from the coast, I take the eastern trail leading to where you are, rather than turning westward to my own house". Informants said that the kananga was composed in a particularly cryptic way so that the desired woman's husband would not understand it.

11. **Kua tenge ngoa a Solomone.** The Solomons extend in a distant line.  
   **Manga iai taku selekae.** That is where my selekæ tern is.

This kananga was composed by a young man who had been to a mission school in the Western Solomons and had there befriended a Melanesian
girl. During a visit to Bellona, he stood at the top of the coral rim surrounding the island and caught a glimpse of Guadalcanal rising above the horizon. This provoked him to compose a song to and about the girl he had left. He likened her to a white tern, allegedly called *selekae* in the (Melanesian) language of Marovo.

12. *Sungusungu oku ngau niu kehu*  
*tenge hakahingo te 'angoha.*  
I plait my *kehu* coconut leaves,  
compassion runs through it as a pattern.

This *kananga* was composed by a woman to a man whose name contained the word *kehu*. The song is a play on his name. *Kehu* is a colour term used only for a certain type of coconut with somewhat orange-coloured nuts. In her “poetic” way she expresses her desire for him.

13. *'Uaikapu o sitanibae*  
i *te gholaoba tatangi paolo!*  
Wake up and stand by  
at the time when the roosters crow!

From this and a number of the following *kananga* it will be evident that the use of recently introduced English phrases plays a part in conveying messages. This song was composed probably by a lover to his mistress or vice versa (informants are uncertain). It tells her to be ready for a meeting and love-making in the very early morning when they can be together unseen by others.

14. *Ou mata ma kongaa na noho te*  
kunga sungu kinai te nga'oo.  
Your eyes are like a place  
shined upon by the sun-oo.

Praise of the appearance of one’s female partner in love is uncommon, but can occur, as in this song, the meaning of which seems obvious.

15. *Te poo ‘attua*  
te *mangiko ngua,*  
e ‘ao ghali  
tetaa poo ta’e!  
A bad night  
is the night of the full moon,  
dawn comes fast  
in our messed-up night.

This delightful little *kananga* was composed by an (unmarried) woman to her (unmarried) lover. She complains about the brevity of the night destined for their love-making (later they got married). *Mess* (*ta’e;* literally “faeces”) is a common expression for something bad and undesired.

(Men of ) Ngango district have much hair.  
*Ahe te matangi mai ngango, ua.*  
The wind blows here from the west, *ua.*

The female composer praises the long hair of men in the Western (Ngango) district. (She has one particular person in mind!). When the wind blows her way towards the east of the island, it sends him to her with his thick and long hair flowing in the wind, which arouses her admiration and desire.

17. *Nimaa sahe ni laisi unga*  
te *Nemusongo kua lae.*  
When some brown rice drifted here, the “Nemusongo” had sunk.
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The following is the background for this kananga: In 1942, a ship, allegedly bearing the name “Nemusongo” or “Namesong”, arrived at Bellona with the news that the capital of the Solomons, Tulagi, had been bombed. The Melanesian crew members befriended a number of Bellonese girls. Among the girls was the composer of this song. The ship left, and later during the war cases with provisions including brown rice and meat were found on the beach at Bellona, having drifted ashore. This reminded the woman of the brown rice which she had seen on board the “Nemusongo”. She expresses her yearning for the crew members by assuming that the goods which drifted to the island are remains from the sunken ship, i.e. the ship which she misses. The word lae is pidgin for “died”, “dead”, or “sunk”, as a ship.

18. Kite ake ai: “Halloo Tiou!”
   Pangungu te baka hai ngongo.
   Discover (my): “Hello Joe!”
   The ship with news is faintly heard coming.

A lover sends his mistress the message that when he approaches her secretly in the dark night he will say “Halloo Joe”, thus revealing his presence in the same manner as a ship through its engine noise when approaching the island.

19. Hai ange ke haka’aangoha
   te ngaungau pahati.
   It’s certainly necessary to pity sexual chases kept in the heart.

In a sense this kananga constitutes a neat transition to the next type of song, expressing contempt. The female composer mildly ridicules a prospective lover who has shown signs of desire for her but never actually approached her physically. Obviously, her complaint is that he did not do so. The song is a mixture of desire and of mild contempt. The word pahati is a loan word from English: “by heart”, but with a slight semantic change towards “inwardness”, “secrecy”.

Kananga are also used to express disrespect, contempt, or to ridicule opponents:

20. Manga noho, usu maanatu
    kia pulisiteisini e mama’o.
    (She) is just here, extending (her) thoughts to the distant police station.

The composer is unknown, but the making up of this song is said to be a group enterprise of a number of women on the island, ridiculing (and perhaps envying) a girl who had lived in the present capital of the Solomons, Honiara, when she was still unmarried. During this period she was mistress to men at the local police station. When she returned to Bellona, her co-sisters composed this song taunting her about her feelings.

21. Oe mokota’a!
    Noka te kolosapu maioie!
    You smell badly!
    Don’t come near to me!

Although the name of the male composer is known, we do not know the name of the girl, or girls, to whom he composed this taunting song. As may be seen from some of the preceding songs, the Bellonese nurture an unusual, almost frantic, disgust for bad smells. The text is almost entirely of loan words: Mokota’a is claimed by the Bellonese to be a Malaita word for bad smells. Oe corresponds to the Bellonese kokoë,
“you” (singular). Kolosapu is a loan word from pidgin English “close up”. The composer wishes to convey the message to a few girls that during intercourse they smell badly, and are thus objects of contempt.

22. Kau putai songo kinai: I’m making dirty jokes about them:

*Hano te simele ki te simele!* The smell approaches the smell!

The exact circumstances of the composition of this *kananga* are unknown. Although we know who the composer is, it has been impossible to question him about its background (people are reluctant to talk about their own *kananga*). Others, however, say that it was composed about a couple married or just lovers in another district, enemies of the composer.

23. *Tuhahine oku ha’anga.* My cross-cousins act as if we were brothers and sisters.

*Te nunu ki te bao nguna mae.* (They) rub themselves against withered Morinda citrifolia trees.

This *kananga* is composed by a woman who complains bitterly that her cross-cousins with whom she is socially allowed to have sexual relations act as if she were their classificatory sister with whom any kind of sexual relationship would be deemed incestuous. Instead, they have relations with other girls whom she likens to withered Morinda citrifolia trees, considered very ugly by the Bellonese. This is distinctly a *kananga* expressing envy!

24. *Ko au manga tuutuu songo* I (have come to) smell badly

*t i te hakapapata ’anga omaa pito!* because our navels (were) close!

This is another example of Bellonese obsession with bad smells. The male composer shows his disrespect for a girl with whom he has had intercourse, by claiming that he has come to smell of human excretions during their intercourse. This is one of the worst insults that one can make up towards a person of the opposite sex on Bellona.

25. *Te baka na sahe i Mangokuna,* The canoe arrived at Mangokuna point.

*mene te ’unga, ngenge te tigho.* The hermit crab sank, the kingfisher flew.

Another *kananga* which may seem cryptic to outsiders. It refers to an animal story concerning a competition between the kingfisher and the hermit crab. The woman, towards whom the composer shows his disrespect, is likened to the hermit crab which may sink to the bottom of the ocean because it is not used to swimming in the sea. The meaning is that the woman, like the crab, is not used to swimming and thus doesn’t wash herself; for this reason she smells badly.

26. *Putatai mai ki te solo* The young (girls) who have

*a te ’atu take poo ngu!* been a sexual target for two nights in succession, (even) make fun of the salt-water district!

This is another *kananga* concerning bodily odours. The composer ridicules the young girls from the middle district of the island, who have
talked with scorn of the Western district from which there is the easiest access to the sea and to bathing. Hence it is here called the salt-water district: solo, from English “salt”. Another loan word is take: English “target”. Girls who have frequent intercourse ought, in the opinion of the composer, to bathe frequently. To make this kananga intelligible it has been necessary to give a rather elaborate translation.

27. Putatai ki te hai tama. You make fun of (my) pregnancy.

Binu ake te bai ha'enge! Drink the foetal water!

This kananga is an insult and a rejoinder composed by a woman who has become pregnant out of wedlock, and towards a man who has made fun about her situation, as children born out of wedlock have a low social status on Bellona. To suggest that the man should in any way come in contact with the excreta of women giving birth is perhaps even worse than the previous mentioning of bodily odours. In a sense, one might term it a profane spell. By the mere words, the man becomes unclean. No informants know how the insulted man reacted to this kananga.

28. 'Ai he'e te ngongo, Not because of an invitation,
  ka manga usukese, (he) came uninvited and was
  toe hano. Teenga tono hano. left out. Thus he left.

The composer, a woman, likens a man who has unsuccessfully approached her with the intention of making love to a person who comes uninvited to a feast and is therefore not given any portion of the food distributed. On Bellona such a situation was considered extremely humiliating. By this little allegory the woman ridicule the unsuccessful lover.

29. Kohea o'outou matu'a, Where are your husbands,
  biki ai ki to'oku matu'a? since you sing my husband's praise?

In a kananga (which cannot be given here as it contains a play on a personal name) a couple of women expressed their desire for a certain married man. The wife of the latter, who was reportedly a very jealous woman, reacted by composing the kananga above. Although the song itself may not be considered very cryptic, its “coding” lies in the fact that no actual names are mentioned.

As mentioned, kananga may also be composed about a general situation, good or bad, and is thus not always directed towards somebody in person. In Bellonese minds, the short form of a kananga is an adequate means of expressing sudden emotional outbursts:

30. Te me'a ngaoi te malete Marriage is good;
  kae ngoungata'a te ama! the outrigger wavers slightly!

The composer of this kananga is now dead, and it was impossible to obtain information about the exact circumstances which prompted this little song. Europeans may easily recognise the composer's feelings although they are here expressed in Polynesian terminology: Marriage requires a straight course; but it is often difficult to steer properly because the construction of the outrigger may lead the canoe astray! No doubt
this kananga has been influenced by the introduction of Christian teachings about marital faithfulness. Such a thing was less well known in pre-Christian days. Malete is Bellona-pidgin for English “marriage”.

31. Kua saki 'ia i te songinga.

Ngenge au ki te lolou aano . . .

I have been expelled from church services. So I’ll leap back to attracting men (in the traditional way . . .).

The composer, a woman, has been “censored” (she used the pidgin loan “sacked”) from the church, because she had had relations with one or more men to whom she was not married. In this kananga she expresses her anger and says that she will now return to the pre-Christian ways of attracting men — an act obnoxious to members of the New Faith. Lolou is, according to informants, a Melanesian (?) loan word for “attracting men”. On Bellona this was done by showing one’s leg tattooings, blowing a flute in front of the desired man’s homestead, or by presenting the prospective lover with gifts.

32. Kua saki 'ia he’e tau tungi.

‘Umi taku baabii samunga.

I have been sacked without reason.

I’ll suck off the embittered fruit flesh.

Although this kananga sounds very obscure to us, its meaning is obvious, at least to members of the middle-aged generation on Bellona. The composer has been “censored” from the church, because of extramarital relations, or as he claims himself, without any reason. For this allegedly unjust act he takes revenge in a shrewd way: According to Bellonese beliefs the flesh of the very important fruit ngeemungi (Santiria apiculata) becomes bitter, and thus inedible, if anyone among friends or kinsmen of the picker of the fruit has sexual intercourse during the period of harvesting. As the composer has already been accused of adultery, he announces that he will take revenge by continuing to have extramarital relationships even during the period of ngeemungi harvesting, and in order that those who have expelled him from the church may not have the pleasure of a good and delectable harvest! (One may easily imagine the difficulties encountered by scholars having to interpret a similar song written centuries ago, and without knowing its cultural context!)

33. Te tangatupu'a nei, si'ai!

This traditional story; no indeed!

Ee aa ngaa? He’e masegho! What about it? Not ruined!

This kananga, composed by an unknown man, is not directed to anybody in particular. However, it is a good example of what may happen during a period of acculturation and also of an individual’s attitude towards an existing belief. The background is closely linked to that of the one previously given (32). The composer has made love to a girl during the harvesting of the ngeemungi fruits. According to Bellonese beliefs, sexual intercourse during this period would make the fruits rancid, small, and inedible. His own experience is, however, that his love affair, which was a break of an old taboo has had no such effect on the quality of the
fruits. He wishes to convey this message to the entire population — but without mentioning names.

34. ‘Aue Tetonusanga, ‘ai tau manu nei e ngaoi, ko te bai i Ahea! Thank you, Tetonusanga, your creature here looks so fine in the pool in Ahea!

This is another example of a kananga composed by a person in praise of himself. The composer has had the opportunity to see his own reflection in a pool in a place called Ahea. In gratitude for what he has seen, he thanks one of the former Sky gods of Bellona, Tchainga’atua (whose name is also Tetonusanga) for his own fine appearance.

The data presented above may show that “codes” can be transmitted in the form of poetry, and with a number of different purposes: A person may wish to send a secret message to his or her lover; another one may want to humiliate or ridicule a rival or rival group. In this latter case, an apparent coding may be so easy to decipher that the composer acquires his subtle purpose, namely to transfer a message in apparent secrecy, yet making it easy for everybody else on the island to decipher — thus making the person to whom the song has been composed an object of ridicule.

The Bellonese kananga thus communicate messages which cannot be publicly or directly expressed in words or shown through acts. In a sense, the major communication is the song form of kananga itself. Just as in many other cultures, affection, self-appreciation, or sometimes even disgust or contempt are not matters suitable for public exhibition. Lovers, or married couples, for example, never show their feelings for each other in public places. In the presence of outsiders they will not exchange glances, let alone hold each other’s hands or utter endearing words. To do so would make not only the couple involved but also everybody else feel “very ashamed” (hu’aiapapa’a). The Bellonese bluntly characterise such behaviour as “to behave like dogs”. On Bellona, expression of strong feelings, be they good or bad, calls for privacy.

The form of the kananga and the way they are communicated serves the need for such private communication. Even at a distance, messages about love, disgust or hatred can be dispatched in such a cryptic or symbolic (hakangahi) way that if necessary, they, only reach the ears of those for whom they are destined. However, it seems likely that as time went by the kananga, or at least some of them, lost their original aura of secrecy and were sung by many islanders who enjoyed their aesthetic value and who perhaps also used them as a means of expressing their own feelings in contexts different from those under which they were originally composed.

KANANGA TODAY

As mentioned above, kananga are now deemed “sinful” on Bellona. Obviously this resolution cannot be blamed on the European missionaries who do not know the language of the island, let alone its culture, and who visit Bellona only once or twice every year. The ban must be a result of

2. I am grateful to Michael H. Lieber for drawing my attention to this aspect of the kananga.
local Christians' decisions. "Pastors" on the island have seen the contents of these songs as a sign of freedom in expression undesirable for people of the Christian faith.

The power of words is very strong, especially in places like Bellona. There one can do more harm or more good with a *kananga* — even physically — than people of Western cultures may perhaps imagine. If a *kananga* is composed as a spell it may have a deleterious effect on the person towards whom it is cast. Likewise, words of desire may bind people together much tighter than do words in Western cultures. When a new religion reaches an island with all its subtle moral codes it will necessarily affect the new adherents forcefully. After some decades, the Bellonese have accepted the Christian premise that their previous channels of communication are now sinful and terrible. For that reason, they have made an attempt to find new outlets for their emotions. It is my assumption that when certain outlets are barred by missionary sermons and pamphlets as were the *kananga*, people tend to find new outlets for feelings in order to find new modes of communicating the message to fellow islanders. Although *kananga* are now forbidden, people who want to express their emotion, and especially their sexual desires, their hates and their contempts, find other ways of doing so: Coconut leaf-stalks on Bellona are now often filled with inscribed messages from one person to another. Modern songs are composed, in the tunes of Samoa and Tahiti, expressing the feelings of one person or groups of persons towards one another. Elbert(3) has given an illuminating presentation of this matter.

Most important however, is that the Bellonese have now substituted ardent letter-writing for the composition of *kananga*. In the old days before 1945, knowledge of writing was scant, whereas nowadays even on this little island (only about seven miles long) people write letters to one another — expressing either affection or ridicule. Sometimes these may be read and decoded by the mail-carrier or they may be brought directly to the person to whom they are destined. In a sense, then, modern letter-writing serves the same purposes as did the old *kananga*. At least this is what the Bellonese themselves feel.

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