

Harry Urata and “Hole-hole Bushi,” a Song of Japanese Immigrant History in Hawai‘i

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Introduction

*Hawai Hawaii to yō
Yume mite kitaga
Nagasu namida mo
Kibi no naka*

*Kyō no hole-hole
Tsuraku wa naiyo
Yūbe todoita
Sato-dayori*

Hawai‘i, Hawai‘i
I came dreaming
But my tears are flowing now
In the cane fields

Today’s *hole-hole* work
Is not hard
Last night I received
A letter from home

“Hole-hole Bushi” is a folk song which *issei* (first-generation Japanese

overseas emigrants), who immigrated to Hawai‘i at the end of the 19th century, sang at their work in the sugarcane fields. *Hole-hole* is Hawaiian, used to describe the act of stripping the dead leaves of sugarcane, and it is said that the song was given this title because it was often sung during *hole-hole* labor. The lyrics are mostly in Japanese with Hawaiian and English words mixed in, and follow a poetic form with lines of 7+7+7+5 syllables. The texts cover a wide range of topics, from the hardships of field labor and uncertainty in life to the relationships between men and women, name-calling, and gossip. Writings on the histories of Japanese immigrants have invariably contained lyrics from “Hole-hole Bushi” as examples reflecting the *issei*’s feelings about their lives at that early stage of immigration. The song was also sung at tea houses, to the accompaniment of *shamisen* and clapping hands, where humorous *hayashi-kotoba* (interjected phrases, often non-sensical), mixing in Hawaiian words, were added, such as “*Sono wakya chacchade, nuinui maitai.*” This specific song style is called *ozashiki*, or tea-house, style “Hole-hole Bushi,” to distinguish it from the “plantation style” (which is simply called “Hole-hole Bushi”) sung in the sugarcane fields.

The *issei*’s “Hole-hole Bushi” was not passed on to the *nisei* (second-generation overseas Japanese) generation. However, Hawai‘i-born *kibei nisei* (second-generation Japanese-American, born in the United States, raised in Japan, and returned to the United States) Harry Urata¹⁾ recorded the song sung by a large number of *issei*, unified their melodies and put it on notation, and eventually copyrighted it. He enthusiastically spread the song, by teaching it at his own music school and producing music tapes and CDs.²⁾ It was also Urata who distinguished and established names for the two song styles, calling the one sung in the plantation fields “Hole-hole Bushi” and the other, more lively performance, the “*Ozashiki* Hole-hole Bushi.” The song on the CD produced by Urata is known for its sorrowful tune and lyrics that recollect the toil of the *issei* in their plantation labor. The recording has been used as part of museum exhibits and on other occasions. The 1994 film *Picture Bride* which depicted the severe

lives of the *issei* in Hawai‘i³⁾ also included a scene of the main character, Riyo, singing “Hole-hole Bushi” in the plantation field.

In Japan, “Hole-hole Bushi” gained some exposure through groups such as the Nihon Min’yō Kyōkai (Japan Min’yō Association), which has had interaction with Hawai‘i since the 1960s. A record was released by *min’yō* singer Matsuko Satō,⁴⁾ and *Nihon Min’yō Taizenshū* (Compendium of Japanese Folk Songs; Chiba and Osada 1990) also contains the lyrics of “Hole-hole Bushi.” The news that Urata had obtained copyright to the song spread to some performers of Hawaiian music in Hawai‘i and Japan, among them, Agnes Kimura, who recorded “Hole-hole Bushi” on one of her CDs.⁵⁾ It was perhaps in the year 2000 that the song garnered wide recognition in Japan, when a fourth-generation *nikkei*, Allison Arakawa, who was a student at Urata’s Music School, sang “Hole-hole Bushi” in the NHK *Nodojiman* (a song contest broadcast by NHK Japanese TV) held in Hawai‘i. In 2002, Arakawa sang the song on the morning NHK TV drama series, “Sakura,” which drew much public attention (*Asahi Shimbun*, August 1, 2006, evening edition). In Japan, several artists perform “Hole-hole Bushi” as part of their repertoire, including Okinawan folk singer Tetsuhiro Daiku, Japanese folk singer Takio Itō, *kōdan* (traditional Japanese narrative) story-teller Murasaki Kanda, and the *kayōkyoku* (Japanese popular song) vocal duo, Sunandlei.⁶⁾

From early on, “Hole-hole Bushi” has captured the interest of intellectuals in the *nikkei* society in Hawai‘i; in essays and books, they documented the abundant versions of its lyrics and the variety of contexts in which the song was sung. Tasaka (1985) describes the history of the *issei*, sprinkled with many song texts from “Hole-hole Bushi.” Accounts of the history of Japanese immigrants in Hawai‘i contain, virtually without exception, examples of those lyrics and make mention of the lives of the *issei* which form the backdrop of the song (Kotani 1985). Although no document refers to musical aspects of “Hole-hole Bushi,” the Smithsonian Institution serves as repository for the sound recordings made by Urata, noted above.⁷⁾ Also, in his writing, Urata expressed his views on the recordings he made and on “Hole-hole Bushi” in general (e.g.,

Urata 1998). In the academic field, Uyehara (1981) discusses the lyrics of “Hole-hole Bushi” with an eye to the characteristics of Japanese folk songs and their poetic forms.

Today, “Hole-hole Bushi,” which is known more than a little both in Japan and to Japanese-American society in Hawai‘i, is generally perceived as a sad song which was sung by the *issei* during their *hole-hole* labor in plantation fields in the early period of Japanese immigration. One learns the meaning of “Hole-hole Bushi” from the descriptions of the song and imagines the distress and harsh living conditions of the *issei* in Hawai‘i by listening to the song itself. How have such a narrative and the image of “Hole-hole Bushi” been established? This paper sheds light on the ways in which “Hole-hole Bushi” and its associated narratives have become what we know today by tracing the history surrounding the song from the early period of immigration to the present. In addition, Urata’s efforts and his tremendous influence should be noted: he established a canonical melody based on various versions of “Hole-hole Bushi” which had not been passed on from the *issei* to the *nisei* generation, through which he sought to revitalize the song and carry on its tradition. Between 1997 and 2007, I conducted over twenty interviews with Urata; in particular, intensive interviews were carried out in April 2004 and February 2005 regarding Urata’s musical history and his endeavors with “Hole-hole Bushi.” In what follows, my statements related to Urata are based on those interviews, but I cite additional sources if the same content is already released in other publications.

1. The Birth of “Hole-hole Bushi”

The title, “Hole-hole Bushi,” does not appear in literature from the early immigration period, but two documents contain the same lyrics later known as “Hole-hole Bushi.” These are *Shin Hawaii* (New Hawai‘i) by Shūgorō Fujii (also called Genmei Fujii) and *Kaigai Katsudō no Nihonjin* (Active Japanese Abroad) by Gennosuke Yokoyama (also known as Itsurō Yūki). In *Shin Hawaii*, two verses are

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documented in the chapter, “Bun’en” (literature), as examples of popular songs.

*Sanjū-go sen de yō, Hanahana [rōdō] yori mo, Pake [Shinajin] san to moimoi
[nemuru] surya, Akahimahi [nanajūgo-sen]. Sonotokya chacchade nuinui
ameame*

Rather than *hana-hana* (work) in the plantation for 35 cents, if I *moemoe* (sleep) with the *Pākē* (Chinaman), that’ll be *akahimahi* (75 cents).⁸⁾
(Followed by interjected rhythmic nonsense syllables)

Yukoka meriken yō, Kaeroka Japan [Nihon]. Koko ga shian no Hawai-koku.

Should I go to America, or return to Japan? This is my dilemma in the land of Hawai‘i.

(Fujii 1900, 650)

Sanjū-go sen (35 *sen*) in the first verse refers to wages on the plantation which were 35 cents per day. The verse describes the arduousness of the field labor as well as a feeling of disaffection toward the low wage, by comparing it with the earnings from prostitution. If the word “*hana-hana*” is exchanged for “*hole-hole*,” the lyrics would be more or less identical to one of the well-known verses of “Hole-hole Bushi” sung today. Also, the addition of the rhythmic syllables, “*Sonotokya chacchade nuinui ameame*” at the end of the verse displays a performance style which today we typically identify as *ozashiki* “Hole-hole Bushi”; this singing style is said to have been employed at banquets and Japanese restaurants, in a lively manner accompanied by hand clapping. The second text is the most popular among the verses currently known as lyrics of “Hole-hole Bushi.” *Meriken* refers to America, and the lyrics express the

unsettled feelings of the laborers after liberation from their work, when labor contracts were prohibited after Hawai‘i became a territory of the United States in 1898.

In addition to the examples above, two verses appear in *Kaigai Katsudō no Nihonjin*, in the section, “Kōchi ni Okeru Rōdōsha no Jōkyō” (The Condition of the Laborers in the Plantation Fields), as part of the chapter, “Hawai shotō” (the Hawaiian Islands).

When they are brought out to the field by a Portuguese, they sing loudly, in the manner they used to sing in Japan.

Dōse ichido wa Nihon e kaeri, Hawai modori to iwaretaya.

I hope I’ll go back to Japan once at least, and I want to be called a returner from Hawai‘i.

Iyana horehore, Karai o yamete, Tsurete yukiyare Honoruru e.

Please quit that awful *hole-hole* and *kālai* [cutting cane stalks], and take me to Honolulu.

The sight of them working as they sing is a piece of watercolor painting.

(Yokoyama 1906, 148)

These lyrics are both known today as texts of “Hole-hole Bushi.” The first text depicts the situation that, although one came to Hawai‘i dreaming of eventual return to Japan as a rich man, life never becomes easier, making the dream hard to realize. In the second text, one asks another party to quit the life of drudgery in the field and instead

take her to Honolulu, hinting at a relationship between a man and woman.

The statements in *Shin Hawai* and *Kaigai Katsudō no Nihonjin* reveal that the song was popular, even without a title, in the early immigration period. We can also tell that the song was sung as a labor song in the field, and that the labor was not limited to *hole-hole*, since the lyrics in *Shin Hawai* say “*Hanahana yori mo*” (Rather than *hana-hana* (work) in the plantation), and the texts in *Kaigai Katsudō no Nihonjin* contain the phrase, “*Kōchi ni izuruto*” (When we go out in the plantation field). In addition, considering the fact that the interjected syllables are also documented in *Shin Hawai*, we can understand that the song was popular at banquets throughout the Japanese community at the time as well, and the *ozashiki*, or tea-house style had already been established by then.

The name, “Hole-hole Bushi,” first appears in *Saishin Hawai Annai* (The Latest Hawai‘i Guide) by Namitarō Murasaki. “Hole-hole Bushi” is described as one of Hawai‘i’s specialties to see, as in the following:

Honolulu is a song-less town. One rarely hears singing except through a phonograph or overhearing a spree coming out of a restaurant. Of course, new popular songs are imported every time Japanese ships come into port. But these songs are sung only at tea houses for the time being, and mostly disappear before they spread outside. Nevertheless, if you go to the countryside, you can still hear the loud singing of a tune saturated with a sorrowful mood. That is “Hole-hole Bushi”—a distinctive feature in Hawai‘i. (Murasaki 1920, 74–75)

Here, Murasaki declares that there is no song in Honolulu, and that the “Hole-hole Bushi” sung in the plantation field is the only song sung, although he also states that the sound of gramophones is heard and that songs are sung in tea houses. The “singing” which Murasaki addresses in this case refers to a song which is unique to the *nikkei* in Hawai‘i.

Furthermore, regarding the song title, “Hole-hole Bushi,” Murasaki explains that “In Hawaiian, *hole-hole* means to strip the dry leaves of sugarcane, and the word was given to the title of the song because the song was often sung during that labor” (Murasaki 1920, 75).⁹⁾ Also, he finds the “Hole-hole Bushi” sung in the field especially emotive, stating that the song “reveals its most salient characteristics in the desolate twilight in which strong winds bend the sugar canes and one can hear the singing voice haltingly. It truly makes it difficult to suppress our tears” (Murasaki 1920, 75). Although he notes that there is a lively way of singing the song, saying that it is also sung in the tea houses, where “vulgar words are added in Hawaiian in a humorous manner” (1920, 76) at the end of a verse, he prefers the version sung in the field, and emphasizes “Hole-hole Bushi” as a song of sorrow. In addition, he goes on to say that “Hole-hole Bushi” is “a legacy from the time when *kan'yaku imin* (government-sponsored immigrants) were brought in and was born out of their diversion from the feeling of discontent and longing for home” (Murasaki 1920, 76); thus, he attributes the sentiment of “Hole-hole Bushi” to the hardship of the immigrants’ lives during the early years of immigration.

In this way, *Saishin Hawai Annai* provides information, including the naming of “Hole-hole Bushi” which is connected to *hole-hole* labor, the viewpoint that this is the only song sung exclusively by *nikkei* immigrants in Hawai‘i, the author’s preference for the song sung in the field rather than in a tea house on the basis that the field version has more feeling, and the interpretation that the song is linked to the harsh lives of the immigrants. Murasaki’s views on “Hole-hole Bushi” were eventually passed on to intellectuals among the *nikkei* living in Hawai‘i, including Kihara (1935, 468), Kawazoe (1959), and Urata, whom I will discuss in this paper.

2. “Hole-hole Bushi” and Harry Urata

Around 1930, the lives of the *issei* improved, and many moved to cities. The

“Hole-hole Bushi” which had been sung in the field disappeared, and, in its place, lively-sounding versions of “Hole-hole Bushi” were performed in Japanese tea houses, accompanied by *shamisen*. During the Second World War, the government banned Japanese cultural activities. After the war, however, the great success of the *nisei* troops in the fight received admiration, and that promoted a re-flourishing of *nikkei* culture. *Nisei* orchestras were formed, playing Japanese popular songs, and even songs glorifying the *nisei* generation were composed (Nakahara 2002b). However, “Hole-hole Bushi” was never performed. For the *issei*, “Hole-hole Bushi” had become an embarrassment.

Nevertheless, “Hole-hole Bushi” was revived and was passed on through Harry Urata’s efforts over several decades. Urata himself had never heard “Hole-hole Bushi” sung in the field or at tea houses. The reason the song drew his attention has something to do with Urata’s life history.

Urata was born in 1918 in Honolulu as the first son of parents who came from Kumamoto, Japan. At that time, there was a custom among the *issei* Japanese to raise their eldest son in Japan so that he could become a bridge between the United States and Japan (Yamashita 1938). Thus, Urata was sent to Kumamoto at the age of six to live with his relatives. When he reached the senior grade in elementary school, he moved to Gyeong-seong (present-day Seoul) to live with other relatives, and attended Gyeong-seong Middle School there. He admired musician and composer Masao Koga and was hoping to enter a music school, but his relatives vehemently opposed the idea, saying “you want to become a male *geisha*?” So he returned to Honolulu at his mother’s request.

At first, after he returned, he felt disconnected from his family, and he could not speak English, either. Working at a cannery, he struggled, questioning why he had gone to Japan at all, but nevertheless he was determined to persevere. He soon found a teaching job at a Japanese language school, and meanwhile studied English intently at Mid-Pacific Institute, becoming versatile in both Japanese and English in conversation,

reading, and writing.

At that time, song contests were popular in the *nikkei* communities, and Urata won first prize in a contest sponsored by Japanese-language radio station KGMB, which catapulted him to fame. He sang on the radio every week, learned piano, and formed the Shinkō Orchestra, which consisted of *nisei* musicians. Urata was content with the country's positive attitude toward musical activities.

In 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and in 1943, immediately after entering the University of Hawai'i, Urata was detained and sent to an internment camp in Honouliuli in Hawai'i and then to Tule Lake in California. The people who were detained in Hawai'i included influential figures from the *nikkei* society at that time, such as newspaper reporters, teachers at Japanese language schools, and monks in Buddhist churches, as well as *kibei nisei* who were fluent in Japanese. After the war, Urata taught Japanese at the US Army Special Program at the University of Minnesota to officers who would be sent to Japan as part of the occupation army. In his class, Urata used popular songs to teach the language, and attracted more than twice the number of students than in other classes, to the degree that students could barely fit in the classroom. He was convinced and confident that there were no borders to the enjoyment of music.

In February 1945, Urata returned to Hawai'i, where he was employed at Japanese-language radio station KULA, after working as a reporter for a Japanese newspaper and for an English newspaper. At KULA, Urata was in charge of a program called Chop Suey Melody, in which amateur singers would visit the studio and sing Japanese songs; it became a hit program. Meanwhile, he re-formed the Shinkō Orchestra, and at the request of *issei* with whom he had become acquainted in the internment camps, performed every weekend at events held in the *nikkei* communities.

Urata became interested in "Hole-hole Bushi" through the influence of Kenpū Kawazoe, a reporter for the Japanese newspaper, *Hawaii Times*, whom Urata met at the detainment camp. Urata thought highly of Kawazoe who was well-versed in the

history of immigration, and they often ran into each other on the street, although their relationship was not such that they might engage in an involved conversation. Urata recalled, “After the war, our houses were still close to each other’s. . . . There was a gas station near his house, so I used to go fill gasoline there. Then he would be on the way home from work . . . it was located in front of the Japanese consulate. And he would go, ‘Say, Urata, are you doing “Hole-hole Bushi?”’ He tells me to get on with it, and that means I should do something. Books hardly write about “Hole-hole Bushi,” only a couple of pages if any. . . . [so Kawazoe told me] ‘You might as well collect lots of “Hole-hole Bushi” song texts because they show how *issei* were living.’” Urata asked the *issei* who gathered for Chop Suey Melody if they knew “Hole-hole Bushi,” and was able to hear stories from some of them, but there was only one who could sing the song.

A while later in 1949, with a future plan to make his living by teaching Japanese music in Hawai‘i, Urata went to Japan where he studied Koga-style guitar playing with Masao Koga, harmony with Masao Yoneyama, and composition and vocal production with Raymond (Itsurō) Hattori while working as an interpreter for coffee buyers and the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the occupation forces. In 1951, he returned to Honolulu after completing his job for the GHQ, and opened Urata Music School, where he taught Japanese songs until 2006. He played a central role in musical events for the *nikkei* community in Hawai‘i, thus contributing greatly to the musical exchange between *nikkei* in Hawai‘i and Japan.

3. Interest in Melodies and Drive for Preservation

Stimulated by Kawazoe’s encouragement, Urata’s interest in “Hole-hole Bushi” grew more concrete in 1960 with a series of events at the 75th anniversary of the Japanese immigration to Hawai‘i. 1960 also marked the centennial anniversary of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States of America and the Empire

of Japan, and Japanese composer Raymond Hattori visited Hawai‘i in May of that year for the celebration. Hattori had been in Honolulu for a while before the war, and had developed a relationship with *nisei* music lovers while teaching Japanese at a Japanese language school. After returning to Japan, he was active as a composer in the world of Japanese popular songs. During that time, Urata studied composition from him. For the commemoration of the government-sponsored immigration to Hawai‘i, Hattori told Urata that he wanted to create a song by arranging an original *min’yō* song of the Hawai‘i *nikkei*. Thus, “Hole-hole Ondo” was born. The song with lyrics he composed was based on a version of “Hole-hole Bushi” that Urata had transcribed, as performed by Kumatarō Inouye, an *issei* whom Urata met through his radio program, Chop Suey Melody. Inouye was born in 1880 in Niigata and came to Hawai‘i at the age of 19. He worked on the plantation in Ola‘a on the island of Hawai‘i and in ‘Ewa on O‘ahu, during which time he learned “Hole-hole Bushi” (Nakahara 2011a).

Urata’s transcription of Inouye’s version was aired several times on Japanese-language radio, with Urata’s singing and Hattori’s piano accompaniment.¹⁰ Meanwhile, a record of “Hole-hole Ondo” was produced, with singing by Chiyoko Shimakura and Hideo Murata,¹¹ and was presented several times, accompanying dance, on occasions such as the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of government contract immigration (Hawai Nikkeijin Rengō Kyōkai 1964, 411–25). “Hole-hole Ondo” is still played today for dancing at *bon-odori* in Hawai‘i.

However, a problem emerged when *issei* criticized the song that Urata sang as not being “Hole-hole Bushi.” Regarding that, Urata states, “Since I transcribed only Mr. Inouye’s performance, I received various criticisms from a lot of people. Mr. Hattori also told me that I should record more “Hole-hole Bushi” sung by a number of people, and transcribe what I think is the best from them” (Urata 1981a). In 1967, when Hattori taught “Hole-hole Bushi” to Japanese Defense Force members who were going to visit Hawai‘i and play the song, he also reminisced about the time he recorded the *issei*’s “Hole-hole Bushi” in 1960, saying, “. . . each person sang differently, and

every one of them said his or her version was correct, so I was in a quandary,” and continued, “Please don’t insist on your version and accept this melody for now—which is the result of incorporating the most common factors—as the standard version. Otherwise, “Hole-hole Bushi” will disappear indeed” (Hattori 1967).

Both Urata and Hattori were aware that “Hole-hole Bushi” was passed-on orally and that the melody varied from one person to another; they thus feared the fact that it was on the verge of extinction. The version which Hattori proposed as the standard was not passed on after all, but the experience impelled Urata to attempt to make an acceptable, standardized melody.

4. Toward the Standardized “Hole-hole Bushi” Tune

Urata relates that, “I was told [by Mr. Kawazoe] ‘Mr. Urata, there is a difference between “Hole-hole Bushi” we used to hear in the field and the one people in Honolulu sing . . . and I felt [what I heard in Honolulu] sounds somewhat like a tea house song. . . .’ And he asked me to research the song sung in the field. So, in that year, in December 1965, I went to the Big Island carrying a recording machine. If Mr. Kawazoe hadn’t said it to me at that time, I don’t think ‘Hole-hole Bushi’ from the plantation field would have survived.”

With Kawazoe’s advice, Urata went to Hilo and through the connections of people in the broadcast industries whom he knew from KULA and via the newspaper company with which he had a relationship from the time he worked for the *Hawaii Hochi*, he visited *issei* in the area who still remembered “Hole-hole Bushi.” The *issei* whom he met for the first time also remembered that Urata used to sing on the radio when he was young, and that he had the Chop Suey Melody program. Thus, the research proceeded smoothly. After that trip, Urata continued visiting *issei* until around 1980 and recorded the songs of approximately 30 people. All except two had been *hole-hole* laborers in the field (Urata 1981b).

While the number of Urata’s surviving *issei* informants continued to diminish, Urata himself faced considerable difficulties in the process of arriving at a standardized melody. In order for “Hole-hole Bushi”—which had disappeared unremarked—to garner recognition, Urata insisted that it “should be a nice song and the melody should be easy to sing and to memorize. No one would feel like singing the song if it’s not pretty . . . so it shouldn’t be ephemeral like a hit song which becomes popular for a short time and disappears quickly, but instead, it must be sung for many long years as a song that conveys the history of the immigrants.” Hence, he listened a number of times to the performances he had recorded, and eventually selected for transcription song versions by four singers—Takeo Kagawa, Saichi Naitō, Misa Tōma, and Katsue Asakura—which, to his ears, had good melodies (Urata 1981b).

Takeo Kagawa was a *nisei* born in 1900 on Maui (Fujii 1937, 22). Miyotsuchi Yoneya, who was a friend of his father and founder of the Yoneya Hotel, often sang “Hole-hole Bushi” at parties. Kagawa learned the tea-house style “Hole-hole Bushi” from Yoneya, and sang it with his wife’s accompaniment on *shamisen*. Kagawa passed away in 1973, and although Urata could not meet with him in person, he was able to obtain a recorded tape of Kagawa’s performance from 1971. A profile of Saichi Naitō by Kawazoe appeared in an article in the *Hawaii Times* in 1966. Naitō came to Hawai‘i in 1906 and worked as a *hole-hole* laborer in the field (Kawazoe 1966). When Urata visited Naitō in 1973 on Kaua‘i, he was already on his deathbed. His neighbor, Junokichi Senda, possessed a tape of Naitō’s singing that had been recorded in 1960; Urata copied that tape (Urata 1981a).

The “Hole-hole Bushi” performed by Asakura was recorded in December 1965 at Asakura’s residence in Wainaku, on the occasion of Urata’s visit to Hilo. Asakura was from Kumamoto and 64 years old at the time of the recording. She came to Hawai‘i at the call of her parents, and worked on the plantation where she learned the song her seniors were singing and did *hole-hole* work in an all-female Japanese group. She relates that the labor was especially hard right after she moved from Japan and

that she cried in the sugarcane field. Asakura was good not only at singing “Hole-hole Bushi” but also in singing popular songs, and Urata favored her “Hole-hole Bushi” the most.

Tōma’s song was recorded by Shinobu Satō, an announcer for KPUA radio in Hilo, and was sent to Urata. When Urata visited Hilo in December 1965, he didn’t have time to visit Tōma in Kona, so he asked Satō to do the recording for him. Tōma was 83 years old at the time. She came from Niigata to O‘ahu in March 1899, and sang “Hole-hole Bushi” while doing *hole-hole* work with all-female workers. According to her, each verse was sung by one singer, but at the end of the verse, everyone entered excitedly, with phrases like “Haa, sōdegansho” or “Haa, sono kide yannare.” And, after that, another singer would sing a new verse, followed by another interjection of syllables in *tutti*. In this way, they kept singing while working. When a large crowd of workers made their interjection together, the *luna* (plantation supervisor) would also smile. In comparing the singers he had recorded, Urata felt that there was a great similarity between the melodies sung by Asakura and Tōma (Nakahara 2010).

Urata repeatedly listened to the songs of the four performers, transcribed them, sang those melodies, and referred to the history of the immigrants; as a result, he reached the conclusion that the singer’s experience of *hole-hole* labor was important for the song. He emphasized that “Putting aside the point of whether or not it is a good melody, the true “Hole-hole Bushi” must be a work song which was sung in the field” (Urata 1981b). Thus, he inherited the view that “Hole-hole Bushi” emerged out of the hardships borne by the *issei* generation, and that this style contained more feeling than the lively tea-house style singing—as had been expressed by Kihara (1935) and Kawazoe (1959), following Murasaki’s statement in *Saishin Hawai Annai* (1920). Furthermore, Urata took into consideration the idea that the majority of the workers who had engaged in the *hole-hole* labor were women (Urata 1981b). This had never been pointed out by other intellectuals who made mention of “Hole-hole Bushi” in the years since the publication of *Saishin Hawai Annai*, and Urata was the first to

make note of it. Eventually, Urata completed a standardized melody by referencing the melodies of “Hole-hole Bushi” by Asakura and Tōma, both of whom had the experience of *hole-hole* field labor. He then commissioned an arrangement of the song from Gun’ichi Yamaguchi, who was his friend and an exclusive musician for Polydor in Japan, and obtained a copyright by sending the arranged version to the Copyright Office in Washington DC. The principal reason behind obtaining copyright was for the preservation of the song. Urata relates that he reached 60 years old at that time and thought that no matter what might happen to him, someone would sing the song as long as a transcription was available.

5. “Hole-hole Bushi” as Sung

After obtaining the copyright, Urata began to sing the song frequently at events of various scales, both in Hawai‘i and in Japan.¹²⁾ In 1984, a television program featuring “Hole-hole Bushi” was aired in Hawai‘i.¹³⁾ In his own music school, Urata taught the song to female students in their teens, and in addition, printed the music and the song text in the school recital programs. Urata arranged the lyrics in such a way that the verse, “*Yukoka meriken, Kaeroka Nihon. Koko ga shian no Hawai-koku*”—which many of the *issei* whom Urata recorded sang first—came first, followed by verses describing *isseis*’ lives, so that the song formed a story. Gossip and sexual content were not included in this version. Among Urata’s students, two who often sang “Hole-hole Bushi” on stage began to wear a set of work clothes, like those which the *issei* used to wear on the plantation, as their costume. The outfit was made with *kasuri* fabric by Barbara F. Kawakami, a researcher into Japanese immigrants’ clothing.

Urata sent out his transcription and lyrics on request, and did not ask for any royalties. He thought of “Hole-hole Bushi” as an asset of the *nikkei* people and not his own property, and was hoping that the next *nikkei* generation would sing this song. Some phone callers, interested in singing “Hole-hole Bushi,” requested a recording

of the song, and for those people Urata made tapes, recording his students singing the song. This led him to think that if he made a tape for sale, more people might sing the song, including ones who could not read music. Thus, in 1997, he produced a commercial tape with a recording of fourth-generation *nikkei*, Allison Arakawa, who had become an excellent singer among his students, and released it for sale.¹⁴ In 2000, Arakawa sang “Hole-hole Bushi” for the NHK *Nodojiman* (song contest) held in Hawai‘i, drawing wide attention. In 2002, Arakawa made an appearance on the NHK morning drama series, “Sakura,” in which she sang “Hole-hole Bushi”; thus, the song became increasingly well-known in Japan as well. After that, Arakawa continued to sing “Hole-hole Bushi” in Hawai‘i, on the US mainland, and in Japan, at the invitation of immigrant-related events. She stated, “I sing as I appreciate the fact that I’m here precisely because my ancestors overcame hardships” (*Asahi Shimbun* Aug. 1, 2006), and “The songs tell of their sacrifices that made it possible for what we have today” (Kim 2010).

Developing an interest in “Hole-hole Bushi,” musicians in Japan began to include the song in their live performances and CD productions (see introduction and endnote 6). Among them, Agnes Kimura, a Japanese singer of Hawaiian music, who generally performs live in Japan, recorded “Hole-hole Bushi” in 1996 on her CD, titled “Hole Hole,” and since then it has become part of her repertoire.¹⁵ Kimura started to sing “Hole-hole Bushi” after she heard the performances by Urata and Arakawa on a tape she received from her musician friend and was moved by their singing. “I was shocked,” she relates. “I didn’t know the history of the *nikkei* immigrants even though I was a Japanese who sings Hawaiian songs. At first, I sang the song like a *min’yō*, since this is the song of the *issei* so I thought it was perhaps in the *min’yō* style.” Kimura reflected on the lives of the *issei* and the context in which the song was sung, by referencing the music and the lyrics of “Hole-hole Bushi” printed in the program of a student recital at Urata’s music school and books on the immigrants in Hawai‘i. When the CD came out, many had reservations about the inclusion of a song

in the *min'yō* style. When she sang it in Hawai'i in 1998, however, the entire hall was silent and filled with deep emotion. Since then, she has been regularly singing her own arrangement of “Hole-hole Bushi” in live performances, in which she tells the story of Japanese immigrants that lies at the base of this song. The version of the song with her own arrangement is contained on the CDs released in 1998 and 2008, and it has been well-received by Hawaiian music fans today.¹⁶⁾

Kōdan narrator Murasaki Kanda created “Hawaii Imin Aika Horehore Bushi Den” (“Hole-hole Bushi,” the Sad Ballad of Japanese Immigrants to Hawai'i) for the 25th anniversary of her career, and recorded it for a CD.¹⁷⁾ She was introduced to “Hole-hole Bushi” by her producer, Sōji Soeda, and her director who had found appeal in “Hole-hole Bushi” for some time and advised Kanda to perform it. Kanda was touched by the fact that there were *issei* abroad who persevered at hard labor without even having a decent place to live, and that present-day Hawai'i is a result of their efforts. In addition, “Hole-hole Bushi” held the possibility that it could be narrated as a contemporary version of the classical *kōdan* story in which a wife faithfully stands behind her husband. In order to refashion “Hole-hole Bushi” as a *kōdan* story, Kanda wished to visit Hawai'i, feel its air, and listen to the stories of the *issei* generation, but the *issei* were already gone. However, she learned that there was a person named Harry Urata in Hawai'i who had interviewed many *issei*, listened to their songs, and had a great deal of knowledge about “Hole-hole Bushi.” So, she flew to Hawai'i with her producer Soeda, Masahide Ōhira, from whom she commissioned a script, and other staff members. Meeting with Urata, they listened to recordings of the *issei*'s songs and stories, as well as explanations of the meaning of the song texts and descriptions of people's lives in those days. “After I listened to the recordings of the *issei* in Hawai'i, I could comprehend how they sang the song in the field,” she said. “And my imagination swelled, and I thought, ‘If they went to Hawai'i as a couple, the wife probably said she wanted to go home,’ or ‘if a single man who worked like a slave in the field could return only to a shack which was barely large enough for sleeping

like sardines, fights must have broken out quite naturally,’ and so on. On the plane back home, we were talking constantly, saying things like, ‘it’ll be good to narrate this way,’ or ‘let’s insert an episode like that,’ and so forth.” Thus, the *kōdan* narrative “Hawaii Imin Aika Horehore Bushi Den,” was born out of Kanda’s wish to preserve it as a part of Japanese history. Her CD also includes a tea-house style “Hole-hole Bushi,” as performed by Murasaki Kanda and the Aloha Mandaras (a Hawaiian music band affiliated with Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai); they perform their tea-house version of “Hole-hole Bushi” every summer at the last act in the *yose* (Japanese vaudeville) theater Shinjuku Suehiro-tei.¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

This paper has traced the history of “Hole-hole Bushi” from its birth, through decline, and revitalization, in as much detail as possible. Viewing “Hole-hole Bushi” as their own unique and original song, *nikkei* intellectuals in Hawai‘i have defined it as a song closely linked to the hardships of the *issei* generation, and have found especially deep feeling in the version sung in the plantation fields. Urata was an inheritor of that viewpoint, and revived the song with a sorrowful feeling based on his own sensibilities as well as referencing recordings of the *issei*. Furthermore, he pointed out that many of the “Hole-hole Bushi” singers were women. Why did he maintain that many singers were women? While details on the approximately 30 singers Urata recorded are unavailable, an essay by Urata himself (1998) lists the names of nine male singers and three female singers who sang the plantation-style “Hole-hole Bushi,” and one male singer who sang the tea-house style “Hole-hole Bushi.” Hence, it is hard to say that the majority of the singers whom Urata recorded were women. Indeed, some documents on the history of immigrants mention that many of the plantation workers were women, but they do not state that there were no male workers. According to *Saishin Hawaii Annai*, the song was often sung at the time of *hole-hole* work, but no claim is made that

the song was sung only during *hole-hole* work. From descriptions in *Shin Hawaii* and *Kaigai Katsudō no Nihonjin*, we can speculate that people sang the song during field labor in general, and that it was not limited to the periods of *hole-hole* work.

When I asked Mr. Urata why the singers of “Hole-hole Bushi” were women, he said that some lyrics of the song made him believe that they were sung only by women. He gave examples of such verses, including “*Ame wa furu furu, Sentakumono wa nureru. Sena no ko wa naku, Meshi gogeru*” (the rain keeps falling, the laundry gets wet, the baby on my back cries, the rice gets burnt). Nonetheless, among the vast number of “Hole-hole Bushi” songtexts, some do convey men’s viewpoint, while some others sound neutral, without displaying explicit characteristics of a particular gender. About this, I could not obtain a convincing answer from Urata.

In my speculation, Urata’s account—that many of the plantation workers were women—was perhaps his strategy to spread the song. “Hole-hole Bushi” received a great deal of attention when the fourth-generation *nikkei*, Allison Arakawa, entered the NHK song contest. It made a strong impact on the audience that a young woman like Arakawa sang the song in a field worker’s outfit which the *issei* women used to wear. If this had been a male singer, it might not have drawn as much attention. Urata kept asking Arakawa for over a month before persuading her to enter the song contest. He, who had taught Japanese popular songs for many years and had connections with the entertainment world in Japan, probably knew the effect a young *nikkei* woman singing this song on stage would have. Also, one might associate the image of the *issei* women with those depicted in the film, *Picture Bride*, who persevered after coming to Hawai‘i for marriage. On that account, the sorrowful image of “Hole-hole Bushi” is enhanced even more with the addition of the idea that the greater number of plantation workers were women.

“Hole-hole Bushi” became known together with, and via, its accompanying narrative that it is a song of the *issei* who suffered harsh labor in the plantation field, and it soon spread among singers in Japan similarly. Kimura and Kanda maintain that

they perform “Hole-hole Bushi” by interpreting it as part of a hidden Japanese history, whereas fourth-generation *nikkei* Arakawa says she sings this song as she appreciates the perseverance of the *issei* who are her ancestors. In fact, the “Hole-hole Bushi” which is sung today as a result of Urata’s dedicated effort is considerably different from the one that *issei* used to sing. Nevertheless, the song serves as a medium through which we can envision the *issei* and their lives in a more specific way, and reinforces our feelings toward them. Furthermore, from the perspective of the *nikkei* population in Hawai‘i, the existence of “Hole-hole Bushi” makes it possible to view the *issei* generation, who immigrated to Hawai‘i, as their original ancestors. The fact that “Hole-hole Bushi” is a song unique to the *nikkei* in Hawai‘i enables them to perceive their ancestors not as Japanese in Japan, but instead, as those *issei* in Hawai‘i.

A question arises: why was Urata alone passionate about handing down “Hole-hole Bushi,” which roused the interest of no other *nisei*? One reason naturally lies in the fact that he was fluent in Japanese and had an interest in music, which made communication with *issei* much easier. On a deeper level, however, his drive perhaps stemmed from his developing consciousness as a *nikkei*, through his experience of a series of hardships as a *kibei nisei* who nevertheless chose Hawai‘i as his place to live and engage in musical activities. I genuinely admire Urata’s dedication to revitalize “Hole-hole Bushi” from a disinterested motive. Urata’s wish to preserve the song as something representing the *nikkei* history in Hawai‘i is now reaching its fulfillment.

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Notes

- 1) Urata’s full name is Harry Minoru Urata. In newspaper articles in English, it appears as Harry Urata, while in Japanese-language articles, 浦田実、ハリー浦田、浦田実ハリー、etc. are used. In this paper, I use Harry Urata.
- 2) “Hole Hole Bushi,” M&H: Honolulu, 2000 (1997).
- 3) *Picture Bride* is an American film directed by *nikkei* Kayo Matano Hatta, released in 1994 at the Cannes Film Festival, in 1995 in the US, and in 1996 in Japan. For the film, Urata taught “Hole-hole Bushi” to Yuki Kudō who played the part of Riyo.
- 4) Matsuko Satō, “Hole-hole Bushi,” King Record BS-5117, 1967, 45 rpm.
- 5) Agnes Kimura, “Hole Hole,” Owa’s Gang Records R650261, 1996.
- 6) Recordings include the following: *Nipponese Song: Ubusuna* (Kabushiki Kaisha Bappu VPCC80515, 1998) by Japanese folk singer Takio Itō and his Takio Band; *Hōraikō exo-PAI PATIROHMA* (Off Note ON-43, 2003, 2 CDs) by Okinawan folk singer Tetsuhiro Daiku; and

Hawaii Imin Aika Horehore Bushi Den (Tokuma Japan SBIX-2028, 2004) by *kōdan* story-teller Murasaki Kanda and the Aloha Mandarars. In *kayōkyoku*, the duo Sanandlei, made up of Toshiaki Hidaka (a former member of the Mahina Stars) and Reiko Takigawa, released *Hole-hole Bushi* (King Record FBCM-6, 2003).

- 7) The recordings were deposited at the Smithsonian Institution by Urata's friend, Dr. Franklin Odo.
- 8) Although Fujii interprets this word as 75 cents, other authors generally introduce the word, "*akahi doru*" here, meaning 1 dollar. "*Akahi*" means one in Hawaiian.
- 9) As Murasaki relates, the title of "Hole-hole Bushi" became established perhaps because the song was sung especially often during *hole-hole* labor. I speculate that this naming may have been also inspired by the sound of the word, "*hole-hole*," which is most captivating to the Japanese ear and is easy to remember. Names for other kinds of labor in the field include "*hana-hana*" (work in general), "*hou hana*" (to plow and weed with a spade), "*hanawai*" (to draw irrigation water to the cane field), "*kachi ken*" (a corruption of "cut cane"; to cut cane stalks), and "*happaikō*" (*hāpai kō* in Hawaiian spelling; carrying harvested cane to trucks). Considering the fact that the *issei* were using only Japanese in their daily lives, the sound of "*hole-hole*" would have struck them as amusing. In addition, since the song was also performed at tea houses, the word may possibly have been used to allude to other meanings, such as "to fall for" (hore-bore 惚れ惚れ) or even "dig dig" (hore-hore 掘れ掘れ), a metaphor for the sexual act.
- 10) Information obtained in my interview with Urata. The name of the radio station and the aired dates are not confirmed.
- 11) A demo 45 rpm record was produced by Nippon Columbia.
- 12) The major events at which Urata sang "Hole-hole Bushi" include the 100th anniversary of the arrival of *kan'yaku imin* (Japanese contract immigrants to Hawai'i) in 1985, the 20th anniversary of the China-Japan Peace and Friendship Treaty in 1998, and the Kokumin Bunkasai (People's Cultural Festival) in Hiroshima in 2000.
- 13) "Hole Hole Bushi: Song of the Cane Fields," aired Monday, May 21, 1984, 7:30 pm on KHET Hawai'i Public Television as part of the *Rice and Roses* series on immigrant plantation life.
- 14) Both the cover for this tape and the cover for the CD which was released in 2000 use a photo of Arakawa wearing the outfit of plantation fieldworkers as reconstructed by Kawakami.
- 15) Agnes Kimura has recorded "Hole-hole Bushi" on the following three CDs: *Hole Hole* (Owa's Gang Records R650261, 1996); *Agnes Kimura in the Hawaiian Style* (Island Viking IVCD198, 1998); and *Ho'i Mai 'O Agnes: A Collection of Hawaiian Songs* (Island Viking IVCD 308, 2008).
- 16) Personal interview with Agnes Kimura in October 2008, and my own observation of Kimura's live performances between 2009 and 2010.
- 17) *Hawaii Imin Aika Horehore Bushi Den* (Tokuma Japan SBIX-2028, 2004).

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- 18) Personal interview with Murasaki Kanda in August 2008, and my personal observation at Suehirotei in Shinjuku.