

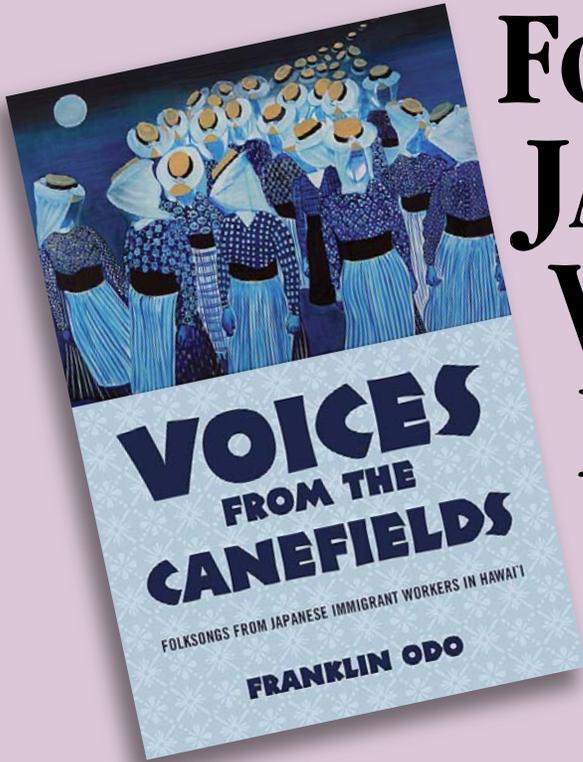
The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress  
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# VOICES FROM THE CANEFIELDS: FOLKSONGS FROM JAPANESE IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN HAWAI'I



Lecture and book signing by

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**12:00 NOON - 1:00 PM**

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**VOICES FROM THE CANEFIELDS:  
FOLKSONGS FROM JAPANESE IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN HAWAII**

**FRANKLIN ODO**

Folksongs are short stories from the souls of common people. Some, like Mexican *corridos* or Scottish ballads, reworked in the Appalachians, are stories of tragic or heroic episodes. Others, like the African American blues, reach from a difficult present back into slavery and forward into a troubled future. Japanese workers on Hawaii's plantations created their own versions, in forms more akin to their traditional short poetry forms, *tanka* or *haiku*. These *holehole bushi* describe the experiences of one particular group caught in the global movements of capital, empire, and labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Bushi* is the Japanese term for melody or tune. *Holehole* is the Native Hawaiian word for dried sugar cane leaves, and hence, the work of stripping them from the stalks. I have translated over two hundred of these songs for my book *Voices from the Canefields: Folksongs from Japanese Immigrant Workers in Hawai'i*, which was recently published by Oxford University Press in July 2013. The book includes lyrics, extensive historical context, and interview materials, illuminating hitherto unexplored areas of immigrant experience, especially those of immigrant women.

**Yuko ka Meriken yo  
Kaero ka Nihon  
Koko ga shian no  
Hawaii koku**

**Go on to America  
Or return to Japan?  
This is our dilemma  
Here in Hawai'i**

This may be the earliest song among many hundreds or thousands, spontaneously composed and sung on Hawaii's sugar plantations. Laborers from Japan quickly became the majority of sugar workers, soon after their large-scale importation as contract workers began in 1885. These lyrics provide good examples of the intersection between local work/life and the global connection that the workers clearly perceived. The term "koku" or country/nation indicates that anonymous composers and singers understood that they were in an independent kingdom and that their options included not only clinging to the status quo but return to Japan or remigration to North America. Many other songs connect the local and the transnational.

Japanese contract workers maintained strong ties to their homeland and families. One important cultural link was the tradition of singing folksongs from their villages. Following long tradition, the immigrants not only sang familiar lyrics but constantly created new songs to reflect and critique their new conditions. Many lyrics lament the decision to leave their villages, and reflect a longing for their contracts to end and for

a return to their families. But these songs also reflect a rapid adaptation to a new society in which other ethnic groups were arranged in untidy hierarchical order – the origins of a unique multicultural social order. Here, a small but powerful oligarchy of white planters largely controlled the economy and society. Native Hawaiians became close neighbors of the Japanese workers; and they quickly assumed the roles of collaborators and competitors. So were the Portuguese, Chinese, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, and Koreans. The Japanese Meiji Government negotiated the inclusion of women among the workers – approximately one in five – to avoid the problems incurred by the overwhelmingly male societies of Chinese immigrants on the West Coast. But the unintended consequences included fierce competition for the women among the bachelors and a wild degree of autonomy among the women, who could select from a variety of desperate suitors.

My work also explores the "cultural baggage" brought by immigrants and some of the dangerous notions of cultural superiority already deployed by the immigrants, influenced by their rapidly modernizing and militarizing Japanese homeland. They were, as a result, simultaneously the targets of intense racial and class vitriol even as they took comfort in the expanding Japanese empire, at the expense of the homelands – Okinawa, Korea, China, and the Philippines – of fellow workers. While the focus here is on the *holehole bushi* themselves, my research also relies on family histories, oral histories, and accounts from the prolific Japanese-language press. It highlights comparative migration history and ethnic/racial movements within national and international contexts.

The *holehole bushi* were universally predicted to disappear along with the immigrant generation, the issei, but through the persistence of one man, Harry Urata, who traed the Islands and taped the interviews and songs in the late 1960s and 1970s, and a series of unlikely events, they are now sung by new generations of folk singers in Hawai'i, Japan, and the West Coast of the United States.

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*