

Teenage Granny: Portrayals of Women in Falkland Islands Nicknames

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Abstract

Nicknames of women on the Falkland Islands, like most nicknames, derive from physical traits, incidents or early experiences, childhood characteristics, behavior, and other sources and are used both as terms of reference and terms of address. The Falklands are unusual in having a large number of nicknames for women. Most of these epithets are given by men and continue as a means both of social integration and social control.

Introduction

Surrounded by the rough waters of the South Atlantic, the mass of islands known as *Falkland Islands* to English speakers and *Islas Malvinas* to their Spanish counterparts, lies three hundred miles east of the Patagonian coast of Argentina. The archipelago consists of two main islands, East and West Falkland, and several hundred others, some no larger than an acre. Only seventeen islands are permanently inhabited by humans; others offer breeding grounds to the numerous colonies of marine birds and mammals.

Of the 1,900 Falkland Islanders who now live on the islands, roughly half reside in Stanley, the capital, a colorful small town where the smell of peat smoke is constant. The rest of the population live in the "camp," a vernacular derivation of the Spanish *campo* or countryside (Strange 14).

Climate and soil have proved marginal to agriculture, but livestock has prospered since the eighteenth century when the French introduced cattle and sheep. Since the mid-nineteenth century, however, sheep-farming, exclusively for wool production, has been the main economic activity of the islands.

Because of their physical appearance, climate, and the way of life of the inhabitants, the Falklands have often been compared to the Western Isles of Scotland. The population is English speaking.

The war fought over the Falkland Islands between Argentina and Britain briefly captured world attention in 1982 and generated masses of books in English, Spanish, and other languages. With very few exceptions, academics, journalists, and propagandists focusing on international relations have perpetuated stereotypes of the conflict's antecedents. Few have shown any interest in local matters, which, despite their apparent parochialism, help explain the situation in the region today. An important but neglected aspect to consider is the world view of the islanders as expressed through their customs.

This paper is concerned with one neglected genre of folklore, nicknames, as an outstanding feature of folk speech in the Falkland Islands. The following discussion will concentrate on the images that emerge from those nicknames applied specifically to women.²

Nicknames

Anthropologists and folklorists have studied cross-culturally the custom of nicknaming, mainly in the context of small rural communities,³ as indicators of the attitude of people towards one another in specific situations. While some authors interpret the primary function of nicknames as exerting social control,⁴ others have stressed their importance in identifying individuals in communities where very few first names and surnames are shared by a large number of people.⁵

In his analysis of nicknaming practices in a Spanish town, Stanley H. Brandes maintains that the function of nicknames can only be understood in relation to demography and social structure. With respect to community size, he argues that nicknames flourish in medium-size towns with a minimum population of 500 people to a maximum of about 3,500. Similarly, George A. Collier and Victoria R. Bricker and George M. Foster relate their studies of nicknames to social structure in different Mexican communities.

In general these studies share the notion that, regardless of their primary role, nicknames provide a source of amusement. The type of nicknames predominant in a given community determines their use. Derogatory epithets are almost exclusively terms of reference, while innocuous nicknames are used both as terms of reference and address.⁶ Innocuous nicknames often replace the individual's given name so that very few people, generally only government or church workers or others who deal with documents, even know the given name (Dignowity; Kenny).⁷

H. Russell Bernard argues that the identificatory function of nicknames, if important, does not explain either their origin or the persistence of the custom. In his in-depth study of Kalymnian nicknames in Greece, he identifies eight distinctive features to explain that continuity. Because these features sum up the findings of other authors and apply to Falklands nicknames in general, I present them here: 1. Nicknames have locative value as personal identifiers. 2. They are descriptive of physical and/or behavioral characteristics or outstanding events in the life of an individual. 3. Nicknames are mostly coined in childhood. 4. They follow a person through his or her life. 5. They can be inherited. 6. They are usually rejected in childhood, but later become a "kind of prized, incorporeal property (68)." 7. Nicknames are usually part of masculine domain. 8. They serve at least two social functions: as mechanisms of social integration and as mechanisms of social control.

Taking these eight features as starting point, I will describe the specific instance of nicknames bestowed upon women in the Falkland Islands, and from them I will attempt to elicit the world view of that insular community.

A Study Case: Female Nicknames in The Falklands

Contrary to the findings of most authors who have studied both European and non-European cultures, nicknames in the Falkland Islands are not exclusively male. Even though nicknames given to men largely outnumber those given to women, the latter belong in a category of their own. When I inquired for explanations about the numerical difference, one local man, a laborer who provided me with large amounts of data, said that most nicknames were created by males and given to other males in the work environment. Since women traditionally stayed in the home, opportunities for nicknaming were less frequent for them.

Although the man's reasoning may be partially correct, his answer is not entirely satisfactory. In the Mediterranean world, where segregation is strictly enforced, and where most women stay secluded at home, my informant's explanation would have been very appropriate. As Brandes ("Structural and Demographic Implications"), Bernard, and others have shown, in Southern Europe the folk custom of nicknaming reveals several aspects of male concerns such as their sexual, economic, and social status vis-à-vis other males. Those preoccupations find an outlet in aggressive verbal expressions that take the form of nicknames.

In the Falkland Islands, although strict sexual segregation does not exist, there is a clear sexual division of labor. Both in town and in "camp" there are certain activities that are considered unthinkable for women. In Stanley, a large percentage of women define themselves as housewives,⁸ therefore they do not have regular contact with a group of co-workers. However, they generally are in close contact with neighbors, relatives, and other women whom they meet in the shops. Friday afternoons, for example, are the favorite shopping hours, when news travels fast down the aisles of the main general store in Stanley.

In contrast to the custom in some Mediterranean countries, especially Greece, where women are excluded from bars (Herzfeld 219), women in Stanley frequent the three pubs with their husbands, boyfriends, or female friends. In the countryside they meet at the farm social club with other men and women. Both in town and camp they drink and play darts freely, with the only limits imposed by the rigid British system of drinking hours.⁹

Despite the differences with the Greek social structure, Falkland Islands female nicknames share most of the characteristics that Bernard ascribed to Kalyrnian names. For example, descriptive of physical traits are names like *Wing Nut* for a woman with large ears, *Sweaty Betty* for a woman who is large and perspires profusely, *Pink Dwarf* for a woman who is short and generally wears something pink, and *Cuddles* (British word for "hugs") for a large woman "ten times stronger than any man" (Description given by a male informant). None of these nicknames is used to address the person.

Some nicknames are reminders of special events in the life of the bearer. *Nanny Flo* for instance, whose real name is known to very few people, is a woman in her late sixties who worked as the nanny of Government House for several years. Since her nickname is perceived as an affectionate one, it is used both as a term of address and as a reference, although her case is exceptional for this category of slightly negative nicknames.¹⁰

Other examples of names recording events include *Fifty Kilos*, for a large woman who was once hanging out her laundry on a very windy day and a gust blew her skirt up exposing her panties, made out of a fifty-kilogram sack of sugar. A very funny image is presented in the nickname *The Pineapple Princess*, given to a woman who "used to wear a straw hat that looked like a pineapple and also a crown." It is interesting that the person who bestowed the nickname saw something reminiscent of monarchy and therefore also ascribed the title of "princess."¹¹ Finally, in this group belongs *Tibs*, a woman who, according to local gossip, once took cat vitamins

called "Tibs" instead of her own medication. She denies the event, but is quite tolerant of the nickname if someone uses it to her face.

Nicknames given to women during childhood not only portray affection towards the bearers, but they also perpetuate an image of women as children. These nicknames illustrate the third and fourth of Bernard's categories: they are coined in childhood and they accompany the individual through her life. Mature women who bear names like *Chick*, *Bunny*, *Chucky*, *Sweet*, *Tui*, *Muzzie*, *Kitty Witts*, *Chubby*, and *Chalky* still remain infants in the eyes of the community. The implication, judging by the nicknames, is that those women never grew up; they are still like infant animals. Since they are not mature, they lack assertiveness or the capacity for making decisions, for living an independent adult life, and need male protection.

Their sexual immaturity is another important reason they need protection. Needless to say, those images reflect not reality but rather idealized portrayals of women that are not unique to the Falkland Islands. Alan Dundes, in his discussion of male chauvinism in American culture, provides several examples of metaphors that perpetuate what he calls the "saccharine quality of women," such as *sweetheart*, *honey*, *sugar* and *sweetie-pie*. Dundes argues that those images were first given by men and subsequently adopted by women. Furthermore, he views the association of women with food—woman as dish, or with food preparation—as tools for social control that "restrict the range of female activity" (*Interpreting Folklore* 164).

In sharp contrast to the benign nicknames given to women at an early age, but also different from other negative nicknames, lie those terms of reference bestowed upon adult females. They are often very derogatory and invariably comment upon the bearer's morals (in that case nicknames derive almost exclusively from events related to the life of the individual or to her behavior rather than from physical traits) or portray them as sexual objects. In most cases the texture (Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* 22-23), that is, the word itself, does not reveal its meaning without recourse to an explanation of how the nickname came to be. In other words, no expletives are used as nicknames.

An example is *The Yellow Submarine* or *Yellow Sub* for short, the nickname of a woman said to provide sexual favors to local men as well as to soldiers. One female informant commented about her, "She is extremely loose, but will charge if anyone is fool enough to pay." The nickname originated some years ago, in the mid-seventies, on the occasion of a dance

in town. According to one version, this woman, who was wearing a bright yellow dress, was having sex with the sailors of a visiting ship, right behind the Town Hall. The men were standing in line waiting for their turn singing the Beatles' song "We all live in a Yellow Submarine." This interesting image reveals a phallic symbolism that may or may have not been conscious in the sailors' minds. It could be argued that this common metaphor for the penis penetrating the vagina the same way that the submarine penetrates the water, represents something else in this nickname. Here, the submarine is not the phallus but the womb, in which the men live. Another version of the origin of this nickname, given to me by a male informant, an ex-marine, indicated explicit sexual symbolism. In this variant, the woman used to visit the Marine's barracks, and the men called her *Yellow Submarine* because [in her] "we go deep, and deep, and deep." The man made an undulating movement with his hand to illustrate the metaphor. The movement reflects both the waves of the ocean and the sexual act. Once again the symbolism has changed from male to female genitalia.

Derisive nickname examples also include *Flash Al*, for which I got the following background explanation from a female informant: "She used to go off with sailors. She used to flash around, in other words, she let them know that she was available. To flash is like flirting I suppose." *Al* is a short version of the woman's name. This nickname is not commonly used today, but obviously some people still remember it. Another example is *Duck*, a married woman from camp who once, in the absence of her husband, was having sex with a lover in her kitchen. They were making so much noise that the ducks were quacking nonstop in the garden. Since the creators of this nickname were single men who worked on the farm where the woman lived, it may have been envy on their part that made them fantasize about the event.

Two other nicknames in this category are no longer used but still remain alive in the memory of some locals. One of them is *Blue Lupine*, applied to a woman in her mid-sixties, who, according to a female informant, "used to be a lady of the night in her youth, and also had a sort of brothel." Since the woman who made this remark was in her late twenties, she could not have known *Blue Lupine* in her youth when the nickname was created, so that the epithet has been kept alive by gossip. The symbolism of the color blue in the English language is very rich.¹² While blue is the color of constancy in "true-blue," used figuratively as faithful, genuine, and real, it is also the color of "blue movies," that is, indecent or obscene movies. Clearly the nickname derived its meaning

from the latter use, but what remains unclear is the association of the plant lupine with brothel activities.

The second nickname no longer in daily use is *The Sausage Queen*. I heard it employed in the course of a conversation with a man in his mid-sixties, approximately the age of the woman. When pressed for a background explanation of the nickname, the man insisted that the name was given to her because she and her family used to make large quantities of sausages. However, the smile on his face while he was uttering the explanation confirmed the double entendre that we all had suspected at first. Sausage is a widespread slang term for penis, so the implication here is that the woman had access to, and control over large quantities of male organs. Once again the monarchic image is present, and the woman is the queen; therefore she is in a superior position in the hierarchy, which could stand as a metaphor for the numerical sexual imbalance of the Falklands. Historically, for reasons not pertinent here, in the islands males largely outnumber females. That means, to some extent, that women are in the privileged position of choosing their male partners, and also that there are large numbers of single men at any given time, some of whom never get married.¹³ The extension of bachelorhood is that those men, particularly the ones living in the isolation of remote farms, are deprived of sexual intercourse with women.

Another derogatory nickname is *Pudding Bum* ("Bum" is the British equivalent of "Butt") for a woman who, according to the couple who told it to me, has a "bum that looks like a big fat pudding." The epithet reduces the woman to her buttocks and comments about their size and aspect, stigmatizing her as a sexual object in the fantasy of males. Here again culinary connotations tied the woman to the kitchen. Not surprisingly, in the Falklands a woman who is a good cook fulfills the ideals of hospitality and generosity expected of a housewife. Her biscuit canisters should always be full of sweets to offer to unexpected visitors. In preparation for the holidays, particularly Christmas, good housekeepers start baking months in advance the food that is kept in the freezer until it is consumed. Christmas pudding is one such delicacy that requires a long preparation. For Falklanders pudding is also synonymous with dessert, so often to the question "What's for pudding today?" they answer "custard, or diddle-dee [a local berry] pie."

Finally, the female nickname that most attracted my attention is *Teenage Granny*. Behind its humorous facade this name comments on several topics. According to a male informant, this woman is in her fifties

but acts and dresses like a teenager. I often heard her nickname used in conversation by gossiping men and women who criticized her behavior rather than her attire. From the point of view of the community, the woman acts like a teenager by imitating young women's public behavior and clothing. What is not directly criticized but only implied by the epithet is the real concern of the locals, namely, that she is very sexually active, usually with young men, in whom teenage girls are interested. It is the semantic inversion implicit and explicit in the nickname that makes it funny while it expresses the concern of the community over her behavior.

Of the categories of nicknames, the harmless ones given to women during childhood and the derogatory ones give to adult women fit the description of epithets as mechanisms of social integration and social control. Not only do nicknames bring people from different social levels to a relation of equality, but the community as a whole, by the constant use of nicknames, shows cohesiveness in its basic moral standards. At the same time the community through nicknames judges its members and chastises those who do not observe the norms.

To avoid presenting a misleading portrait of the Falkland Islands, it is important for me to stress that the community is extremely tolerant of its members, despite the stereotypes that its folk speech presents. To use a relevant image, the Falklands community is like a big flock, with mostly white sheep and a few black ones who are not the pride of the group, but who are nevertheless part of it. With few exceptions, nobody is ostracized in the islands. People may gossip and condemn someone's behavior, but that does not stop the person from having friends or a job or even from getting married and starting a new life.

From the examples described, it is quite clear that Falkland Islands' female nicknames and the stories that explain them present a dual image of women. At one extreme of the polarity are women who never left childhood; hence they are pure and they need the protection of males. At the other extreme are the harlots. These are women who, reduced by the nickname to a single aspect of their personalities, supposedly have an insatiable sexual appetite.

These two poles reveal more about the unresolved feelings of people who give the nicknames than they show features of the bearers. If the speculation of my informant about male creation of nicknames is right, and therefore it is mostly men who give nicknames in the Falklands, it follows that female nicknames reflect Falkland Islands' male ambivalence towards women. Some women are put on a pedestal and at the same time in an

inferior position by what Dundes calls "projective inversion" (*Parsing through Customs* 36). While it is men who feel inferior to women, they reverse the roles and put themselves in a superior position. The shift can occur only with a segment of the female group, the more submissive or controllable ones. However, because of the presence of the other segment of females, the "uncontrollable" ones, men cannot avoid a constant reminder that their superiority is only relative. On the one hand, they admire the pure woman and on the other they desire and envy the assertiveness of the harlot.

Where does this ambivalence stem from? In the case of the Falklands, where hardly any of the characteristics of Mediterranean childrearing and adult male attitudes would apply, the explanation must be sought somewhere else. It is true that even though fathers are not absent from the household, women are, for the most part, the primary caretakers of children, and the men are the providers. Because of this traditional family arrangement, the man occupies a superior position in the home, with the woman and children as dependents. However, outside the home, the man loses his power and he is in turn put in an inferior position relative to other men in the hierarchy of the political system.

Because the islands have remained a colony for over a century, their inhabitants, and in particular the men who constitute the bulk of the work force, have consistently occupied an inferior position. Absentee landowners (or their representatives on the islands, the expatriate farm managers), the colonial authorities, and the expatriate community in general have always held the most prestigious jobs. In other words, the paternalistic colonial system reduced able adult males to the category of children, who can only work under supervision. Those men, then, feel the need to prove their masculinity, and at the community level, beyond the sphere of foreigners and colonial authorities, they do so by finding women as scapegoats, and placing them in an inferior position.

As it is the case with folklore in general, nicknaming in the Falkland Islands is largely unconscious. Men, under an apparently humorous custom, present some of the community's traditionally defined ideals of womanhood. As often happens with victimized groups, women accept those ideals and therefore adopt and employ nicknames themselves, perpetuating images that do not do them justice.

Notes

1. I read a shorter version of this paper at the Kroeber Anthropological Society Annual Meeting on April 16, 1988, at The University of California, Berkeley, and the present paper at the Annual Meeting of the California Folklore Society, April 21-23, 1989, at Pomona, California. The fieldwork was conducted between January 1986 and February 1987 when I resided in the Falkland Islands with my husband, who was carrying out doctoral research on a Fulbright Fellowship.

2. Because of the vagueness of the term nickname, it is necessary to narrow it down to a specific meaning. In this discussion a nickname refers to a name attached to a person because of physical characteristics or because of a particular action or habit for which the individual is known. Hypocoristic names, e.g., *Bob* for *Robert*, are excluded here.

3. See especially Antoun; Barrett; Bernard; Breen; Danneman; Dorian; Gilmore, "Some Notes"; Kenny; McDowell; Parman; Pitt-Rivers; and Timpunza-Mvula.

4. For example, Antoun; Bernard; Kenny; Morgan, et. al.; Pitt-Rivers; and Winslow.

5. For example, Dorian, Ennew, Hoyer, MacColl and Seeger, Salzmann, and Wallman.

6. See Hoyer; Kenny; MacColl and Seeger; McDowell; and Morgan, et. al.

7. With the systemization of surnames in medieval times, nicknames became last names, particularly when censuses were instituted for purposes of taxation.

8. In the 1980 Falkland Islands Census, 214 out of 500 women in Stanley described themselves as housewives. In the countryside, 79 out of 186 women in the East Falkland and 61 out of 135 women in the West Falkland so described themselves.

9. In Stanley the pubs are open from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays; on Sundays "Glory Hour" is from 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m.

10. Even though most Falkland Islanders perceive *Nanny Flo* as an affectionate nickname, the attitude is not unanimous. A woman who has lived in the community for over thirty years, but who is not native to the islands, told me that she thought it very negative to perpetuate a person in the position of nanny, or specialized maid.

11. A short anecdote will illustrate that nicknames accompany some individuals for life. Some twenty years ago, the lady who bears the nickname *Pineapple Princess* emigrated from the Falklands to Southampton, England, where there is a large colony of Falkland Islanders. In 1986 one of our Falklands friends and her mother went to England and while visiting friends and family in Southampton, saw this woman. "Look!" the mother said, "There goes the Pineapple Princess."

12. I am indebted to Professor Anton Blok for pointing this out to me.

13. The shortage of marriageable women is such that a Falkland Islands farmer advertised for a wife through a farmer's magazine in England. A woman answered the ad, and he sent for her. People on a nearby farm, who were anxious to meet the newcomer, referred to her as the "mail order bride."

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Placename Bibliography

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