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***Shimauta*: The Island Songs of Okinawa**

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All over the world, from the Caribbean to Hawaii, island music has unique qualities distinct from mainland traditions. Within close-knit island communities, inextricably linked to the sea and the forces of nature and often subject to powerful outside influences, musical traditions have flourished and evolved into a recognizable expression of each island's identity and the character of its people. Nowhere in Japan is this musical identity more evident than in Okinawa. Anywhere you go in the islands, your travels will more often than not be accompanied by song and the sound of the *sanshin*, the Okinawan shamisen. Folk clubs and singing contests abound and most Okinawans will have a *sanshin* at home, ready to pick up and play at any opportunity. In addition, Okinawan songs and musicians have become noted and celebrated in recent years among members of the global music community. Many of the songs sung today are the product of a rich songwriting tradition that grew throughout the islands over time, and hold a great deal of interest with respect to their musical style, lyrical themes and the circumstances under which they were written. What follows is a brief account of the development of Okinawan music from its roots to the present day and of how the Okinawan people have used these island songs to both document and reflect on their experiences during a long and sometimes troubled history, and to maintain a strong sense of national pride in their cultural heritage in the face of many adversities.

First it is important to define what is meant by the terms 'Okinawan' music and *shimauta* (literally 'island songs'). The islands of what is now Okinawa Prefecture stretch from the main island of

Okinawa to the Yaeyama islands close to Taiwan. In the past, however, they were all part of the semi-autonomous and unified Ryukyu kingdom, established under the influence of China in the fourteenth century, which also included the Amami islands to the north, now part of Kagoshima Prefecture. It was during this period that a Chinese instrument, known as the *sanxian*, was introduced to the islands and with some modifications adopted enthusiastically by the people as their own.¹ This became the distinctive Okinawa *sanshin*, a three-stringed, banjo-like instrument with a snakeskin-covered sound box. Used throughout the Ryukyu islands to accompany the songs, it is the sound of the *sanshin* that is most clearly associated with 'Okinawan' music. The term *shimauta* has its origins in the Amami islands and is distinct from the term *minyō* used to refer to traditional folk songs throughout Japan. *Shimauta* now normally means the modern folk songs updated from traditional Ryukyuan *minyō* and also the newer original songs that began to be written from the 1920s onwards². For most people it is *shimauta*, probably with reference to the successful modern pop song of the same name about Okinawa by rock band The Boom, that encapsulates the folk music of Okinawa today.

The core of all Ryukyuan music lies in the sacred songs (*kamiuta*) performed by priestesses in religious ceremonies that were generally sung as a plea for abundant harvests, or as prayers for rain or safe sea voyages³. These religious incantations developed into songs, which are still performed at festivals throughout the islands today, and are referred to collectively as *koyō*. These varied with each island. On the main island of Okinawa where the Ryukyuan court was based were the ceremonial songs of *omoro* or *kuena*. On Miyako Island there were both religious songs called *neeri* and songs of everyday life, *ayagu*. Rustic songs of labour in the fields known as *yunta* or *jiraba* were predominant in the Yaeyama islands⁴. These were usually sung unaccompanied or with sparse instrumentation, and utilized the local *ryūka* form of lyrical poetry as the basis of the songs, with its 8-8-8-6 syllable structure providing the framework⁵. As well as being

¹ John Potter, *The Power of Okinawa: Roots Music from the Ryukyus*, (Tokyo: S.U. Press, 2001), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ Robert Thompson, 'The Music of Ryukyu', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, ed. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 305-6.

⁴ John Potter, *op. cit.*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*

performed in religious festivals, songs were an important part of the islanders' everyday lives, particularly in the *mo-ashibi* parties. These were gatherings held at the end of the working day, which would involve much drinking, dancing and singing until the early hours and had an important role to play in courtship.

It was therefore through the abundance of music that the islands of the Ryukyu kingdom began to establish an identity. Early Western visitors to the islands were immediately struck by this; the German scholar Kaempfer noted the people's 'agreeable, contented life,' and their habit of carrying their musical instruments with them out into the fields⁶. For a peaceful people, who were discouraged from bearing arms throughout the days of the Ryukyuan kingdom, it was music that generated national prestige, and the highest honours were bestowed on musicians. Many of the Ryukyuan nobility were especially renowned for their accomplished *sanshin* playing, and the instrument was afforded the same status as the sword had in Japan. With the demise of the Ryuku kingdom following its forced incorporation into the modernized nation state of Japan in 1879, a number of these aristocratic *sanshin* experts found themselves having to make a living for the first time in their lives⁷. They therefore used their skills to their best advantage and began to travel around the islands playing music and teaching the ordinary people. The refined musical compositions that issued from the royal court began to be adapted by the commoners into a more lively form of music, accompanied by the *sanshin*, which expressed their everyday concerns⁸. Many of these early songs have become standard items throughout the islands and have words or melodies that can be changed according to the performer or situation. The Okinawan musician China Sadao has stated that there are three tunes that are most representative of the three main island groups of Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. These are respectively *Nakuni*, *Togani* and *Tubarama*. All three of these song types have a basic melody to which the performer can add words at will, usually in the local dialect and its many variations throughout the islands, known as *Uchināguchi* (combining the words *Uchinā*, the name Okinawans give to their own land and *kuchi*, 'mouth' or 'speech')⁹.

⁶ George Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*, Revised ed. (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 1958), 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁸ John Potter, *op. cit.*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

In the early 20th century, modern folk songs with their roots in the standard melodies began to be written and recorded. In the subsequent turbulent years, these songs became a direct expression of the Okinawan people's experiences and therefore hold a great deal of interest as documented records of this period. Following its incorporation into the Meiji state, Okinawa became (and remains) Japan's poorest prefecture. From the beginning of the last century, such poverty led many Okinawans to migrate both to the mainland and further afield¹⁰. Of these migrants, a significant number went to the Kansai region and it was here in 1926 that the recording company Marufuku Records was founded by Fukuhara Chōki. The recordings on the Marufuku label made by Fukuhara and other Okinawan migrants represent some of the first modern *shimauta*, using old melodies to which new words have been added. Unsurprisingly, many of the songs' lyrical themes are concerned with the sadness of leaving Okinawa and a longing to return home. Fukuhara's *Imin Kouta* ('Emigrant's Song') is perhaps one of the most typical songs of the period and it tells of a person reluctantly forced to leave his home in search of better wages. As the song continues, a second voice advises the singer not to squander his hard-earned money but to send it back to his parents who will be proud of him and then he will earn the respect of the villagers he left behind¹¹.

Back on the islands, the Japanese government had begun to implement an aggressive programme of political and cultural assimilation in order to turn the Ryukyuans into proper Japanese imperial subjects¹². This meant that many religious and cultural practices, including folk music, were targeted as backward and in need of reform. This period of assimilation into the modernist, imperialist state is reflected in a number of prewar Okinawan songs, such as *Hadashi Kinrei no Uta* ('Barefoot Prohibition Song') and *Tsuyoi Nipponjin* ('Strong Japanese'). The former functions didactically as a warning of fines that would be incurred as a result of walking barefoot in Naha, as laid down in one of the edicts issued by the Japanese in order to stamp out any traces of previous local practices. The latter more directly asserts the strength of Japanese control and the inclusion

¹⁰ James E. Roberson, 'Uchinā Pop: Place and Identity in Contemporary Okinawan Popular Music', in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, ed. Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 203.

¹¹ John Potter, op. cit., 40.

¹² James E. Roberson, 'Memory and Music in Okinawa: Cultural Politics of War and Peace', *Positions* 17:3 (Winter 2009): 686.

of Okinawa in its imperialistic goals¹³. While on the surface these songs seem to indicate Okinawan complicity in the prewar climate of both assimilation and militaristic expansion, it has been suggested that the use of traditional Ryukyuan music and the local language, which lends its own nuances to the lyrics, indirectly subverted the pro-Japanese sentiments of the songs by qualifying their imperialistic force¹⁴. This incongruity between the music and the ideas conveyed in the lyrics can be regarded as a subtle attempt to retain Okinawan identity and distinctiveness under the pressures of conforming to the model of good 'Japanese' subjects¹⁵. Songs from the 1930s such as *Wakare no Sakazuki* ('Wine Cup of Parting') and Fukuhara Chōki's *Gunjin Bushi* ('Soldier's Song') similarly reveal some complexity of feeling during the period of wartime mobilization as reflected in the melancholy of the *sanshin* accompaniments (Fukuhara was actually investigated by the authorities for using the honorific appellation *gunjin* for a soldier of the imperial army, which was considered inappropriate for the title of a Ryukyuan folk song¹⁶). The sad repetition of the phrase 'for the sake of the country' (*kuni nu tami*) at the end of *Gunjin Bushi* also seems clearly to suggest ambivalence towards the singer's conscription into the army¹⁷.

The islanders' experiences of the Battle of Okinawa of 1945, with the destruction wrought upon the islands and the horrific number of casualties, also found expression in song. The story of the Himeyuri Student Nurse Corps, 219 female high school students who were drafted to defend the island and most of whom were killed during the battle, is recounted in *Himeyuri no Uta*. Sung to the melody of *Haisen Kazoe Uta* ('War Defeat Counting Song'), an earlier song that laments the losses of war and the futility of the battle, *Himeyuri no Uta* and other songs like it can be interpreted today as significant 'sites of memory that critically invoke Okinawan suffering as the result of Japanese and American militarized violence and of Okinawan complicity born of misguided assimilationist loyalties.'¹⁸ Nostalgia for a past, peaceful Okinawa is also a common theme of the immediate postwar period. Songs of life in the internment camps set up by the occupying Americans such as *PW Bushi* and *Yaka Bushi* describe

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 688.

¹⁵ Ibid., 689.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 690.

¹⁸ Ibid., 695.

a romanticized ideal of village life contrasted with the people's predicament following the end of the war.

Songs written during the 27 years of American occupation continued to develop this theme, of a hope of returning to a peaceful idyllic past and, ironically, considering the suffering inflicted on the islanders, of a return to Japanese control. Specifically, it was a living memory of prewar peace and stability that now had become a long-held hope of the Okinawan people. This was coupled with a sense of separation, both from the past and from their homeland in the case of those Okinawans who found themselves far from the islands of their birth at the war's end, described in songs such as Fukuhara Chōki's *Natsukashii Kokyō* ('Nostalgic Homeland') in which he sings of a desire to return home and find his island as he remembered it before the war and his family members safe and happy. More overtly political songs were also recorded during the occupation, drawing on the themes of nostalgia together with a sense of protest. These were especially prevalent in the 1960s, when America was using Okinawa as a base for military campaigns in Southeast Asia, and songs such as *Okinawa o Kaese* ('Return Okinawa') and *Heiwa no Nakane* ('Bell of Peace') explicitly called for the Americans to leave Okinawa.

After Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, a new generation of musicians and songwriters began to emerge, and Okinawan songs started to find an audience in mainland Japan. While earlier songs had been almost exclusively listened to by the Okinawan public, songs written in the mid-1970s like Kina Shōkichi and Champloose's *Haisi Ojisan* with the *sanshin* accompanied by a full rock band, appeared in the mainstream pop charts¹⁹. This new type of song emphasized local features, such as the Okinawan scale and high-pitched female vocals combined with electric instruments and a danceable beat²⁰. China Sadao's 1976 album *Akabana* was also a landmark in this fusion of Okinawan and Western music and was written with a clear purpose in mind. China has stated that in the years after Okinawa was returned to Japan, many young Okinawans moved to Tokyo and were beginning to forget or even deny their own culture. *Akabana*, which included the hit single *Bye Bye Okinawa*, was written to remind Okinawans living in

¹⁹ Christine Yano and Hosokawa Shuhei, 'Popular Music in Modern Japan', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, ed. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 357.

²⁰ Robert Thompson, 'The Music of Ryukyu,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*, ed. Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 308.

and attempting to fit in with mainland Japanese society of their roots²¹. With Okinawa still housing 75 percent of the U.S. army bases in Japan and with the many crimes associated with army personnel, protest songs continue to be written, reflecting the ongoing presence of the war and its aftermath and narrating more universalistic desires for peace. Daiku Tetsuhiro's *Okinawa Kagayake* ('Shining Okinawa') updates the music of *Okinawa o Kaese* and tells of a future Okinawa which will heal hearts and tell the world about peace²². These sentiments are further expressed in the Nenes 1997 album *Akedoru Umai* which, written in the context of the notorious rape of a schoolgirl by three U.S. servicemen in 1995, has a number of songs with peace as their theme²³.

Most albums recorded by Okinawan musicians since the 1970s have consisted of re-recordings of earlier songs, both traditional and modern, together with new compositions, constituting a body of work that continues to place the themes of Okinawan identity and experiences at the forefront. By looking back to the tranquil days of the Ryukyuan kingdom, with its traditions of cultural tolerance and peacefulness, and confronting the experiences of war, occupation and diaspora as well as recent local issues, contemporary Okinawan music, both traditional and popular, can generally be considered to be expressive of what it means to be Okinawan as opposed to being part of a homogeneous Japan. This 'otherness' is also reflected in the continued use of *sanshin*-based music and Okinawan-language lyrics and words (*Uchināguchi*) mixed in with what would otherwise be Japanese songs²⁴. Unlike in the Japanese mainland, folk music remains an integral part of Okinawan life, with song contests, singing clubs, festivals and other events providing a medium through which musical traditions can continue to thrive. It has even been suggested that Okinawans today regard their music as 'embodying social and moral virtues that set them apart from others, including mainland Japanese and Americans.'²⁵ Drawing on the two virtues of historical peacefulness and diversity, a legacy of Okinawa's position on the maritime trading routes of Asia along with its many visitors and

²¹ John Potter, op. cit., 64.

²² James E. Roberson, 2009, 700.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ James E. Roberson, 2003, 203.

²⁵ Laura Hein and Mark Selden, 'Culture, Power, and Identity in Contemporary Okinawa', in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, ed. Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 10.

conquerors, musicians and other artists seek to promote this image through their works.²⁶

With the current popularity of Okinawan music, most clearly seen in the Okinawan (*Uchinā*) pop boom of the 1990s throughout Japan and, to a varying degree, the globe, it seems that images of Okinawa remain synonymous with one of its most enduring and accessible cultural practices. Considering the islands' troubled history, it is remarkable that Okinawan musicians have been so successful in maintaining and exporting their culture in the face of such strong external forces. With respect to this achievement, perhaps the most important and lasting theme to be addressed in recent island songs has been that of continued remembrance. In Kina Shōkichi's *Shimagwa Song* ('Island-Child Song'), the (Okinawan) listener is implored not to forget where he or she came from – 'We are children of the islands' – a message that is emphasised by the repeated phrase 'Do not forget the spirit of the islands.' What emerges from this and an abundance of similar contemporary songs is that wherever native Okinawans are, be it in mainland Japan, Hawaii or South America, the songs will always be there to remind them, and the world, of their ancestry, by keeping the island spirit alive.

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The Last King of Mongolia

Keith McPhalen

On the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar (as the locals call the city, when they are not calling it U.B.), a city that sometimes seems as though it is all outskirts, is a small compound of slightly run-down buildings along a particularly dusty stretch of not-quite-sealed road. Though small by modern standards, even in a city that includes suburbs consisting of

²⁶ Ibid.