

## Chapter 14

# Rooted as Banyan Trees: *Eisā* and the Okinawan Diaspora in Japan

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Uchina kara njite yusu ni makirarimi  
Washita wakamun ya yuni shirasa  
Gajimaru nu gutuni chimuni neyuhatotē  
Yamatu ite shimanu hanayu sakasa  
“Hailing from Okinawa, we will not be defeated  
and the world will hear from us young people.  
Like the banyan, we will root ourselves firmly  
so blossoms from our home bloom in Japan”  
*Gajimaru* by Toshinobu Oshiro (2004)

I owe my initial interest in Okinawan music to Robert Garfias. When I took his course in 1980, I knew nothing of Japanese traditional music although I was born and grew up there. I was struck by the beauty of the Okinawan court music repertoire presented in class. Robert's expert exposition and infectious enthusiasm encouraged me to listen to the music of “my country” without succumbing to its prevalent image in Japan as something too feudal and constrained to enjoy. Although I researched other areas for my master's and doctoral thesis projects, a strong desire to study Okinawan music was instilled in me. My move from Seattle to Osaka in 1996 gave me a chance to learn Okinawan music in person, and I was fortunate to find Munetaka Machida, a veteran teacher of Okinawan classical music and a long-time resident of Osaka. In the process of apprenticing myself to him (both a delight and a challenge), I was initiated into the community of Okinawans in the Osaka area, which eventually led me to study the topic of this chapter. A circle of events was completed when Robert came to the National Museum of Ethnology as a visiting professor for seven months in 2003, and we attended the annual *Eisā* Festival in Osaka.

The *eisā* is a form of dance performed in Okinawa during the summer *bon* festival, when the spirits of the deceased are believed to return temporarily to the world of the living.<sup>1</sup> The *bon* is held for three days, July 13 through July 15, as part

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in San Diego, California (March 5, 2004). The accompanying

of the lunar calendar according to which Okinawan rituals and festivities continue to be observed. The spirits are welcomed (*unkē*, July 13), entertained with food, drink, music, and dance, then sent off (*ūkui*, July 15) until their next visit. In many areas of Okinawa, including Hontō (the main Okinawa island) and the smaller islands adjacent to it, each town (or section of a city) has an *eisā* group with a distinct style of performance in terms of its use of instruments, choreographed movements, repertoire of songs, and costumes.

A large *eisā* group may have more than 50 performers, consisting of drummers, dancers, accompanying musicians (*jiutē* or *jikata*), and in many cases comic relief characters (*chondarā*). Although what we know today as *eisā* has an enormous variety and is not subject to easy classification, it can be grouped into two main categories, depending on whether or not dancers play drums while dancing: *taiko-odori* ("drum dance"; dancers with drums) and *te-odori* ("hand dance"; dancers without drums). Each category is further subdivided into two types. One style of *te-odori* is performed only by female dancers and is practiced in the northwestern region of Hontō; the other is performed by both male and female dancers on the Motobu Peninsula in the northern region. The *taiko-odori* category is divided into two subtypes according to the kind of drums used. A tradition using the *pārānkū* (small frame drum) is practiced on the Yokatsu Peninsula (central eastern region) and the neighboring Hamahiga Island. Another tradition using *shimedaiko* (or *shimidēku*, laced drum) is most prominent in the central region, around the city of Okinawa, but the tradition has spread to all regions of the island to become the dominant style (Kobayashi 1998: 36-40).

The last two types of *eisā* have spread beyond Okinawa to places with sizable communities of Okinawans. Okinawa is known for its high levels of emigration; many people of Okinawan descent now reside in Hawaii, North America, and South America, as well as in large urban centers in Japan.<sup>2</sup> *Eisā* has become

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documentary film, *Drumming out a Message: Eisā and the Okinawan Diaspora in Japan*, was screened at the International Workshop, *Possibilities and Problems of Visual Documentation of Traditional Performing Art*, at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka (February 21, 2005); and at the 50th Annual Conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Atlanta, Georgia (November 18, 2005). The comments from the floor at these meetings were both useful and encouraging, and some of them were incorporated into the present article. A copy of the film can be rented free of charge for educational and research purposes from the Audiovisual Section, National Museum of Ethnology (Contact address: 10-1, Senri Expo Park, Suita, Osaka 565-0083, Japan). My deepest appreciation goes to the *Gajimaru no Kai* members and others in the Okinawan community in Osaka for their patient and generous assistance, particularly Toshinori Tamaki, Kaoru Kinjo, and Keiko Nakama. I also acknowledge here with gratitude the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (*Monbushō*) Grant (#09871058) for partially funding my research on which this chapter is based.

<sup>2</sup> The first recorded emigration occurred in 1899 when 30 Okinawans migrated to Hawaii (Kinjo 1992: 37). Okinawa is presently part of the nation-state of Japan, and the rest of Japan is sometimes referred to as "mainland Japan." However, in this article, Okinawa

one of the most frequently practiced forms of performing arts among overseas Okinawans. *Eisā* performances are featured prominently in community events and cultural festivals serving to showcase Okinawan identity, whether in Osaka or Honolulu, Los Angeles or Sao Paulo (Sutton 1983, Terauchi 1997, Shiramizu 1998, Shirota 1999, 2002).

In this chapter I focus on Osaka, where *eisā* was first introduced to Japan. Its beginning and unique development have been conditioned by the historically constituted relationship between Okinawans and Japanese and the discriminatory practices against Okinawans in Japan. I aim to describe the experiences of Okinawans in Osaka and their shared memory of history, which served as a backdrop to the introduction of *eisā*.

### The Okinawan community in Osaka

Within Japan, Kansai (Osaka City and adjacent areas) has the largest off-island Okinawan community, concentrated most heavily in the Taisho Ward of Osaka, where a quarter of the population is estimated to be of Okinawan descent (Kinjo 1992: 29). Okinawan immigration to Osaka dates back to the late 1890s, and the 1920s marked its first peak. The great depression in 1924 forced many Okinawans to seek employment outside Okinawa, and many ended up in Osaka. Described then as the Manchester of the Orient, Osaka was flourishing as a center of spinning and shipbuilding and needed a great amount of cheap labor, especially in the years following the World War I, when by 1925 more than 30,000 Okinawans were already in the Kansai region (Arashiro 1997: 181, Ishihara 1982: 64, Osaka Shishi Hensansho 1999: 256-9).

Due to overt discrimination and negative stereotyping, Okinawans kept low profiles and many hid their ethnic identity in public spaces.<sup>3</sup> Job advertisements during this period often included a phrase such as *Chōsenjin Ryūkyūjin Okotowari* (Koreans and Okinawans Need Not Apply) (Nakama 1999: 61-2, China 2006: 24-5). Most Okinawans lived in marshy lowland areas, such as the present-day Taisho and Konohana Wards of Osaka, and along the Mukogawa River in Amagasaki, where minimal urban amenities were available. This was not only due to housing

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is treated as a separate entity, and the rest of Japan is referred to as Japan. This bifurcation, based on the Okinawan category of *Uchinā* or *Uchinānchu* (Okinawa or Okinawan) as contrasted to *Yamato/u* or *Yamatonchu* (Japan or Japanese), is applied here in order to keep distance from the centrality implied in the expression "mainland."

<sup>3</sup> For more on the origin and history of Japanese discrimination against Okinawans, see Tomiyama (1990) and Oguma (1998). One of the strikingly notorious events that revealed a Japanese sense of racial superiority and blatant discrimination was the Jinruikan (Human Pavilion) Incident in 1903 when two Okinawan women were displayed along with many other racial minorities as live human specimens (Matsuda 2003; Engeki "Jinruikan" Joen o Jitsugensasetai Kai 2005).

discrimination against Okinawans but also because of proximity to work and the convenience and comfort of living close to fellow Okinawans (Kinjo 1992: 43).

Japanese considered many cultural traits of Okinawans (diet, attire, language, marital practices, music, and dance) distinct from and often inferior to their own. For many Japanese, Okinawans had a tendency to live in shacks, raise pigs (which the Japanese considered unsanitary), get drunk frequently, and start to dance abruptly when music was played. These stereotypical traits collectively conjured up an image of Okinawans as a cultural "Other" for the Japanese.

In order to ensure their welfare and fundamental human rights, the Okinawa Prefectural Association of Kansai (*Kansai Okinawa Kenjinkai*) was formed in 1924 and established a journal, *Dōhō* (Brethren). While the rights of Okinawans began to be articulated in organizational efforts, assimilation to Japanese customs and ways of life was encouraged within the Okinawan community.<sup>4</sup> The educated elite and well-to-do within the community were especially inclined to take an assimilationist stance, and they led the Lifestyle Reform Movement (*seikatsu kaizen undo*) in the 1930s. In this movement, they demanded that fellow Okinawans refrain from Okinawan customs and habits, such as speaking their native dialect, walking barefoot, drinking heavily, partying late at night, and playing the *sanshin* (a three-stringed long-neck lute) and drum except on special occasions (Ishihara 1982: 67-8, Nakama 1999; for a critical analysis of the Okinawa dialect controversy, see Oguma 1998: 392-416). Some individuals and families adopted Japanese names that bore no resemblance to their Okinawan names, while others used the Japanese pronunciation for their names without changing the written characters. For example, the Okinawan pronunciation *arakachi* was changed to the Japanese-sounding *shingaki*. Many Okinawans were hesitant to exhibit what were despised as typically Okinawan traits. Young Okinawans were by and large discouraged from learning Okinawan music (Ota 1996: 45), and those who were inclined to learn music were branded as *dikiranu* (delinquents) despite their role as the primary purveyors of Okinawan culture in the Osaka area (interview with Kaoru Kinjo, 1999). During this period, many played the *sanshin* inside the closet (literally) so as not to reveal their Okinawan identity (Nakama 1999: 85).

### The birth of *eisā* in Osaka

The post-war immigration of Okinawans began in 1957, and reached its peak during the 1960s and 1970s when the "economic miracle" was in full swing. The reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 (it had been under U.S. rule after World War II) further facilitated the migration of young workers, who no longer needed passports to enter Japan. The majority of such youths had just graduated from junior

<sup>4</sup> Tomiyama (1990) argues, however, that the *Kenjinkai* was run by a small group of individuals with leftist agendas and did not necessarily represent Okinawans in Osaka at large.

high schools and high schools. The 1970s wave of immigration is distinguished from earlier periods in that it was officially encouraged and supported by the Okinawan prefectural government. Such migration was regarded as a means to solve the problem of high unemployment in Okinawa. The prefectural government sponsored workshops for potential candidates to promote assimilation into Japanese culture by explaining differences in lifestyles and customs. The message given at such workshops was highly ambivalent (Kishi 2001).

Unfortunately, when Okinawan youths arrived in Osaka, their hopes for a new life turned quickly into disappointment, largely due to false advertising and broken promises by employers and middlemen. Faced with grim working conditions and discrimination, many Okinawans had their dreams shattered, suffered severe mental strain, and, in some cases, were involved in tragic incidents such as rape, murder, and suicide (Ota 1996: 124-5, Narisada 1998a: 78-80).

The suicide of a young man in prison in 1974 sent a shock wave through the population of young workers from Okinawa, and it became a potent symbol of the predicament that Okinawan youths faced. Toshinori Tamaki (b. 1947), then a recent immigrant from Okinawa, sensed the urgent need to organize young Okinawan workers in Kansai and proposed the formation of a group for mutual support. Responding to his call, over 300 young Okinawans gathered to establish the *Gajimaru no Kai* (then, *Gajumaru no Kai*, Banyan Association) in February, 1975. The group's name was adopted because the banyan trees grow all over Okinawa, and all members were familiar with them from childhood. Their desire to establish themselves in Osaka is expressed in the imagery of banyan trees firmly rooted in the ground.

The *Gajimaru no Kai* adopted three goals: (1) for young migrant workers to stick together; (2) to protect their rights to a livelihood; and (3) to protect and teach people about Okinawa's natural beauty and culture. Under these slogans, they requested employers to stop their discriminatory practices and to improve labor conditions for Okinawan workers. For example, when an Okinawan intern was fired by a hospital in Osaka in 1977 because she spoke with an Okinawan accent and therefore was not easily understood, the *Gajimaru no Kai* held a rally in front of the hospital demanding that she be rehired (Hirano 1980: 6-7, Uda 1999: 195-6). They also began organizing social activities such as picnics, cycling trips, dance parties, and softball games. From the very beginning, *eisā* was chosen as their most important cultural activity, offering members opportunities to reaffirm their Okinawan culture.

Kaoru Kinjo, one of the founding members of *Gajimaru no Kai*, eloquently summarizes the importance of cultural activity for minority individuals to fight against discrimination.

The situation of not being able to behave freely, in other words, of feeling discrimination, means if there's someone around with a prejudice against you, you can't find the energy to fight back. By getting together, people felt they could stand their ground better. They don't go out to work united in a group. And, after

spending time together everyone goes off to their separate lives. Then, if they face problems individually, they each need the energy to stick up for themselves. For that, restoring their sense of identity by expressing their Okinawan culture is a vital support, and they react by feeling bold and confident. Gradually they stop feeling so sensitive, and people stop interfering with them. Maybe they're easier to understand, or both sides are better able to accept each other. So picnics, hiking, volleyball and other sports have nothing to do with culture, so all this still can't help them generate the energy to stand up for themselves. But joining in the *eisā*, or doing drama, playing the *sanshin*, doing karate, doing Okinawan classical dance ... all done in small groups, these things are a much greater support. Some people become truer to what's inside themselves, and others reinvent themselves. (Interview, 1999)

Since 1975, the *eisā* group has had a weekly practice in the park surrounding Osaka Castle. The park provides enough space for practicing *eisā*, and its central location in the city is convenient for members. Apart from the size and location of the park, there are at least two other reasons for its selection. First, in Osaka Castle Park Okinawans can expose their Okinawan identity publicly by practicing *eisā* in the presence of many Japanese. Members of the *Gajimaru no Kai* were aware that producing a characteristically Okinawan sound in public was, in the context of the suppressed Okinawan identity of former generations, an act of "coming out," requiring a great deal of courage and determination.

Second, some members of the group interpreted their weekly practice as an act of soft resistance against the Japanese domination represented symbolically by the site. Osaka Castle was constructed by Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-98), the warlord who united Japan in 1590 after many years of internal warfare. The castle was Hideyoshi's headquarters and the symbol of his political and military might. Okinawa was an independent kingdom during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, though their independence was precariously maintained through a tributary relationship with China. In 1592, Hideyoshi tried to force the reluctant Shōnei, then the king of Ryukyu (Okinawa), to provide soldiers and subsistence for his imminent invasion of the Korean peninsula. Ensuing events, including Okinawa's recalcitrance over sending help, triggered the invasion of Okinawa and eventually its subjugation in 1609 by the Satsuma clan of southern Japan, which the Shogunate gave permission to attack. After the 1609 invasion, the Japanese government worked relentlessly toward the incorporation of Okinawa into Japan. Okinawa became a prefecture of Japan in 1879. Set against the history of Japanese subjugation of Okinawa, members of the group found a measure of satisfaction in filling the symbolically charged space surrounding Osaka Castle with the powerful sounds of Okinawan drumming (Narisada 1998a: 81-2).

### Annual Eisā Festival

The annual Eisā Festival (*eisā matsuri*) has been the *Gajimaru no Kai*'s most engaging activity since its establishment in 1975. Much of the group's resources are used to organize the annual September festival. The festival has become an arena in which to showcase *Gajimaru no Kai* and several *eisā* groups formed by Okinawans in other parts of Japan. At the 28th Eisā Festival in 2002, more than 4000 people visited the site to watch their favorite groups perform. Eleven *eisā* groups participated in the festival. About a dozen booths were set up to offer Okinawan delicacies (*uchinā soba* soup noodles with pork, *sātā andāgī* donuts and others) and drinks (*awamori* distilled hard liquor, Okinawan beer, *sīkāsa* lime juice), as well as Okinawan music CDs, books, and T-shirts. Visitors of all age groups enjoyed the event, many with their families, in a relaxed and jovial atmosphere (Figure 14.1).



Figure 14.1 *Pārankū eisā* at the 26th Eisā Festival in Osaka (2000)

However, when the *Gajimaru no Kai* started organizing the annual Eisā Festival in 1975, initial reactions from the Okinawan community were not at all encouraging or positive. Many elder community leaders, especially those associated with the *Kenjinkai* (Prefectural Association) complained that the group's public performance of *eisā* would be nothing short of "exposing Okinawa's shame" (*Okinawa no hajisarashi*) (Nakama 1999: 62, Tamaki 2001).

Kazufumi Nakamura, an active member of *Gajimaru no Kai* for many years, relates an incident that revealed the *Kenjinkai*'s reluctance to support the *Eisā* Festival.

The group had some problems over tents for the Festival. In Taisho Ward the Okinawa *Kenjinkai* had some large tents they used for sports meetings and so on. So I suggested we borrow them. The chairman at that time first agreed to let us borrow them. Then, a week before the Festival, I got a call saying we couldn't use them. When I asked why, they said the *Kenjinkai* wasn't happy about us displaying Okinawan culture. When I pointed out that they helped organize displays of Okinawan classical dance, they said that was okay because it was indoors and the audience was largely Okinawans. But the *Eisā* Festival is outdoors where anyone could be watching. (Interview, 2004)

Those senior Okinawans managed to obtain economic stability and social status by suppressing their ethnic identity and assimilating into Japanese culture. Many had changed their Okinawan names into Japanese sounding names, and they avoided wearing Okinawan attire. Such elders thought the group's activity would contradict the impression that Okinawans were willing to assimilate into Japanese culture. Other elders, who had experienced discrimination by exposing their ethnic affiliations, also expressed reservations about public displays of Okinawanness. During its initial years, the *Gajimaru no Kai* received no support, financial or moral, from established organizations such as the *Kenjinkai*, but instead received letters and phone calls of protest and, in some instances, even threats.

Some elderly individuals did give the *Gajimaru no Kai* unspoken yet powerful encouragement. Kinjo vividly remembers an old woman (*obā*) at the first *Eisā* Festival who quietly watched from a distance the entire preparation process of the festival on a day of scorching heat. The *Gajimaru no Kai* members realized that their *eisā* performance did have relevance for aged *issei* (first-generation immigrants) despite stiff resistance from some quarters of the community. Even today, *Gajimaru no Kai*'s activities receive considerable moral support from some elders who await the festival eagerly, counting the days with the invitation flyer at their bedsides (interviews with Kaoru Kinjo in 1999, Hiroki Simajiri in 2000, and Kazufumi Nakamura in 2004).

Inspired by the performances of *Gajimaru no Kai*, several other *eisā* groups have been formed in Kansai, including *Okinawa Kariyushikai* (established in 1985, in Daito, Osaka Prefecture), *Okinawa Eisā Ryūkokai* (1993, Amagasaki, Hyogo), *Kyoto Ryūkyū Yūyūkai* (1993, Uji, Kyoto), *Deigo no Kai* (1997, Osaka), *Rekio* (1998, Takarazuka, Hyogo Prefecture), and *Heshikiya Eisā Tamotsukai* (1999, Osaka/Nara). Other localities in Japan such as Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Toyota (Aichi Prefecture) also have *eisā* groups and hold *eisā* festivals of their

own.<sup>5</sup> They all gather at the annual *Eisā* Festival in Osaka to acknowledge the pioneering work of *Gajimaru no Kai* and to celebrate Okinawan culture together.

### *Eisā* and *nisei* identity

Although most members were young immigrant workers from Okinawa when the *Gajimaru no Kai* was formed, the *nisei* (second-generation) Okinawans who grew up in Kansai also joined the group. In addition to the negative stereotypes forced upon Okinawans and their settlements ("dirty," "crazy," "quick-tempered," "heavy drinkers"), they had also suffered the identity crisis caused by their own dislocation from Okinawa and its culture. For such young people, participating in *eisā* with fellow Okinawans was not merely for socializing or entertainment, but a search for the relevance of Okinawan culture in their diasporic existence.

One such individual was Kaoru Kinjo (b. 1953), whom I quoted earlier. Although he was born in Koza (present-day Okinawa City), his family moved to Amagasaki near Osaka when he was still an infant. Kinjo grew up in an Okinawan settlement (*Okinawajin buraku*) in Amagasaki, and considers himself a *nisei*. He became aware of his ethnic identification when he was around 10, but kept his Okinawan identity in the background throughout his junior high and high school years. During this time, he traced the cause of most discrimination against Okinawans to poverty and lack of education in his parents' generation, a line of thinking widely shared among the *nisei* in the Kansai area (Ota 1996: 37). His perspective experienced a drastic turn, however, when he met an elderly *issei* woman who was too proud of her Okinawan background to hide it as many others had done, despite the fact that she had little formal education and wealth. Inspired by her pride and dignity, Kinjo began to look deeply into the history of Okinawans in Osaka and his own identity and encountered *eisā* in the process of his own soul searching. Kinjo recollects his initial encounter with *eisā* as follows:

I'd never seen the *eisā* before. But you know, even though it was the first time, somehow I felt something stirring inside, in my roots. It touched my roots deep inside that I didn't know were there. It was like lighting a fuse to something living inside me. Something resonated. I had this powerful sense of breaking out of a shell, of something about to emerge. (Interview, 1999)

Kinjo uses the shell as a metaphor for the Japaneseness that he had unwittingly internalized. From the perspective of *nisei* like Kinjo, the immigrants and temporary workers from Okinawa seemed adept at freely expressing their feelings and emotions, unlike themselves. This observation led to a painful realization

<sup>5</sup> The Toyota Okinawa *Kenjinkai* has sponsored its own *Eisā Matsuri* since 1980. Since 1985, Tokyo Okinawa *Kenjinkai* has sponsored Ashibi Matsuri where its *eisā* group plays a prominent role.

that they themselves had internalized the Japanese characteristics of restraint and aloofness while growing up in Japan.

An encounter with *eisā* can also be a tremendously joyous and enlightening occasion for the *nisei*, as they confirm their innate connection with Okinawa. For example, Yoshimi Moromisato, one of the founding members of *Gajimaru no Kai*, describes her excitement when she realized her identity as an Okinawan through *eisā* as follows:

It seemed more like the Okinawa inside me bursting out. I felt incredibly excited inside, the first time Mr. Tamaki said I could beat the *pārānkū* drum. I was so thrilled, so excited that after all, there was something of Okinawa inside me. (Interview, 2001)

Kinjo concludes that though many young Okinawans can be joyously expressive among others like them, these same young people fail to express themselves under the forceful Japanese gaze. For many *nisei* like Kinjo and Moromisato, playing *eisā* was a way of regaining the lost identity that was taken away from them, and of living with confidence so as to deal with harsh realities including rampant discrimination. For its members, *Gajimaru no Kai* provided a “space to breathe in the suffocating *Yamatu* (*Yamato*, Japanese) society” (from Kaoru Kinjo’s public lecture, “Okinawa in Osaka,” in 1998 at Asia Library, Osaka).

### Context, repertoire, and style

The primary function of the *eisā* group during the *bon* annual festivities is to offer a short performance on the *ūkui* (“send-off”) day in front of the altar where ancestors are enshrined. The practice of going from house to house to offer such performances is known as *michijunē*, and it can take several hours to complete the round. Only after this performance, the offerings for ancestors (food, drink, incense, paper money) at the altar are brought to the boundary of the village in the direction of the cemetery, signifying “sending back” the ancestors to the realm of the deceased, thus marking the end of *bon*. In Osaka, by contrast, *eisā* is not played during *bon*, during which time many Okinawans return “home” (*satogaeri*). The *Gajimaru no Kai* performs *michijunē* by visiting neighborhood restaurants and shops owned by Okinawans on the night before the *Eisā Festival*, informing local residents of the festival and collecting donations (Figure 14.2).

The initial style of performance by the *Gajimaru no Kai* was modeled after the *eisā* of Hamahiga Island near the main island of Okinawa. Two founding members of the group, Toshinori Tamaki and Yasukazu Hokama (b. 1948), taught the *eisā* style practiced on their home island of Hamahiga, with the use of *pārānkū*, a small frame-drum struck with a short wooden stick. Between 1979 and 1985, *Gajimaru no Kai* learned *eisā* styles from Kadena and Senbaru (the main island of Okinawa) that use the *shimedaiko*, and gradually created a style of their own based on them

(Narisada 1998b: 276-7). Some founding members of the *Gajimaru no Kai* revived and performed the *pārānkū*-style *eisā* at the Eisā Festival to pass down the original spirit of *eisā* in Osaka to younger generations.



Figure 14.2 *Michijunē*: A *Gajimaru no Kai* member strikes his drum while whistling with fingers (2002)

Hybridity and pan-Okinawan appeal characterize the *eisā* of *Gajimaru no Kai*. Historically, *eisā* was performed in the main island of Okinawa and its surrounding small islands such as Hamahiga, but not on Miyako and the Yaeyama Islands, south of the main island. In order to make *eisā* accessible to all Okinawan youths regardless of their home region, *Gajimaru no Kai* decided to adopt songs from these areas to accompany drumming. Frequently, they sang Yaeyama Yunta (based on *Asadoya Yunta* from Yaeyama Islands), *Nariyama Ayagu* (from Miyako Island), *Chunjun-nagari* and other songs (from the main Okinawa Island), as though gradually moving up from the south till they stopped at the main island (from an interview in 2002 with Toshinobu Oshiro, a *jiutai* musician [*sanshin* and vocal] for *Gajimaru no Kai* for many years). Thus, the drumming and dance styles of Hamahiga Island *eisā* were fused with the songs from Yaeyama and Miyako, where there is no tradition of *eisā*, and with those from other parts of Okinawa

Island where *eisā* with *shimedaiko* drums is prevalent. This fusion of different stylistic traits was the primary characteristic of *eisā* in Osaka. Furthermore, lyrics describing the experience of Okinawans in Osaka were written for the melody of Okinawan songs, such as the one provided at the beginning of this chapter.

### Learning about Okinawa

In the 1980s, the *Gajimaru no Kai* continued to attract young workers arriving in Osaka from Okinawa. Many were taken to the *Eisā* Festival by their friends and coworkers. The current leader of the group, Hiroki Shimajiri (b. 1962), is one of these. Growing up in Ishikawa where students were discouraged from participating in *eisā*, he had no prior experience of being involved. When he joined the group in 1980, experiences of young Okinawans were not as harsh as before, and he has no memory of being discriminated against on the basis of his ethnicity. He joined the group mainly to meet other Okinawans and release work-related stress by playing drums. Yet, *Gajimaru no Kai* served as a place for him to learn about the history and current situation of Okinawa. Being around the founding members, he became sensitized about Okinawa's struggle over problems relating to the disproportionately high presence of U.S. bases. He never thought much about them when he was there as they had been there since his childhood, but now he often participates in political rallies and social movements.

Through *Gajimaru no Kai*, many Okinawan workers like Shimajiri have had an opportunity to cast their personal and localized experiences in the context of the global economy and minority issues in Japan at large. They also have become more knowledgeable about the geopolitical position and power relations of Okinawa in the world. With this heightened awareness, *Gajimaru no Kai* members are concerned about the accelerating Japanization of Okinawa, manifested in the attitudes and perspectives of young students and workers from Okinawa today. They tend to consider their activities in Osaka, or at least those that explicitly assert Okinawan identity, as a message and warning to Okinawa. For example, Nakamura states, "I think the biggest issue is that at some point we must stop Okinawa from becoming more and more like Japan. That's something impossible to stop in terms of politics, so I think it's vital that we stop it in terms of culture." Shimajiri adds, "It is a message for Okinawa that people are struggling here in Japan, so Okinawa should try harder. Having the kinds of activities we're doing here in Japan should be a source of encouragement and confidence for Okinawa."

### An "Okinawa boom" and the spread of *eisā*

The current popularity of *eisā* in Japan is, in part, a result of an "Okinawa boom" that began in the 1980s and has continued until now. The tourist industry created an image of Okinawa as a tropical paradise, and it has become one of the most

frequently visited destinations for Japanese tourists, many of whom stay at resort hotels built by Japanese developers. Okinawan food and cuisine are presented to such tourists as enhancing health and assuring longevity, backed by statistics that Okinawans enjoy the longest life expectancy of any group in Japan. The All Okinawa Eisā Festival (*Okinawa Zentō Eisā Matsuri*), which started in 1956, has also become a tourist attraction where many Japanese are exposed to *eisā*.

In popular music, Okinawa has provided considerable inspiration to Japanese musicians since the 1970s. The Okinawan lyrics of Kina Shokichi's first hit, *Haisai Ojisan*, inspired many Japanese musicians to incorporate elements of Okinawan music into their creations. These elements include instruments (especially *sanshin*), the "Okinawan scale" (a major scale without the second and sixth), and the rhythms of *eisā* drumming. In addition to Kina, whose live performances are sometimes backed by an *eisā* group, several prominent and popular Okinawan groups, such as Rinken Band and Nenes, incorporate *eisā* rhythms into their music, thus popularizing them in Japan. Examples of pieces with *eisā* influences include "Kunjan Sabakui" by Nenes (*Yunta*, 1992, KSC2-16), "Eisā" by Rinken Band (*Ajimā*, 1992, SRCL2472), and "Kudaka Manjushu" by Shoukichi Kina (*Hinukan*, 1996, PHCL5014).

The boom was manifested in the emergence of "Okinawa freaks," who idolized Okinawa and its distinct culture as an alternative to their stiff and strained lifestyle in Japan. Their orientalist outlook sets up Okinawa as an exotic destination for vacation (and more recently relocation) and an object of visual, aural, and gastronomic desire. Although not completely unaware of (and sometimes quite knowledgeable about) Okinawa's history and current socio-political problems, they simply remain in their comfortable inaction and amnesia. It felt natural and unproblematic for those Japanese who became attracted to *eisā* to want to perform it themselves, since, first, it is one of the many genres of music and dance available in the music industry and, second, the notion of (and respect for) ownership of music is rare.

Apart from pleasure-seeking "Okinawa freaks," there are more socially conscious Japanese who join the group in their effort to learn Okinawan perspectives and to seek a long-lasting connection with Okinawans. One such Japanese is Mariko Hanada, a native of Kyushu who now lives in Taisho. Although acknowledging the difficulty of being a Japanese member of the *Gajimaru no Kai*, she sees the group as a potential site for learning and connecting with Okinawans:

I'm on the side that did the discriminating, that has made Okinawa suffer. Knowing that, I feel guilt. There are times I suffer because of the burden of guilt we carry, the guilt we must carry. But beyond that, the most important thing is that I'm able to think about it together with others. Probably for me the *sanshin* and the dancing, things like that, all help me feel a bit better. Because there's no Okinawan blood in my veins, I may not have the "impulse" they feel in their blood. But I feel the *eisā* leads me to all sorts of other things. To Okinawa itself, to Japanese like me who are thinking about these things, to Okinawans

themselves who don't bear this guilt ... I feel as though I can be a part of it. It's a sense of being united ... or something like that. So I want to say to other Japanese like me who don't know anything about Okinawa and so aren't able to think about it, "Come! Come!" I want them to see it. (Interview, 2002)

Not surprisingly, the "Okinawa boom" is hardly a welcome development for the members of *Gajimaru no Kai* who struggled against the negative stereotypes of Okinawa. Shimajiri, for example, expresses his puzzlement and concern over the seemingly sudden turnaround in Japanese perceptions:

Now it's quite the opposite. They [Japanese] think that Okinawa's great. But that may, in fact, be weakening the spirit of the Okinawans. They say that Okinawa's such a fantastic place, so everything's fine, isn't it? This may not be a good choice of words, but I would describe it as "damning with flattery."

Influenced by the media portrayal of Okinawa and attracted to the distinct rhythm and communal nature of *eisā* performance, many young Japanese joined *Gajimaru no Kai* and other *eisā* groups. The increasing presence of Japanese players is vexing for some Okinawans in Kansai. For the founding members of *Gajimaru no Kai*, *eisā* was a form of performing art in which to reconstitute their Okinawan identity. They were involved in *eisā* not merely for the joy of performing together, but also because it provided a means of expressing themselves as diasporic Okinawans, implicitly in protest against Japanese dominance. Although the group is ready to accept Japanese members, they are apprehensive that the group's character may change as more Japanese become members. Nakamura, for example, explains the group's stance toward Japanese participation.

We don't exclude them from dancing with us or helping to run the *Gajimaru no Kai*. But we won't have them interfering, forcing us to accept the Japanese way of thinking. The interfering types inevitably get annoyed and leave the group. There are different personalities. Among the Japanese there are those who join because they want to cooperate. They're fine. But if they say, "It would be so much better if you did this," or "Why not do that? You should do this," it won't work out.

Senior members of the group trace Japanese members' dominating behaviors to their inability to understand the group's initial goal and the majority's tendency for arrogance. Yet, the open-door policy of *Gajimaru no Kai* is a manifestation of their desire to build a more inclusive cultural arena in which the majority Japanese realize their privileged position and their unconscious imperialism so that the Okinawans and Japanese can live together as equals.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have briefly sketched the relationship between experiences of displacement and the construction of identity through performing arts. Okinawans in Japan, who have been displaced both geographically and culturally, struggle to construct a positive identity for themselves in relation to their homeland, their diasporic community, and the dominant culture. The *eisā*, an essential part of annual *bon* ritual in Okinawa, serves in Osaka as a creative expression of their diasporic existence among young immigrant workers from Okinawa and second-generation Okinawans. For the founding members of *Gajimaru no Kai*, *eisā* served as a much needed outlet for self-expression (*sakebigoe* or “cry,” again to quote Kaoru Kinjo), which was suppressed in the presence of the Japanese. Public displays of Okinawan culture were an act of coming out and an attempt to turn negativity forced upon Okinawan traits into something that Okinawan people can be proud of.

The Japanese gaze, which had overwhelmed the victims of stereotypes, was challenged by the performance of *eisā*. Through the process of creating such music and dance, Okinawans in Osaka contest the derogatory images in mainstream culture, and at the same time transform themselves into individuals more resistant to the adversity created by such images. *Eisā* also serves to enhance a sense of connection to their heritage, while creating a new culture that will better reflect their diasporic identity. Tamaki, the founder of *Gajimaru no Kai*, stresses the importance of making their own history with their deeds and actions. In order to achieve such a sense of ownership, Okinawans in Osaka have to endure the time-consuming process of practicing, performing, and organizing events, at times struggling with resistance from the very community that they belong to and wish to serve. Through this process they are creating a new culture derived from Okinawa but firmly rooted in Osaka, or, in Tamaki's words from an interview in 1999, “the Okinawan culture that does not exist in Okinawa.”