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## **“Being Okinawan” Within and Beyond the Ethnic Boundary: The Process of Identity Formation in an Okinawan Cultural Activist Group in Osaka**

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### **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I explore a case of identity formation in an Okinawan cultural activist group in Osaka as Japanese society’s perception and treatment of ethnic and cultural difference changed over the period of time from the group’s inception in the 1970s to the early 2000s.<sup>1)</sup> I examine how activists and lay members of the group have adopted different meanings to interpret and redefine “Okinawan” identities, first to counter the predominant ethnic prejudice and empower the underprivileged children of Okinawan immigrants in Osaka, and later to forge a distinctive Okinawan identity within those of the following generations, when the majority of participants found themselves in better economic and social conditions, but were also assimilated to a greater degree with the majority of the Japanese population.

Since the collapse of the Japanese Empire and the loss of its colonies, Japan has been dominated by a hegemonic ideology of ethnic, cultural, and social homogeneity (Befu 2001), denying and silencing existing ethnic, social, and cultural diversity. The main mechanism by which the Japanese government and mainstream society have dealt with social and ethnic minority groups has been the denial of their existence and the assimilation of differences, rather than outright oppression. Despite the struggles of different minority groups for social recognition and equal treatment which have gone on for decades or centuries, in postwar Japan, the main mechanism used to maintain the hierarchy between the Japanese majority and the minority groups has been to render social and cultural difference invisible, thereby constructing the entire society and nation as a homogeneous entity (Befu 2001; Oguma 2002; Yoshino 1992).

The performance of Okinawan music and dance as a form of cultural activism started occurring in the mid-1970s by diasporic Okinawans as a means to contest the dominant ideology of Japanese homogeneity, assert Okinawan difference, and build communality through collective participation in music and dance as both performers and audience members.

In this paper, I examine the Taisho Okinawa Children’s Club (hereafter TOCC), a children’s club formed in an Okinawan community in Osaka.<sup>2)</sup> The TOCC was set up in 1978, when the discrimination against Okinawans was still at its height in Japanese society, and aimed at the restoration of ethnic identity and promotion of self-esteem of the offspring

of underprivileged, working-class Okinawan immigrants. From September 2007 to October 2008, I conducted ethnographic research with various activist and/or hobbyist groups teaching and performing Okinawan music and dance. In this paper, I will reconstruct the group's history based on my own ethnographic research and interviews with the participants, and also on the written accounts of the group's participants, especially of its organizing staff (mainly from Kaneshiro 1992; 1997a; 1997b; 2008; Kinjo 1996; Miyamoto and Miyamoto 1996; Nakamura 1984; [1984]; 1996). The TOCC's approach shares certain similarities with other minority cultural activism in Osaka in the 1970s and 1980s, although some of its strategies are distinctive due to the fact that the majority of its participants are children.

I will proceed to show: (1) a history of the Okinawan diaspora in Osaka, which provides the background of the group's formation, and the significance of the use of Okinawan dance and music in this type of cultural activism; (2) the changes in the ways in which the club operated as Okinawan cultural and ethnic difference came to be more widely accepted and popular in the Japanese popular media, especially after the so-called "Okinawa Boom" in the 1990s; and (3) what "being Okinawan" came to mean for this club beyond the ethnic boundary in a time when a majority of the club's members are not necessarily Okinawan nor marginalized. In particular, I will consider how "being Okinawan" came to mean different things over time, surpassing ethnic and cultural distinctions and coming to signify human qualities in a broader sense.

## 2. The History of Okinawans in Osaka

From the annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom to Japan in the late nineteenth century on, Okinawans began to settle in Osaka, and came to constitute one of the mosaic pieces in the socio-spatial configuration of inequality there (Mizuuchi 2001; 2008). Until the 1920s, the rate of Okinawan emigration to other overseas destinations was as high as that to mainland Japan, because the Japanese government encouraged overseas emigration from impoverished prefectures, and because Japan felt equally foreign to Okinawans as other countries did, due to linguistic and cultural differences. However, the emigration of Okinawan people to mainland Japan increased when the Japanese government placed restrictions on Okinawan overseas emigration, while not on that of the people of other prefectures. These restrictions were based on the alleged cultural incompatibility of Okinawans with the host population in the countries Okinawans emigrated to, and their "lack of competence and work ethic." With the 1924 US Federal Immigration Act banning the immigration of Japanese, the movement of Okinawans to mainland Japan developed into full-scale emigration during the 1920s and 1930s, in response to an increased need for labor in the industrializing Kansai region, the collapse of Okinawan agriculture due to the severe drop of the sugar price in the world market, and the great famine of the 1920s known to Okinawans as "Cycad Hell" (*sotetsu jigoku*) (Kaneshiro 2008: 109–111; Nakasone 2002: 16–17; Tomiyama 1990: 78–82).<sup>3)</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Osaka attracted the largest number of Okinawan migrants, who settled in the fast-industrializing wards surrounding what is now the Osaka Port, such as Minato, Taisho, Nishinari, and Konohana. Poverty-stricken Okinawans, as well as Koreans

from Japan’s new colony, were attracted to employment opportunities in metal factories, timber mills, spinning factories, and at the ports. By the 1920s, Okinawan communities started forming in these wards, and continue to exist even today. Taisho Ward has been host to the biggest Okinawan population of all, which accounts for a quarter of the ward’s entire population (Kaneshiro 1992; Rabson 2003).

The majority of Okinawan immigrants occupied a lower socio-economic rank, which made them a cheap source of labor. In Japan’s industrializing labor market in the early twentieth century, visible markers of cultural difference such as language, dress, food, and customs of ethnic and social minorities (such as Okinawans, Koreans, and Burakumin) were seen to detract from what was perceived as proper Japaneseness.<sup>4)</sup> Since proper Japaneseness, or “being Japanese,” signified the competent, diligent, and productive workforce in the “modern” Japanese nation state, cultural and ethnic difference was not simple difference, but considered as some kind of deficiency, symbolizing “not being Japanese enough” to be a proper member of the new nation-state and empire of Japan (Tomiyaama 1990; Nakama 2001). The widespread use of the “No Ryukyuan or Koreans” (*Ryūkyūjin chōsenjin okotowari*) sign in rental housing and employment, is an oft-related example of the treatment of these two minority groups in Osaka during the prewar and wartime period (Kaneshiro 2008).

Okinawans faced social marginalization and harsh discrimination not simply owing to their cultural differences, but also on their poverty-based lifestyle. The neighborhood in Taisho Ward called Kubun-gwa provided a vivid example of how these two forms of prejudice overlapped and fed off one another. Meaning “the hollow” in Okinawan dialect, this low-lying, swampy area was surrounded by the Taisho canal and log ponds for timber mills. Impoverished immigrant workers lived in barracks-style housing in places deemed unfit or undesirable as places of residence. About 30 percent of Kubun-gwa’s occupants were Okinawans, and the region was referred to as the “Okinawan Slum” in mainstream media. This geographically segregated area itself functioned to accentuate the stigma placed on Okinawans, enhancing the perception of them as impoverished and backward, until the 1970s when Kubun-gwa was cleared and the land level was raised by Osaka City.

Under such circumstances, wealthier, more educated, and upwardly mobile Okinawans who aspired to be accepted in mainstream society took voluntary cultural assimilation as their means of achieving social upward mobility and equal treatment. In 1920s, elite Okinawans in Osaka led the “Lifestyle Betterment Movement,” in which they urged fellow Okinawans to eradicate all their unrefined Okinawan customs and shameful behavior, such as their Okinawan dialect, Okinawan-style family names, and Okinawan customs, music, and dance, so that they could be fully accepted as “full-fledged Japanese citizens” (*rippa na nihonjin*) (Nakama 2000; 2001; Tomiyama 1990: 195–249).

### 3. “Being Okinawan”: Poverty and Shame

Through this process, Okinawan cultural difference was constructed as a source of shame for diasporic Okinawans—something that should be hidden from public view. Performances of Okinawan folk music and dance were considered expressions of one such difference, as

evidenced in the common tale recounted among Okinawans of how people used to play *sanshin* (a three-stringed Okinawan instrument) inside a closet with its door shut, covering themselves with thick blankets, so that the sound of the *sanshin* would not be heard by their neighbors (Kuriyama 2008).

Whether it was hidden or exposed to the public eye, the stigmatization of Okinawan cultural expression and its association with poverty and low social status left a profound mark on the offspring of Okinawan immigrants who were born and grew up in Osaka. This negative association led Okinawan children to develop a sense of inferiority, humiliation, and fear of exposure as being Okinawans.

The fact of being “Okinawan” came to carry a stigma, representing one’s status as an undesirable, improper member of society, which Okinawans aspiring to belong to the mainstream therefore opted to eradicate or conceal so that they could better blend into “Japanese” society. Okinawan children who were born into and grew up in such communities consequently suffered from low self-esteem or even self-hatred, and felt alienation from the older generation as well as from the mainstream population.

The following is the account of a young second-generation Okinawan, written in colloquial Osaka dialect, quoted by one of the co-founders of the TOCC:

I hated Okinawa since I was in elementary school. I felt like an “Anti-Okinawan” (*Okinawa hantai*) slogan was branded on my body when I was in elementary school. My father was a good man, and everyone, including himself, knew that he was darned hardworking. But drinking was the only hobby of that old man of mine. I remember I started running to buy cheap, unrefined sake for him when I was in second grade. When he was drunk, he’d start causing trouble. Also he started wandering around at night. And my mother couldn’t stop him. Every night was like that. My father was an iron-cast worker, but he was poor, and when bad things happened, he drank to forget them, so he brought over his Okinawan friends living nearby to our small shabby house, and drank till late at night. Neither I nor my little sister and brother could sleep. My old man and his friends drank like fish, yakked in Okinawan dialect, and then Okinawan *min’yō* (folk songs) started pouring out from their mouths. Even though it was in the middle of night, they didn’t care about the neighbors, and didn’t even listen to my mom when she tried to warn them. That’s how “Anti-Okinawanness” became my slogan. My sister and brother were like that, too, so my sister stormed out of the house as soon as they started singing Okinawan *min’yō*. Without knowing the reality of Okinawa, I just hated it, and hated our poverty at the same time. But I didn’t know what to hate and how. We had the same meal every day. No snacks at all. I felt unbelievably ashamed to go to school wearing rags and shoes with holes. (Nakamura 1984: 86)

The antipathy of young Okinawans to their ethnic origin—mainly their own families—was complicated by the fact that they did not understand the source of their antipathy—“what to hate and how,” as the young Okinawan put it above. Their parents and grandparents usually did not teach children Okinawan customs and dialect, in the hope that their children would become better assimilated into Japanese society, although they themselves couldn’t quite fit in. Thus children not only had a hard time understanding their parents’ behavior

and lifestyle, but also felt a sense of deficiency from not knowing enough—and not being Okinawan enough.

#### 4. “Being Okinawan”: From a Source of Shame to a Source of Pride

It was under such circumstances that the TOCC was launched in 1978 within the Taisho Ward Okinawan community. It was formed by two Okinawan elementary school teachers who aimed to empower underprivileged Okinawan children. They met at a primary school in Yata, a large Burakumin residence in Osaka City, and were deeply inspired by the Liberation Education (*kaihō kyōiku*) Movement that they experienced in their workplace. Liberation Education was an anti-discrimination movement that initially derived from the *buraku* liberation movement, but had been spreading across minority groups in Osaka at the time. In fact, education was another factor that reinforced this socio-ethnic-geographical configuration of inequality, by reproducing low socio-economic status within the younger generation of the minority population. By the 1960s, meritocracy (*gakureki shakai*) had become one of the defining characteristics of Japanese society (Allinson 1997). Such an arrangement effectively excluded children from low-income families with minority backgrounds from competition at an early age (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Yoder 2011; Park 2011). This was the case for Okinawan families in Taisho, in which both parents had to work and were not able to assist with their children’s school work due to a lack of time and education. The Liberation Education Movement not only sought to problematize this reproduction of inequality, but also tried to counter its negative effects by supporting students and their families in their education and their life outside it, and empowering them by fighting prejudice against their minority background and turning it into a source of pride.



Figure 1 Kubun-gwa in the 1960s and 1970s (Mizuuchi 2008: 259)





**Figure 2** The TOCC in the 1970s (courtesy of Nakamura Noboru)

According to the recollections of one of the co-founders (Nakamura 1984), the TOCC's approach was in line with the Liberation Education Movement. Its initial goal was to provide children with free classes to supplement their school education. However, the teachers soon realized that academic aid alone was not going to be effective given the low motivation and confidence of the children. The teachers changed their approach and attempted to address these issues by teaching Okinawan *min'yō*, *eisā* (Okinawan folk dance), and the *sanshin*. The idea of teaching *sanshin* to children was very unusual at the time, but the teachers believed that learning folk songs would allow the children to learn the Okinawan dialect, customs, and traditions that appeared in the lyrics, and thus would make it easier to understand their parents' behavior and ideas that had previously seemed weird and embarrassing to them.

When the children had learned several songs, the club started formal and informal folk song and *sanshin* performances as part of community events for the children's families and neighbors. Most grownups were extremely pleased and moved by their children's effort to learn their culture; some of them cried at the performance. Watching their parents and grandparents crying with joy and gratitude was a very powerful and connecting experience for the children. Elated by their own achievement and the adults' enthusiastic and often tearful responses, children started to view what had once been a source of humiliation and self-hatred as a source of pride and connectedness.

For the parents, this situation opened up the mixed feelings they had about being Okinawan—feelings that had been building over course of their whole life. Some parents confessed to the teachers their deep-seated anxiety and shame, and how they felt concerned that learning about Okinawan culture might thwart their children’s upward social and socioeconomic mobility. For example, they wondered if the children should be learning piano instead of *sanshin* and *min’yō*, and admitted to being just as ashamed of their Okinawan habits as their children were:

Hey, teacher, when I heard my kid singing in dialect, I was really so happy. Tears fell from my eyes. But teacher, I have been trying to forget *Uchina* so long.<sup>5)</sup> I still feel more or less like that. I love Okinawa in my heart, only I didn’t want to let it out (of me). But teacher, my kid has started doing more Okinawan things that I wasn’t able to do. What does that make me? (Nakamura 1984: 88)

Parents reflected on their own repressed emotions about being Okinawan and hiding their Okinawan identity. These performances created a complex relationship between teachers and students, parents and children, relatives and neighbors within the club and within the Okinawan community, where isolation and alienation between generations had been prevalent. It was a transformative experience for all who were involved. The children’s performance provided a chance for the repressed emotions of the adults about being (and hiding the fact that they were) Okinawan to come to the surface, and led to deeper conversations between parents and teachers. The two teachers, who were Okinawans themselves, sent their own children to the club. Later, more second-generation Okinawan adults joined the club as organizing staff, while also sending their children to the club.

Early participants in the TOCC humorously recounted that the two teachers—both renowned drinkers—were drinking every night with somebody’s parents, other TOCC organizers, other Okinawans activists who were also neighbors, or all of them together. A TOCC alumnus, whose homeroom teacher had been Nakamura (one of the cofounders), recalled that her parents served him *awamori* (Okinawan distilled rice wine) in the early afternoon when he visited her house for an official teacher home-visit, which then stretched on until late at night. These drinking parties were in effect like teacher-parent conferences for Okinawan parents, who could make time only at night because of their work. In more personal settings, they could talk more honestly and freely about being Okinawan and raising Okinawan children in Osaka with other parents and teachers who were themselves Okinawans. Thus, these performing events and the socializing that followed them opened up opportunities for conversations and understanding within and between different generations, between children, parents, and teachers about living as Okinawans in Osaka, through which children started to view what had once been a source of humiliation and self-hatred as a source of pride and connectedness, transforming all the involved parties.

The TOCC also engaged in peace and anti-war study, learning about social and historical issues such as the Battle of Okinawa, the atomic bombings, and US army bases in Okinawa, travelling to Okinawa and Hiroshima, and participating in anti-war rallies. Through these activities, the children came to expand their scope of interest in social issues that went



beyond what they learned about at school and their local community, by learning, discussing, and participating in political events. Thus, through TOCC activities, “being Okinawan” changed its meaning for Okinawan children from a source of shame to a source of pride. It also became an entry point for children to understand problematic social issues in Japanese society, such as inequality, war, and colonialism, beyond the scope of their immediate surroundings of the Okinawan community in Osaka.

Participating in the TOCC was a transformative experience not only for children but also for older second-generation Okinawans who ran the group in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the first-generation Okinawan cofounder Nakamura, they did not have a strong conviction in their identity as Okinawans. But almost all the TOCC organizers, most of them school teachers, sent their own children to TOCC as well, thereby creating intersecting relationships between teachers and students, parents and children, relatives and neighbors (Kinjo 1996; Kaneshiro 1997b), and through their engagement with the club’s participants and supporters, they reached a deeper level of self-awareness as Okinawans in Osaka, who were not simply “rootless grass” (*nenashigusa*) or “marginal beings” (*mājinaru man*) but rather Okinawans who had Osaka as their second home (Kaneshiro 1997b).

## 5. The Okinawa Boom: A Celebration of Okinawan Difference

As shown in the previous sections, the TOCC started as a youth club for underprivileged children and took a Liberation Education-inspired approach, whereby the club sought to promote Okinawan ethnic identity and empower Okinawan youth, in a time in which ethnic and cultural difference in Japanese society was predominantly seen in a negative light, and in which the overlapping stigma of ethnic difference and poverty affected Okinawan children. However, in the three decades since the club’s inception in the 1970s, the reception of Okinawan cultural difference in mainstream Japanese society went through significant changes as part of changing social attitudes towards pre-existent and increasing ethnic diversity.

Conditions for Japan’s minority groups underwent wide-reaching improvements from the start of the 1980s onward, in response to the persistent minority struggle for legal and social equality. Moreover, the increasing visibility of ethnic and racial diversity, due to the influx of visibly foreign workers, disrupted popular notions of a homogenous Japan. The emergence of the discourse of the “multiethnic Japan” and “multicultural society” in the 1990s contributed to the view that cultural diversity was positive and should be celebrated rather than suppressed.

More specifically, for Okinawans, the cultural phenomenon called “the Okinawa Boom” that occurred in the 1990s directly affected the way Okinawan difference was received by the general public. A series of popular media products that featured Okinawan differences, such as movies, TV shows, and popular music, enjoyed nationwide success, which in turn contributed to Okinawan tourism. The media representation of Okinawa was idealized and utopian. Often dubbed “the islands of comfort” (*iyashi no shima*), Okinawa was depicted as a place where easygoing people lived in a subtropical paradise surrounded by the beautiful ocean, with pure hearts, endless optimism towards life, and inexhaustible hospitality toward

others. Amid such positive representations of Okinawan difference, “being Okinawan” was no longer something of which one should be ashamed; rather, it became something cool and popular.

At this time, Japanese enthusiasm for Okinawa extended to diasporic Okinawan communities as well. In particular, the Taisho district drew many Japanese Okinawa enthusiasts in search of so-called “authentic Okinawan” food, souvenirs, music and dance, and martial arts. The area came to be known by the media as the “little Okinawa that you can visit on a bicycle.” This has led Okinawans to reevaluate their cultural legacy in a positive light, and also provided many Okinawans with a new way of making a living.

The living conditions of Okinawans in Taisho Ward have changed significantly, and this in turn has had an effect on the TOCC Club. The first major change was the improvement brought about by the series of land- and road-improvement projects, which started in the 1950s and concluded in the early 1980s. At this time, Kubun-gwa, the notorious “Okinawan Slum,” disappeared from the map. Although Taisho Ward as a whole still maintains the biggest Okinawan population in mainland Japan (approximately a quarter of the ward’s total population of 80,000) (Kaneshiro 1992), Okinawan families dispersed to larger areas within and outside of the ward. Okinawan and Japanese families now live alongside one another, and many families have been more integrated in and assimilated within mainstream Japanese society. Although they are still mostly working-class, Okinawan families have become more affluent in general. Not only negative stereotypes of Okinawans, but also an awareness of themselves as Okinawans has faded among the younger generations, specifically in third-generation Okinawans and their offspring.

## 6. Challenges to the Club

While this Japanese fascination with Okinawan music and dance has had positive effects on the reception of Okinawan difference within society, and provides many diasporic Okinawans with opportunities to boost their self-esteem and widen their possibilities for making a living, Okinawan critics and cultural activists express discontent that it has also distracted mainstream Japanese from appreciating the political and social marginalization of Okinawa in the past and present, undermined Okinawan cultural activism, and resulted in the commodification of Okinawan music and dance.

The Okinawa Boom affected the Okinawan Children’s Club as well. At the time of my ethnographic research in 2007 and 2008, the club gave the outward impression that it has continued its anti-Okinawan discrimination cultural activism without interruption since its foundation. The club’s story has been publicized in human rights and education-related media, as well as in the news and popular media. New visitors, journalists, and academics introduce the history and success of the club in a celebratory manner. However, as I spent more time with them, I came to realize that the club had been through considerable changes in the constitution of its membership, the focus of its activities, and the nature of the relationship between its members and organizing staff, so much so that some alumni who had been active in the early years no longer wanted to identify themselves with it any more.

It is always the Taisho Okinawa Children's Eisā Club who get the biggest applause. That's not just because they look so adorable when they are dancing with such enthusiasm. It is in praise of their efforts to pass on the life and culture of the southern islands, which is the homeland of their *oji* (grandpas), *oba* (grandmas), fathers, and mothers. (Ohta 2008)

As this news article suggests, at the time of my research, the club continued to be perceived as having retained the generational continuity of this diasporic community. However, children with Okinawan parentage (at least one Okinawan parent) now only made up about half of the entire membership, and whether Okinawan or not, most families were much closer to mainstream society, if not already a part of it. These changes in the composition of the club had brought about changes in its orientation, which were not obvious on the surface level and often seemed to escape the attention of the outsiders such as media journalists and academics who occasionally visited Taisho for a short time to cover popular Okinawan spots and groups.

The biggest change to the club was the tangible shift away from the anti-discrimination agenda of Liberation Education to focus solely on the performance of *eisā*. It was not that organizers had changed their stance regarding discrimination issues. Almost all the organizing staff, including the club's current leader who deliberately minimized the new Club's political agenda, are known to have been active in the Liberation Education Movement and/or outspoken on Okinawa-related issues from the beginning of their involvement in the club. When they were by themselves, they spoke openly about Japanese discrimination against Okinawans and other minorities, and the differences between Japanese and Okinawans. They lamented the indifference of the younger generation, Okinawans and Japanese alike, towards such inequality, and their ignorance of the hardships Okinawans in Taisho had gone through, and they were sometimes cynical about the Okinawa Boom—the naive and irresponsible Japanese infatuation with Okinawan music and dance, which was likely what had attracted some of their new members. The Liberation Education connection was not totally lost, either, but it was now merely implicit and almost unnoticeable. Neither the organizers nor the teacher members talked much at all about Liberation Education, Okinawan discrimination, or any other social issues in the club setting. They were almost hesitant and reluctant to discuss those issues openly and officially in front of lay members, in fear of driving them out.

The main reasons behind such changes in the club's activities and focus are as follows. First, there was the expansion of the club's membership in terms of number and geographical range. Its membership nearly tripled from fifteen in 1978 to nearly fifty in 2008. Although most members are still Taisho-based, they are further dispersed across the area. More significantly, children with Okinawan parentage are estimated to make up only about a half of the entire group. This estimation is based on members' family names and/or the organizers' acquaintance with the child's families, but it does not accurately reflect the child's sense of identity as Okinawan (or not), as it is often the case that individuals in the third generation or beyond tend not to recognize themselves Okinawans, depending on how they were raised. The non-Okinawan members are those who have developed an enthusiasm for Okinawan music and dance through their exposure to popular and media culture during the Okinawa

Boom.

Secondly, most TOCC families are better off than their counterparts three decades ago in terms of their socio-economic status. Their mothers are in a better position to devote themselves to caring for their children, and some also participate in the dancing. In other words, Okinawan or not, most families are much closer to mainstream society, if not already part of it. The majority of the club members are no longer Okinawans, and neither are they underprivileged or explicitly discriminated against. With a broader range of families who are not necessarily Okinawans or underprivileged, the club’s organizers take a more moderate attitude toward non-Okinawan “Okinawa lovers.”

With so many non-Okinawan members, the organizers are reluctant to vocalize their honest opinions in front of children and their parents in fear of making them uncomfortable, or worse, driving them out. Now the club’s activities are largely confined to *eisa* practice performance occasions. Opportunities for socializing have significantly decreased, and interactions between organizing staff and lay members have become less intimate. The age gap has grown wider as the organizing staff have aged and incoming members—both parents and children—are young. The relationship between members, and between lay members and organizing staff, has become less personal.

The current representative of the club explains that it minimized and muted its political agenda in order to accommodate a wider basis of members. He and other staff thought the stereotypes of Okinawa and Okinawan people presented by the Okinawa Boom were problematic. At the same time, however, they wanted to utilize it as a kind of learning opportunity to reach out to more people who are interested in Okinawan culture and let them see beyond the superficial representations of Okinawa that the mainstream media has to offer, rather than avoiding it altogether as a matter of principle. In his words, the club was attempting to “*ride that Okinawa Boom* [emphasis added]—we will take advantage of those commercialized images of Okinawa, and strategically appeal to people to understand issues of Okinawa” (Kaneshiro 2008).

However, this idea of “riding the Okinawa Boom” seems easier said than done. The reluctance of the staff to voice their political opinions goes hand in hand with the lack of interest or knowledge on the part of children and parents about those issues. In spite of the organizers’ concerns and ambivalence over the current state of the club, today the club appears more like an extracurricular hobby group for middle-class families with a sole focus on practice and performance of *eisā* than a club with an activist agenda of promoting Okinawan identity and empowering children. And for some of the former members who were involved in the club as children, this “soft turn” taken by the Okinawan Children’s Club was too much of a concession, meaning that the purpose of the club itself was lost. For them, all the lessons and discussions about Okinawan history, discrimination, and hardships that early Okinawans went through were what provided children with a background to their dance. They question how children can learn to respect the dance without an understanding of that backdrop.

There was a consensus between long-standing participants and observers of the Children’s Club that the price the club has paid for its mainstreaming is a loss of its critical “edge” in addressing the reality of social and ethnic inequality, and that while its scale and popularity

have increased, the participants' enthusiasm and solidarity have weakened. Some even question if the organizers' good intentions end up serving the mindless fantasy and desires of "Okinawa Boom" followers, be they the club's members or its spectators.

### 7. "Being Okinawan": Beyond the Ethnic and Cultural Boundaries

However, I argue that a closer look at everyday practice and interaction between members and families reveals another aspect through which the club's continuity with its past is maintained. While the interests and concerns of the current members of the club have changed over time, certain qualities in people, behaviors, attitudes, or ways of thinking, which had been emphasized from the club's inception, are still emphasized. More significantly, these qualities are framed and promoted as part of "being Okinawan," regardless of the ethnicity of individuals who practice them, giving "Okinawanness" new meanings that go beyond ethnic or cultural distinctions.

The first of such qualities is voluntarism and mutual support. As the club's size increased and the staff grew older, they struggled to keep up, while current members remained passive. A lay member suggested that the staff take more forceful measures, and hold individual members accountable for active involvement. Although it could have been an effective way to solve the staff's difficulties, they unanimously objected to it. Their rationale was that there could be some parents who are not able to participate as fully as others even if they wished so, due to their family or work conditions. "In the past, everyone used to do things



Figure 3 A TOCC street performance in Taisho in 2008

voluntarily (*borantiā*) and if somebody couldn’t help out because of her particular situation, we understood and took her place. That’s what *being Okinawan* [emphasis added] is about.”

This emphasis on volunteerism was observed frequently. Relying on members’ spontaneous impetus to offer their active support may seem a bit too idealistic and impractical. And yet, their low-pressure approach is a legacy from the past and expresses the group’s considerate attitude towards children and families who cannot afford to give their full participation or support, and their wish not to exclude such individuals or families. Later it turned out that there were indeed a few such families whose material situation prevented their full participation.

Secondly, when it comes to children’s participation, there is an emphasis on fun and excitement, which is associated with the children’s spontaneous involvement. For example, there was an unprecedentedly big stage opportunity for the club that came up during my research, at an official ticketed event at the Osaka Welfare Pension Hall, one of the biggest concert halls in the Osaka-Kansai area. Previously, almost all events at which the Children’s Club had performed had been public, free events, in which the quality of the children’s performance did not matter as much as the fact they performed; however, this time it was different. In preparation for this particular performance, while the young *eisā* instructor expressed constant and keen attention to each child’s mastery of the choreography and technique, the club as a whole emphasized liveliness and unison. In particular, special emphasis was placed on the *hēshi* (*hayashi* in Japanese), the rhythmical shouts between the *jikata* (*sanshin* accompanists) and the dancers, and even from the audience, which enhance the dancers’ coordination and spurs on the dancers and the audience alike. *Hēshi* had great importance for all of the club, both the staff and the members, and they were determined to give an exceptional performance that was worth watching. As a part of a concert with a paying audience, the club even attempted to select the onstage performers through auditions for the first time.

Conditions for Appearing Onstage:

1. Being able to shout *hēshi* loudly and clearly: you need to memorize all the shouts, and be able to utter *hēshi* words in unison while dancing
2. Being able to *dance by yourself* [emphasis added]: you need to be able to dance the entire repertoire, without peeking at people next to you
3. Being able to dance in a *lively manner* [emphasis added]: you need to be in accord with everyone in both dancing and *hēshi* shouts, and dance in a lively way

The most important aspect of children’s *eisā* is liveliness (*genki*). It is only when all the performers dance spiritedly and shout *hēshi* in unison that our dance will be worth showing to others. Practice will become hard toward the concert, please try your best at every rehearsal. (From a TOCC leaflet, January 20, 2008)

These “Conditions For Appearing Onstage” ended up as more of a way to encourage children than actually limiting criteria: the proposed “audition” kept being delayed, and in the end, all the children ended up onstage. However, the goals of shouting *hēshi* in unison loudly and clearly, dancing by oneself, and dancing spiritedly continued to be emphasized



even once the concert performance had been successfully concluded, right up until the Taisho Eisā Festival later the same year, and were often used throughout as criteria to evaluate whether the quality of the children's dancing as group had improved.

In the early period, the teachers first let children "play" with the *sanshin*, not even trying to teach them, until they became interested, and finally wanted to learn to play Okinawan tunes for themselves (Nakamura [1984]). Such motivation and growing attachment to the *sanshin* was considered a bigger achievement than their actual learning to play it. Currently, the emphasis on children's enthusiasm and spontaneity is often expressed in terms of *genki* (energy, liveliness, spiritedness); the children's demonstration of such enthusiasm and spontaneity often received compliments like "now that's the Okinawan way," in an "attaboy" tone of voice. This use of the word "Okinawan" did not refer to ethnicity, but rather to the idea that promoting a love of art and music at a young age will eventually extend to a love of Okinawan culture and people, regardless of the ethnicity of the people involved.

Third, and finally, there is a continuing emphasis on families and community, although this is more individually experienced. Some families told me how they coped with their problems and went through a healing or bonding process through the club's activities, and expressed their belief in and gratitude to the club. I will discuss two cases of this kind here.

The first family had no ethnic or personal affiliation with Okinawa, not even by marriage, but the mother and daughter had a strong attachment to Okinawa in the way common among Okinawan enthusiasts. The mother was a single parent, and a nurse. The daughter, a third grader, had a great passion for *eisā*, so her mother searched around to find the club, and drove some thirty minutes to attend the weekly practice, from Hirano in east Osaka where they lived. At that time, the daughter was currently the only child in the club who had completely mastered all the choreography with surprising accuracy and elegance, through her own effort. In addition to participating in *eisā*, she was very eager to learn the *sanshin*, occasionally taking private lessons from the *eisā* instructor (the cofounder's daughter) for free, and listening to her tales about Okinawa. When an *eisā* club from an Okinawan college was invited to give a performance at the Children's Club, the mother video-recorded the entire show and they practiced every move at home until the daughter had mastered it. The mother saved up money for her and made sure to visit Okinawa more than once every year, planning ahead for the events or places they were going to visit next time. Her work as a nurse seemed to take a physical toll on her body, and she sometimes suffered from injuries from helping out her elderly patients and other difficult work. I presumed that it was not easy for her, a single parent and nurse, to make ends meet with her salary, and to find time or money to pursue this hobby with her daughter. But I saw her taking great pleasure in watching her daughter dancing at the club. During breaks, the mother and daughter would be cuddling, whispering in each other's ears, and laughing. Their time at the club seemed like one of the few moments they could afford to be together and do something they both liked.

The second case shows how one mother unexpectedly reconnected with her ethnic identity through her daughter's participation in the club. Her nine-year-old child had been in the club for a year without her mother's knowledge, following the lead of her school

classmates in joining, and came to develop a passion for *eisā*. Her mother was a second-generation Okinawan and it turned out her family had traumatic memories of discrimination by the Japanese during the wartime period, and were betrayed by their Okinawan neighbors in Taisho. Her parents resented their Okinawan neighbors, as well as their own Okinawan heritage. They did not socialize with other Okinawans, and even took the trouble of physically leaving Taisho on the days of the Taisho Eisā Festival so that they did not have to hear the sounds of the festival. The mother herself did not identify herself as Okinawan, and was married to a Japanese man.

However, as the daughter became a member of the Okinawan Children’s Club, not only the mother, but the entire family came to see her performance. Her daughter did not know about her family’s Okinawan ancestry even after joining the Children’s Club, and quite simply loved performing *eisā*. Even the mother did not realize that her daughter did not know, until she asked her mom one day: “Mom, are there any *uchinānchu* (Okinawans) in our family?” The mother relayed to me that moment of revelation with a sense of pleasant surprise and pride, when she answered to her, “Why, yes. There is Okinawa in you. And in me.”

Nakamura, one of the co-founders, expressed his belief that the club is still serving its purpose: “Everyone who comes to this club is seeking something . . . Whether they’re Okinawan or not, it’s OK as long as they find it, and find something good about Okinawa, here in this club.” And in this process, “being Okinawan” comes to take on new meanings beyond ethnic boundaries, such as spontaneity, voluntarism, and spiritedness, which once helped underprivileged Okinawan children shake off their shame and self-hatred, and become firmly rooted in their family and community.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the history of Taisho Okinawa Children’s Club from its inception in the 1970s, through to the 2000s. I have explored how the idea of “being Okinawan” in their activism to promote Okinawan identity and the self-esteem of young diasporic Okinawans changed shape in accordance with Japanese society’s changing attitudes toward ethnic and cultural difference. Especially important to this changing identity was the shift in the reception of Okinawan cultural difference in popular culture and the media, and the demographics and living conditions of Okinawans in Taisho Ward. Initially, when the discrimination against Okinawans was still at its height and Okinawan cultural expression was stigmatized, the club was inspired by the Liberation Education Movement. The club taught children Okinawan *min’yō* and *eisā* as a means of having them learn about Okinawan language, history, and culture, thereby narrowing the gap between generations. In doing so, the club sought to empower Okinawan children by redefining their ethnic origin, altering it from a source of shame and humiliation to a source of pride.

However, over the next three decades, the living conditions for Okinawans in Taisho improved and their socio-economic status became similar to that of mainstream Japanese. Although Okinawan cultural difference came to be widely accepted and even celebrated in popular culture and the media in the wake of the so-called “Okinawa Boom,” within the

Okinawan community in Taisho, the younger generation Okinawans' self-awareness as Okinawans became weaker owing to the dispersal of Okinawan families, cultural assimilation, and the intermarriage between Japanese and Okinawans over generations.

In order to accommodate members who were now not necessarily either Okinawans or underprivileged, and in an attempt to reach out to the so-called "Okinawa Lovers" and guide them to see beyond the stereotypical representations presented by the Okinawa Boom, the club's organizers moved away from ostensibly political strategies. However, such attempts proved hard to put into practice, and the club faced the criticism that such a turn was too much of a concession, to the point of ridding the club of its purpose.

However, I have argued that the club's continuity with its past is carried on at another level. Voluntarism, spontaneity, fun and excitement, love of art and music, and a focus on family and community are values that are continuously emphasized as "Okinawan," regardless of the ethnic identity of members, and this gives "being Okinawan" new meanings that go beyond ethnic or cultural distinctions, and express human qualities in a broader sense.

## Notes

- 1) This paper is a revised version of part of my doctoral dissertation, "The Politics of Difference and Authenticity in the Practice of Okinawan Dance and Music in Osaka, Japan," based on my research in Osaka, supported by the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Center of Japanese Studies at the University of Michigan, while I was under the auspices of the Osaka City University's Urban Research Plaza as a Global Center of Excellence fellow between 2007–2008.
- 2) This is the club's real name. The TOCC has been introduced in multiple sources such as magazines and newspapers, and many of its participants have been interviewed and have published their written accounts, using their real names and mentioning the name of the club. Since I quote those interviews and publications in my paper and cite them in my bibliography, I decided that making the club's name anonymous or giving it an alias would not serve to protect their privacy. In this paper, I use the real names of participants who have published or been interviewed under their real names. The others I have left anonymous.
- 3) During the 1920s, many impoverished Okinawans resorted to eating starch from the stems and fruit of the cycad plant to ease their starvation, and died from food poisoning from the toxic residue in these plants (Shinjo 1997).
- 4) Burakumin are the descendants of the members of a historical outcast group. Although the premodern status system was abolished in the late nineteenth century, these people are still subject to prejudice and discrimination in matters such as employment and marriage, due to the perceived "impurity" of the occupations their ancestors held.
- 5) *Uchina* is "Okinawa" or "Okinawan" in Okinawan dialect.

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