

# PERFORMING OKINAWA

## *Eisâ*, Identity Construction and the Recontextualisation of Traditional Performing Arts

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### Introduction

Some traditional Okinawan performing arts have been transformed with regard to their content, context and reception over the last few decades as a result of the impact of tourism. Moreover, they have been pivotal in the construction of local identity and a sense of place within the nation-state, and, since the wide-scale development of tourism in Okinawa, have been popularised and recontextualised to showcase representative aspects of Okinawan identity to suit the cultural tastes of short-term visitors. This research explores the dialectics of identity construction in terms of self-representation and consumer fetishism relating to new contexts of Okinawan traditional culture, in particular a dance form known as *eisâ*. The new cultural environments in which so-called traditional performing arts are found exist as contested sites that mediate and negotiate between traditional culture and tourist consumerism.

The specific ethnographic focus of this study is Okinawa, one of Japan's south western (Nansei) islands. Okinawa has several identities. It is a Japanese prefecture of over 160 sub-tropical islands; it is the largest island of that prefecture; it is a city on that island; and it was once part of the Ryûkyû Kingdom (in this discussion the term Okinawa refers primarily to the island unless otherwise indicated). Stretching about 1320 kilometres from Japan's largest south western island of Kyûshû to very close to Taiwan, the Ryûkyû islands are usually subdivided into four groupings: Amami-Ôshima, Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama. Okinawa prefecture comprised the last three groupings and has a population of around 1.3 million.

The Ryûkyû Kingdom was established in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century and provided a link between China and Japan. It had a strong relationship with China, from which much Okinawan culture has its origin. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Ryûkyû experienced turbulent relations with Japan: the Kingdom's autonomy was challenged in 1609 when the Satsuma clan of Kyûshû invaded; the Meiji government replaced the Kingdom with Okinawa prefecture in 1879; and the US occupied the islands from the end of World War II in 1945 until 1972. Still, Okinawa has a distinct place within the Japanese nation-state. Using a

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paradigm of multicultural Japan (Sugimoto, 1997), Okinawa has several cultural traits that are seen as unique vis-à-vis the dominant mainland culture.<sup>[1]</sup> As well as being geographically isolated, it is also culturally different and a geographic ‘other’ within the nation-state. For example, while the Okinawan language is related to Japanese, it is a distinct and unique language that most Japanese would not understand. There are also several dialects within Okinawa itself.

Now known mainly as a tourist destination, as well as for the US military bases that have been present since the end of US occupation, the islands have a rich cultural heritage that are often celebrated with pride through cultural display within the tourist industry. Okinawa is well positioned as a tourist destination with a sub-tropical paradise setting, although Okinawans are often linked to minority and human rights issues in that some other Japanese sometimes discriminate against them. Okinawa holds a somewhat paradoxical place in the Japanese nation-state in that its culture is celebrated in a culture of difference, but that difference is also negated in a culture of antipathy.

Some of the ideas presented herein relate to what Schechner (1985) in his study of the anthropology of performance terms ‘restored behavior’. Some performances, especially those that are typically prevalent in touristic contexts relate very closely with this notion, where “the original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed” (Schechner, 1985:35). But with some of the recontextualised spheres of performance the source is not always explicitly acknowledged; rather, it is implicit as one symbol of Okinawan cultural identity.

Studies of touristic sites, to use the notion in its broadest sense, whether ‘away from home’, ‘at home’, ‘virtual’ (DeWitt, 1999:73) or ‘sonic’ (Taylor, 1997:19), have the potential to identify and understand convergences and tensions between such binary notions as traditional/modern, private/public, authentic/inauthentic, sacred/secular, centre/periphery and local/global. Without dwelling too much on essentialist categories of difference, these dualisms and others do help to foreground opposite ends of continua that are often found as a result of the influences of tourism, as well as other spheres resulting in the recontextualisation and cultural transformation of traditional culture.

A basic deconstruction of the concept ‘traditional performing arts’ points to the construction of that notion vis-à-vis that which is perceived not to be traditional (and vice-versa). This was perhaps epitomised in the early years of ethnographic studies, which so often focussed on the traditional as a construct linked to ideas of an authentic culture where the old was usually foregrounded in studies that presented histories and descriptions of the culture or country and seldom touching on the contemporary. Times have certainly changed, but ideas of a perceived traditional culture that acts as a mediator between the past and the present seems to exist in increasing contexts with site-specific instances of symbols of a real or imagined past acting as forceful signifiers of contemporary cultural practices, seemingly in search of a modern identity. Touristic sites that showcase the performing arts are one example; and *eisâ* is one example that is especially visible in one of Japan’s peripheral regions.

Writing in a special issue of *Critical Asian Studies*, Hein (2001:32) noted that “the last decade has been an unusually active moment for the re-construction of Okinawan identity. Nor does that activity seem to be diminishing”. Indeed, this activity is especially visible in the performing arts, where symbols of Okinawan identity have taken on a whole new meaning. As a prefecture on the periphery of the Japanese nation-state (in culture and geography), Okinawan performing arts hold a unique position in that they occupy spaces of nationhood and ‘otherness’. Their study can show how culture can be marginalised yet celebrated within a notion of difference that is both an ‘other’ and part of one’s own national setting. Okinawan performing arts are increasingly celebrated and consumed within a paradigm of celebrating local difference within local, national and international touristic settings. Drawing from my own field research and from secondary sources, I show that on Okinawa there is a heightened awareness of performing identity where traditional modes of performance are transformed and recontextualised in the tourist industry, but also in related spheres that consume Okinawa as a kind of ethnic ‘other’. There are, of course, numerous performing arts on Okinawa, old and new, and this paper focuses on one, albeit a highly significant one that deserves scholarly attention.

This paper, which focuses on the context of *eisâ* rather than on its content, divides into three main areas, each of which looks at a distinct *eisâ* setting. The first focuses on *eisâ*’s traditional ritual context at an annual Buddhist celebration; the second looks at a competition and festival context, which shows one of *eisâ*’s recontextualisations; and the third centres on *eisâ* and tourism, especially the transformation of this traditional performing art for tourists at theme parks. The aim of the discussion is to show the movement of *eisâ* from religious to other contexts, and to show how the genre has significance today as a marker of cultural identity for Okinawans and other Japanese.

## Religious Context

The term ‘*eisâ*’ is thought to originate from the vocal utterances (*hayashi*) that are found in *eisâ* chants (eg ‘*iya sâsâ*’—vocables), and the dance form is believed to derive from *nenbutsu odori* (Buddhist dance), which was transmitted from mainland Japan (Okaze, 1992:22).<sup>[2]</sup> In its religious and ritualistic context, *eisâ* has significance in that it is understood to awaken the deceased ancestors, to console them and to dispel bad spirits.

An *eisâ* ensemble consists of male and/or female dancers accompanied by several instruments and chanting. Men usually play the drums *ôdaiko* and *shimedaiko* while dancing, and women often perform hand dances, although hand dancing by men is not unusual. Other instruments often include *yotsudake* (castanets), *pârankû* (drum) and *sanshin* (three-string lute). Also, the performers sometimes whistle.

*Eisâ* is a type of dance with musical accompaniment that is normally performed during the summer Buddhist *bon* festival (see Combs, 1979, 1980).<sup>[3]</sup> *Bon*, which is sometimes referred to as the Festival for the Dead, is a three-day event beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, and is the time when the souls of ancestors return to the living world.<sup>[4]</sup> It is an especially affecting time of the year and

an occasion for family reunion and visits to the tombs of dead ancestors (see Hogg, 1973 in Combs, 1980:17).

## Contest/Festival Contexts

In 1956, the Koza government (present-day Okinawa city) founded the Okinawa Island-Wide *Eisâ* Contest “in order to celebrate the birth of Koza” (Okaze, 1992:37), which in its first year attracted around 30,000 spectators.<sup>[5]</sup> The founding of an *eisâ* contest was a result of the local government wanting “to inspire cultural identity in Okinawan people in order to promote community morale” (Okaze, 1992:37).<sup>[6]</sup> The contest, which ran each year from 1956 to 1977, was always held after the August *bon* festival. In 1977, however, the competition became an annual festival in response to dissatisfaction regarding the rules and the placement of a folk performing art into a competition context (Okaze, 1992:43).<sup>[7]</sup> Like the contest before it, the festival is an annual event and falls on the first Sunday after *bon*.<sup>[8]</sup> It is held at the City Sports Park in Koza and currently runs from 3pm to 9pm.

Most of the groups participating in the festival come from the central part of Okinawa, and involvement is by invitation only, with the Festival Committee selecting the groups that will perform. “The prestige of participation is so great that rejection of this opportunity by the groups is rare” (Okaze, 1992:54). About seven groups normally participate each year. Some groups attend annually, some are invited to attend from mainland Japan, and some have even come from outside Japan. Each group is required to have over 50 members, and must perform for 30 minutes (Okaze, 1992:43). There are some single-sex groups and some mixed-sex groups.

In comparison to the ritual event, there has clearly been a change in performance practice. As well as regulating the size of the *eisâ* team, one of the categories in the competition was formation, which saw the contestants developing new dances to fit the rules of the competition. Also, “the category of dance composition, which included the combination of traditional, modern and creative innovations, was crucial to the evolution of today’s *eisâ* style” (Okaze, 1992:40). Modern songs too are part of the event. Even regarding the appearance of the performers, costuming has become more elaborate in the festival over the years (Okaze, 1992:29, 40).

## *Eisâ* Under the Tourist Gaze

Gyokusendô is the biggest theme park in Okinawa prefecture. Here, the park displays two contexts of music: one is a small building that houses a *sanshin* maker within a traditional musical instrument shop; and the other is a place where *eisâ* is performed for the visiting tourist. Both the *sanshin* shop and the *eisâ* display provide points of inbetweenness, as something that is staged in a perceived authentic way for the visitor, yet is recontextualised and far removed from its perceived original setting.

Gyokusendô’s advertising brochures are replete with images of their *eisâ* group, depicted in full costume, playing large drums and in a dynamic performance mode. Indeed, the *eisâ* show is given prominence at the theme park, with four daily

performances in a large outdoor stage area (partly covered), which is designed to attract onlookers due to the visual appearance and sounds put on display. This particular show includes *eisâ*, lion dancing, *sanshin*, folk songs, and *sanba* (castanets). It is billed as having lively performances, and there are also CDs and videos of the show available for purchase. The *eisâ* show is labelled ‘Sûpâ Eisâ’ (Super *Eisâ*) and features the group called Mafekaji.

Theme parks are distinct physical spaces that have cultural display at their core. Unlike many theme parks throughout Japan that emphasise international or non-Japanese culture, Gyokusendô portrays the local—albeit it is a local that is somewhat exoticised and showcased in terms of its cultural difference. Gyokusendô recreates a perceived traditional Okinawan lifestyle, and showcases through the performing arts representative examples of music and dance. This theme park is one example where two specific music themes are present that serve to stand for aspects of traditional Okinawa. While quite different in form to the Disney experience, there is fantasy at Gyokusendô: that is, a fantasy of reliving an idealised historical Okinawan experience. In such an experience a nostalgic longing for the past might be linked to the Japanese notion of *furusato* (hometown) (see Robertson, 1989, 1995). As well as a space of leisure and consumption, Gyokusendô acts as a site of nostalgia for traditional Okinawa—the consumption of one area of traditional Japan. For the visitor, it might be difficult during a short stay on the island to visit a *sanshin* maker or see an *eisâ* performance, especially since the religious and secular events are held at certain times of the year. Seeing both of these symbols of Okinawan identity at the theme park allow the visitor to enter a world, a fantasy world, where the experience of Okinawa can be consumed the whole year round.

When anthropologist Joy Hendry (2000:1-18) talks of “going abroad at home”, it must be stressed that in the case of mainland Japanese visitors to Okinawa, who are by far the majority of tourists there, consuming Okinawan identity in a theme park is both going abroad and staying at home. Okinawa is one of Japan’s ‘others’, and it is well positioned in the nation-state as an ‘other’ that is both close to home, yet simultaneously distant.

## Closing Thoughts

In each of the contexts discussed above, *eisâ* is displayed as a symbol that represents Okinawan culture. It has an ability to travel across cultural settings, either maintaining or changing form, but transforming meaning. Its propensity to travel shows how it can have intense effect as an emblem of local culture and identity through its display and consumption in many places.

Why, one might ask, is *eisâ* used to represent Okinawan cultural identity? The dance form is visually and aurally distinct, and in its religious context provides a sense of traditional culture and something that is unique to Okinawa in terms of its form and presentation. In other contexts, the foregrounding of traditional performing arts might be a response to the oppression that Okinawans have often felt within the Japanese nation-state, and such performance is utilised to gain political visibility. Also, within a

notion of multicultural Japan, Okinawa is on a periphery of the nation-state, both geographically and culturally, and the promotion of *eisâ* in touristic contexts might be viewed as a reaction to mainland hegemony.

Some *eisâ* performances are connected to the idea of invented tradition, or at least re-invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), where “performances are invented and presented as traditional when they are not” (Schechner, 1985:75). Some *eisâ* troupes present their show in terms of a perceived traditional past, when in reality their version of *eisâ* is actually quite modern. This is particularly evident in contexts that present an *eisâ* performance that is clearly influenced by contemporary culture. *Eisâ* occupies a somewhat ambivalent place in contemporary Okinawan culture. It exists simultaneously in different guises: as a form presented authentically in traditional and contemporary settings; and as a form that is easily transformed and recontextualised so as to celebrate and represent traditional Okinawan culture. *Eisâ* has an ability to be used as simulacra in commercial and touristic contexts. In tourism, for instance, it gives the impression that it is presenting an authentic form, one that represents an ideal in a ritual setting. But this nostalgia is presented in a contradictory way, outside the perceived authentic context, out of time and out of place. What makes theme park settings especially interesting is that they are not based on a purely imaginary world, but on a perceived real world that is imagined through simulation.

In many Okinawan contexts, nostalgia is on display through the articulation of identity in *eisâ* performance. The cultural staging and representation of *eisâ* in any of the contexts discussed are part of a negotiation of performing a tradition and transforming it, and for the viewers there is also a re-interpretation of the display (cf. Carlson, 1996:185-186). As a performing art, *eisâ* is a form through which local identity is celebrated, whether it is for community, ritual, religious or economic purposes. Okinawa is awash with cultural exhibits, sites and shows, and has many symbols of Okinawa, yet *eisâ* has the ability to travel between disparate cultural spheres and still represent traditional culture.

This study, therefore, has shown how a small island ritual and performing art can capture a local and national imagination, how a dance form can mediate and negotiate between traditional culture and contemporary touristic culture, and how culture and identity are expressed through music and dance, whether for religious, entertainment or economic reasons. In each context and within a changing cultural environment, Okinawans are performing, and in each they are performing Okinawa.

## Endnotes

[1] Even though Japan is an island nation of over 3000 islands, I use the term ‘mainland’ to refer to the dominant and sometime hegemonic culture of Honshû, particularly that of Tôkyô.

[2] There are several studies of *eisâ*, by Okinawans and scholars from mainland Japan (see further Okaze, 1992:6-8). On *eisâ* of Nakijin village see Kobayashi and Kobayashi (1997).

[3] *Eisâ* is sometimes referred to as *shichigachi eisâ* (seventh month *eisâ*). *Bon* is celebrated at different times in different parts of Japan, either in July or August depending on whether the lunar or solar calendar is observed.

[4] The lunar calendar was officially abandoned in 1872 when Japan adopted the solar calendar. There is about a one-month difference between the two systems. When calculating the date of a festival one of three methods are used: (1) a calendar month is added to the lunar calendar date; (2) the same date is used for the festival; and (3) the lunar calendar is maintained. On the *bon* festival in Okinawa and the US see Combs (1979).

[5] The post-World War II years saw the building of US military bases around Koza, which were important for regional development.

[6] See Okaze (1992) for a history of the competition.

[7] On the folk performing arts of Japan see Thornbury (1997).

[8] On the 36<sup>th</sup> Okinawan Island-Wide *Eisâ* Festival (Okinawa Zentô *Eisâ* Matsuri) see Okaze (1992).

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