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SANTA CRUZ

**COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND MUSICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN  
CALIFORNIA MIN'YŌ AND TSUGARU SHAMISEN GROUPS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

MUSIC

by

**Alexander J. Nunes**

March 2024

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2024

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Community Resilience and Musical Sustainability in California Min'yō and Tsugaru Shamisen

by

Alexander J. Nunes

In California both min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners occupy two disparate diasporic intercultural spaces for Japanese folk music. Based on fieldwork conducted in California music and dance affinity groups between 2018 – 2023, this study of Japanese folk music and dance argues these two practices and communities demonstrate different types of musical resiliency during precarious times while they engage with the differing desires of institutions, participants, and audiences in expressing a Japanese folk musical past. In precarity, the min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen groups demonstrate resiliency in adapting to shifting conceptions of identity whilst experimenting with alternatives to the current promotion practices of state institutions and NGOs.

The min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen communities work to sustain the spatial aesthetics of Japanese folk music and dance which are tied to specific places and practices in Japan. While cultivating this aesthetic, practitioners move across different transmission spaces with masters and peers both in-person and digitally distanced. The contemporary place of min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen communities in California is informed by a Japanese American history of displacement. These groups exhibit

resiliency in negotiating the transitions and transformations of Japanese folk music and dance.



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I want to thank my sincerest thanks to my min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen collaborators. Morita Sensei and Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai shared their musical and dance practices with me with unfailing attention. Kyle Abbot, Su Bunjamin, Christopher McTook, and Pedro taught me, learned with me, and practiced with me at the San Jose JACL.

## Chapter One. Introduction

February afternoon in 2020, I sit across from Japanese American musician and dancer Shizue Morita (Morita Sensei to her students). She guides me in my first *min'yō* lesson, “*Kyushu Tanko Bushi*” (coal mining song of Kyushu).<sup>1</sup> “Let’s start from the intro,” she says. My ring finger starts on the eighth position of the highest-pitched string and swaps to my index as I ascend to six, four, and then fall back to six. The shamisen emits a bright tone as our strumming hits the non-depressed third and second strings. This action causes the first string to vibrate sympathetically against the *azuma sawari* (eastern *sawari*), which produces the characteristic harsh buzzing tone of the shamisen.<sup>2</sup> Our fingers slide on the smooth, polished wooden neck. This phrase repeats once more before Morita Sensei shouts “Ha!” to mark the beginning of the lyrics – our playing style shifts to a heterophonic texture to accompany the vocal melody. I sight-read the provided shamisen tablature, attempting to follow her lead. “*Chotto, chotto, chotto,*” brings my eyes off the page. “Good, you’re picking this up fast, but this isn’t *Tsugaru* (a loud and percussive musical style originating in the eponymous peninsula in northern Aomori prefecture). You have to play here,” she says, tapping her *bachi* onto the upper portion of the shamisen’s body by the neck. “You don’t want to overpower the singer.” She laughs. I smile and nod. I imitated her playing and immediately noticed the muted sound.

“Okay, that’s enough for you to practice until next time, but come look at this,” she gestures to a bookshelf across her music/office room. I move around the small knee-high table as she grabs a picture frame. “I want to show you all of us

together,” she says, looking at the picture. There are 25 members, 15 women and ten men dressed in white and black *kimonos* (Japan's national dress, a wrapped robe with rectangular sleeves worn left over right) with golden and black *obi* (belt or sash). “That’s me,” she says, pointing at a younger version of herself in the back row with a short black bob hairstyle, third from the right. “I’m the only one left, though... I stopped playing when I was raising my daughters for 20 years.” “I was only dancing when Matsutoyo Sensei called me and said she needed my help to get the *kai* (club, association, society) up here (Northern California). I want to leave my culture here.”



Figure 1: Picture of Lodi Min’yō Dōkō Kai (From the Morita’s personal collection used with permission).

The above vignette recounts my first lesson with Matsutoyo Shizu Sato Sensei (Morita Sensei’s name when she teaches or performs shamisen and voice on behalf of the Los Angeles-based Matsutoyo Kai) in February 2020. It would be my last in-

person lesson with her until June 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai* (meaning Japanese Folk Music Enjoyment Club and hereafter MTK) resumed lessons and group practice through the Zoom and Line video call applications in October 2020. We had lessons twice a month and group practice once a month. At the first group gathering, everyone exclaimed how alone they had felt without MTK meetings and how delighted they were to see everyone, even over a webcam. We continued practicing this way until everyone received their COVID-19 vaccinations. No events or festivals were happening, but Morita Sensei insisted we diligently practice to be the first group ready as soon as they opened. Despite California Governor Gavin Newsom lifting the stay-at-home order on June 15th, 2021, many of the summer 2021 obons (Japanese ancestor festival held in the summer) and cultural festivals planned for an online event. The later festivals and celebration organizers canceled events due to the California wildfires. In October 2021, we performed for the Japanese American women's club *Sumire Kai*, our first event in almost two years. After this event, two people joined our min'yō family. The challenge then has become how to continue the practice of min'yō music and dance in the face of various ecological disasters against a history of anti-Asian sentiment in California reawakened by the pandemic. For this dissertation, I draw on ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon's concept of resilience, which "refers to a system's capacity to recover and maintain its integrity, identity, and continuity when subjected to forces of disturbance and change" (2019; 193). I argue that California's min'yō and

Tsugaru shamisen communities demonstrate resilience in adapting their musical practices to demographic shifts, US culture, and precarity.

Investigating musical resiliency in min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen within California requires tuning into ideas of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and its continued practice during an ecological crisis. As min'yō is a Japanese musical style exclusively practiced by the Japanese until the 20th century, race/ethnicity intertwines this musical culture. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many musicians pick up the shamisen and incorporate it into Western genres.<sup>3</sup> Outside of shamisen music, white *shakuhachi* (Japanese end-blown flute made from bamboo) players such as Michael Chikuzen Gould in the United States cultivated a sizeable spiritual movement around the instrument without Japanese American players.<sup>4</sup> Many non-heritage musicians work with heritage practitioners to authenticate their practice and the joy of musical collaboration. During my research in California, I noticed that the prominent members of the Tsugaru shamisen are white and male. This makeup contrasts with the min'yō groups I have been in contact with, primarily female and Japanese American.

The Tsugaru shamisen group, *Bachido*<sup>5</sup>, consists of mainly white and *hapa* (half-Japanese) men occupying a different area of Japanese folk music to demonstrate resiliency. Kyle Abbot founded the website Bachido in 2011 to become an international hub for shamisen players. It started with a chat forum, a free “crash-course video,” and a weekly video blog on the shamisen. The site now offers lessons from Kyle Abbott, Kevin Kmetz, Mike Penny, and Aki “Ten Ten.” These lessons and

courses focus on min'yō playing and singing, Tsugaru, Appalachian folk songs, and advanced techniques such Kmetz's *kamashi* playing using the pinky.<sup>6</sup> The Bachido team has traveled to compete at the Tsugaru competitions as a group and as individuals, even placing first in 2014. Following this victory, Kyle started shamisen workshops in California, which soon led to the ShamiCamp international workshop series in Mountain View, Berlin, Tokyo, and Sapporo. In addition to hosting the website with his friend and contact Masahiro Nitta in Hokkaido, Kyle builds and repairs shamisens at his home in Santa Cruz. He continues hosting the shamisen workshops every weekend at the Issei Memorial Building, part of the San Jose Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Japanese Americans contribute



Figure 2: Monsters of Shamisen – from left to right: Kevin Kmetz, Masahiro Nitta, Kyle Abbott, and Reigen Fujii. From Bachido YouTube, used with permission.

numerous works of intercultural collaboration drawing from their Japanese ancestry and enculturation in the US; Japanese folk music practitioners connect across cultural boundaries to promote their music and produce new hybrid forms. Bachido engenders

such moments through its international website, the San Jose workshops at the JACL, and the musical projects of multiple members. Kyle Abbott hosts the San Jose sessions, drawing a multiethnic group interested in the min'yō subgenre.

Japanese folk music performers in the diaspora navigate identity and intercultural collaboration and their impact on cultural sustainability. Newer min'yō practitioners grapple with race/ethnic and gender identities as they come from mixed ancestry or no ancestry in a practice that emphasizes Japanese ways of moving and being. These practitioners must also contend with not only the legacy of Orientalism in the US, but also its continued my research, participants in Japanese folk music and dance groups express reluctance to incur greater responsibility due to a lack of participation and income from a senior or leadership position within local groups. Japanese folk performing arts decline as heritage participants express limited interest due to increased responsibility and the proliferation of other leisure activities. The American imagination continues to apply racist and essentializing tropes to Asian bodies and their cultures, which extends into the real world. The conflation of epidermal color and culture continues to bear significant weight in perceived ability and skill in the performance and appropriateness of participation in a heritage performing art.

On the other hand, intercultural collaboration ensures that non-heritage practitioners help perpetuate traditional performing arts but are subject to accusations of cultural appropriation. As participation from outside the Japanese American community increases, the false equivalence of race/ethnicity and skill continues as

both heritage students and cultural critics dismiss non-heritage performers over doubts of their credentials, authenticity, and critiques of privilege. Non-Japanese traditional artists tread carefully between tradition and experimentation due to a past preference for white performers.

Japanese folk music practitioners in the US continue to grapple with the dual burden that women bear the responsibility of supporting a family and household and perpetuating cultural practices in an increasingly expensive world that undervalues racial and ethnic performing arts. As I practice and learn in MTK, I witness several members step back due to shared commitment to family obligations. Other prodigious members stagnate due to additional pecuniary and senior responsibilities associated with more excellent status accompanying a promotion. A licensed teacher would travel to support other troupes across the north of the state, which at the height of the obon season often means three-hour minimum round trips. As younger members balance jobs and families, traveling across the state to new communities proves difficult. These frequent summer outings exhaust elderly members, who desire to see min'yō and obon continue but also acknowledge the limits of their aging bodies. Local and national governments and NGOs implement and experiment with methods of continuing traditional performing arts at the expense of community input and sustainability.

Japanese folk music and dance enthusiasts grapple with sustaining these practices with modernization, late-stage capitalism, and environmental crisis. Japan actively seeks to maintain its intangible cultural heritage status to further ensure the



prestige of its performing arts. The top-down sustainability projects via UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage or other national or local government interventions maintain these dwindling arts. These efforts often freeze the cultural practice in time as a museumized product incapable of further development. The projects sometimes instituted new hierarchies that gave practitioners less input into their local traditions. Some folk practices, like Tsugaru's, avoid such help by ensuring local input and support. If local efforts fail to invigorate the performing art, practitioners might move online to connect with a broader audience where they can engage potential diaspora and non-heritage members.

Laws and infrastructure instituted by governments and NGOs can help sustain musical communities, but sometimes at the cost of adaptability. Intervention by UNESCO through national governments can salvage and stabilize traditional performing arts. Such efforts temporalize these practices, which are supposed to reflect people's contemporary lives and places. A positive example is that the Alliance for California Traditional Arts provides funding for continuing these cultural arts in California, but the instructor must be a heritage practitioner. This practice ensures the mentor artist "is recognized as an exemplary practitioner of a traditional art form by their community and peers" (ACTA 2024). The only option for groups and individuals outside with no immediate heritage practitioner to regularly guide them is to dialogue with international members. The Bachido website offers such a feature through its forums for shamisen and Japanese folk aficionados to communicate and share knowledge on performance, materials, and music practice.

Morita Sensei asks, “can we keep doing this?” She inquires about continuing the master/student relationships and the strictures of the iemoto system within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States. While other ethnographies of Japanese performing arts transmission reveal rigorous and exacting methods, my tutelage under Morita/Matsutoyo Shizu Sato Sensei reminded me of my undergraduate apprenticeship in euphonium. In both instances, I was expected to practice and seek out other performers and develop a cultural understanding of the pieces. I returned to ask questions and refine my skills based on these outside endeavors which would further cement my appreciation and cultivation of Japanese folk music. For *min’yō*, she only asked that I find the commonality of the human experience and shape it with Japanese aesthetics via her guidance – no easy feat. Transmitting and sustaining cultural arts in diaspora, late-stage capitalism, and environmental disaster is possible.

## Field Site Locations and Demographics

I selected these areas as they are some of the few places with existing min'yō shamisen groups in Northern California. The two groups I work with primarily tour



Figure 3: Map of California counties.  
and work in these areas during the Japanese cultural fairs and demonstrations. They also live near large Japanese-identified populations or have existing ties through other institutions that perpetuate group membership. Some groups have overlapping membership and maintain contact with each other outside of Japanese cultural settings. The primary members of MTK are all Japanese heritage and women. The six current members are Morita Sensei, Gale “Yoshiko” Nagato, Denise Devela, Linda

Liang, Samantha Liang, Kay, and me. By primary, I mean those members regularly involved with group rehearsal and training. The secondary members are the husbands, brothers, and sons of members who join us for performances to assist with transportation or play percussion instruments such as the *kane* (a small flat gong)<sup>7</sup> or *shime-daiko* (literally, bound drum).<sup>8</sup>

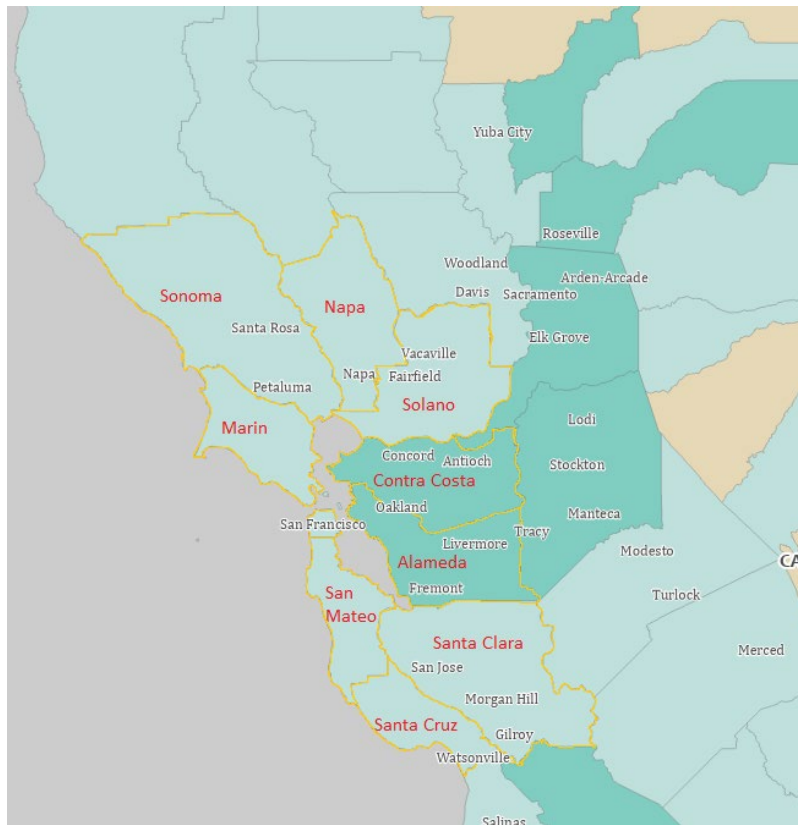


Figure 4: Map of Greater San Francisco Bay Area Counties  
California's population is 39,538,223, according to the 2020 US Census

(America Counts Staff; 2021). The T01001 Total Population table and the Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics file lists 251,111 respondents who identify as Japanese alone and 469,915 who identify as Japanese alone or in any combination (US Census Bureau, 2020). The San Francisco Bay Area is my first fieldwork site.

The area surrounds the San Francisco, San Pablo, and Suisun Bay estuaries. The Association of Bay Area Governments defines the Bay Area as the counties surrounding the estuaries: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma, and San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> See figure 2 for a view of these counties in relation to each other. As of the 2010 census, the SF Bay Area's total population is

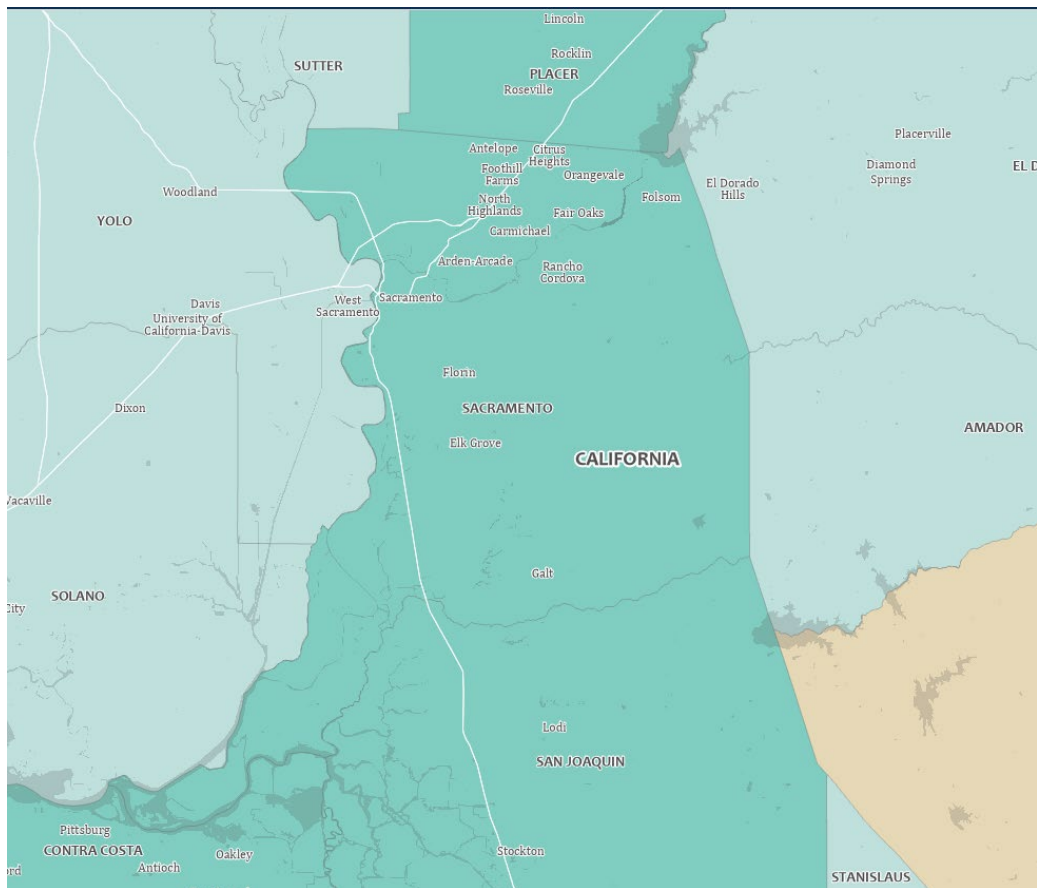


Figure 5: Map of Sacramento County (US Census Bureau, 2020)  
 7,150,739, of which 0.9% or 64,357 identify as Japanese Americans. They comprise 1.5% of San Francisco and San Jose’s populations each, over 2% of Sunnyvale, Berkeley, and Los Altos, and 4.6% of Cupertino.

California’s Sacramento and San Joaquin counties comprise my other field

work site. The former county was one of California's original counties from statehood in 1850. San Joaquin County has a low inland elevation and a high water table near the San Joaquin River and its tributaries. The 2020 census lists Sacramento County as having a population of 1,585,055, of which 9,540 responded as Japanese alone and 20,734 as Japanese alone or in any combination (US Census Bureau, 2020). San Joaquin County had an estimated population of 751,615, amongst whom 2,338 people identify as solely Japanese compared to 5,293 for Japanese alone or in any combination.

#### Japanese American Immigration History

*Nikkei* (Japanese emigrants and their descendants; Japanese diaspora) categorize themselves by generation since their first wave of immigration. Japanese immigration to the United States began in the Meiji period (1868-1912) when they lost access to their homes or land. Before 1884, emigration from Japan was illegal, but after pressure from displaced nationals, the government allowed the first group of laborers to travel to Hawai'i. These young sojourners (*dekasegi*) were like their Chinese counterparts: young men who intended to work abroad temporarily (Lee, 2017; 2). With the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the United States began pressuring Japan to allow its citizens the right to self-determination. In actuality, the United States' west coast businesses needed a new cheap source of labor (ibid.). 23,000 Japanese men and 6,000 women voyaged to Hawai'i by 1894 to work the sugarcane plantations (Adachi 1977; 25).

By 1910, 72,257 Japanese lived in the US, primarily on the Pacific coast in

San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland, although Colorado, Utah, and New York had sizable Japanese populations. The Japanese immigrants were primarily male until the signing of the Gentlemen's Agreement between the US and Japan in 1908.<sup>10</sup> This agreement restricted the entry of unskilled laborers into the United States but did not prevent their families' migration.<sup>11</sup> This agreement brought many "picture brides," or women who were married on picture alone, on return trips, or sometimes by proxy (Ichihashi, 1932; 10). Between 1908 and 1923, over 33,000 Japanese, including picture brides, immigrated to the US (Chan, 1991; 17). This initial period was favorable primarily to Japanese immigrants regarded as "noble savages" as opposed to the racist vitriol the Chinese received (Sueyoshi, 2018, 94). However, this treatment shifted at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century as more Japanese immigrants arrived and established communities.

As Japanese immigrants increased in both cities and farming communities of California, white citizens sought further exclusion methods. Collectives of white farmers in California arose to vilify the Japanese immigrants. The benevolent racism they experienced prior to 1900 ended as West Coast laborers turned on them, as exemplified in the 1902 American Federation of Labor pamphlet entitled *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion: Meat vs. Rice*.

Whereas recent events have increased the danger threatening  
the American workers from Mongolian labor; and

Whereas the Chinese-exclusion law expires in 1902; and

Whereas the Pacific Coast and intermountain States are suffering

severely from Chinese and Japanese cheap coolie labor: Therefore be it

Resolved, That Congress strengthen and reenact the Chinese exclusion law, including in its provisions all Mongolian labor.

(American Federation of Labor, 1902)<sup>12</sup>

This act extension was also pushed for by the San Francisco Building Trades Council (Lee, 2018). The America Legion Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West, the Japanese Exclusion League of California, and the California Joint Immigration Committee were founded during this time to further anti-Asian sentiment. This sentiment grew stronger in 1906 with an attempt by the San Francisco municipal school board to send all Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students to segregated schools. This action angered Japan, forcing President Theodore Roosevelt to cancel the segregation order and lead to the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907 (Daniels, 1990; 119-27). This informal agreement between the US and Japan ended emigration from Japan to the US but would not impose restrictions on Japanese immigrants already present.

However, California persisted in 1913 by passing the Alien Land Law (also known as the Webb Haney Act), which dictated that immigrants were "aliens ineligible for citizenship" and, by extension, unable to lease or own land beyond three years. To circumvent this law, *Issei* registered their property and land under their Nisei American children's names (Rawitsch, 2013; 102). The Alien Land Law of 1920 closed this loophole, which ended any land leasing to Asian Americans,



increased property ownership restrictions, and shrunk eligible parties to whom the land could be transferred (ibid.; 130). Having successfully limited the upward mobility of Japanese immigrants, the United States pushed out the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively barred Japanese immigrants from entry. By 1940, 285,000 Japanese heritage people lived in the US, over half of whom were born here (Natividad and Gali, 1996: 26). The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 finally permitted Japanese immigrants to become citizens, and the ban on Asian immigration remained until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. The lack of cultural flow, in addition to the incarceration camps, led to an increased rate of cultural assimilation.

The onset of World War II and subsequent incarceration further stirred generational divides between the roughly 260,000 people of Japanese heritage. The 10 “War Relocation Camps” are Manzanar and Tule Lake, California; Poston and Gila River, Arizona; Granada, Colorado; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Minidoka, Idaho; Topaz, Utah; and Rohwer and Jerome, Arkansas. Each camp held somewhere between 7,318 and 18,789 incarcerated Japanese Americans with Granada holding the former and Tule Lake the latter.<sup>13</sup> The prevailing sentiment was that resident Japanese or Japanese Americans would interfere on behalf of Japan against the United States. The FBI propagated this view, which assumed the homogeneity of Japanese Americans linked them all potential traitors (Roxworthy, 2008; 69). Despite this fact and the general mismanagement of the camps, they remained open until Tule Lake’s closure on March 28, 1946 (Natividad and Gali, 1996: 26).

Following the end of incarceration, Japanese families received no assistance

to return to their former lives or to start new lives elsewhere. The Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act was enacted in 1948 and allowed Japanese Americans to claim damages for property loss during incarceration. In the late 1960s through the 1970s, the JAACL, National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, National Council for Japanese American Redress, Japanese American Politicians, lawyers, and activists fought to achieve reparations for the incarcerated Japanese Americans. They succeeded in passing the Civil Liberties Act on April 20, 1988. Each surviving individual received a tax-free payment of \$20,000 to cover their losses. While the Civil Liberties Act finally acknowledged the atrocity, the US government failed to undo the damage of racist policies, laws, science, and stereotypes of Japanese Americans.

### **Literature Review**

While I pull from a multitude of disciplines to investigate and analyze the musical resilience in California's Japanese folk music and dance communities in precarity, I primarily draw from ethnomusicological sources. A comprehensive review of the English language ethnomusicological literature on musical instruments and genre, supplemented by Japanese language sources, informs the bulk of my work. This work is supported by scholars outside of ethnomusicology from cultural studies, gender studies, history, and sociology writing on Japan, Japanese Americans, Asian Americans, and Orientalism.

## Musical Resilience and Sustainability

This project's crux comes from the ethnomusicological scholarship on sustainability and its application to min'yō music and dance and Tsugaru shamisen in California. Like many scholars before me, I turn to the work of ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, whose scholarly output emphasizes the project of environmental and cultural sustainability. His article, "Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint," puts forth a metaphorical argument for a shift in cultural policies of music toward "the new conservation ecology: diversity, limits, to growth, connectedness, and stewardship in which music is conceived, then, not as something directed from a stage at an audience by a master artist but as something we all make in our quotidian lives, an activity that connects people, a way of being human" (2018; 172, 176). He further implicates the "cultural heritage concept" as placing musical practices as something always in need of defense in primarily in the form of top-down veneration for certain musical traditions and the creation of heritage spaces "where music is mediated – that is, explained to – and then performed for an audience (ibid; 172). In California Japanese folk music, I see the impact of cultural heritage on min'yō music and dance primarily in its connection to musical heritage spaces such as festivals and living history centers. Tsugaru shamisen practitioners engage in such spaces out of necessity and instead "share their skills and networking abilities to help the musical community maintain and improve the conditions under which their expressive culture may flourish" (ibid; 173). I see min'yō music and dance practitioners tentatively experimenting with this latter approach to cultural policy

management as they reconsider the transmission of tradition. While cultural policy management and the role of cultural heritage provide significant support to musical traditions, there are other aspects to an ecology of musical sustainability.

Considering Japanese folk music and dance practitioners in California, ecological influences dictate which cultural policies they must follow or depend on for continued support. Ethnomusicologist Huib Schippers sketches out “ecosystems of music” in his article, “Sound Futures: Understanding Musical Ecosystems,” which illustrates the multitudinous forces “working on the sustainability of any music practice” across “five domains – or clusters of forces: systems of learning music; musicians and communities; context and constructs; infrastructure and regulations; and media and the music industry” (2018). A sketch of the min’yō music and dance and Tsugaru shamisen practitioner’s ecosystem then includes ease of access to learning materials such as nearby licensed teachers or affinity groups, online resources, and the compatibility of pedagogical methods in the diaspora. For communities, a practitioner needs access to a Japanese folk music group, a Japanese American community, or a teacher. The context of min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen constructs includes identity, Japanese musical aesthetics, the association of folk music and dance with obon, and balancing tradition and change. The domain of infrastructure and regulations for Japanese folk music practice in California contains min’yō organizations, the iemoto-like structure offered by Matsutoyo Kai, and the ability to acquire shamisen and accessories. Finally, min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners’ media presence is mainly restricted to Japanese American press outlets;

some have their own websites or Facebook groups, and some media exposure through popular entertainment such as film and television. The practitioners might adapt based on the relative population of each aspect of a musical ecosystem. In adapting to sustain their musical tradition, these min'yō musicians and dancers demonstrate resilience.

The growing field of musical resilience scholarship provides valuable insights into how the Japanese folk musicians of California manage adaptation to their respective styles. As mentioned previously, Jeff Todd Titon's concept of resilience put forth in "Sustainability, Resilience, and Adaptive Management for Applied Ethnomusicology" hypothesizes resilience as a music culture's ability to integrate change, manage precarity, and "guide the outcome toward a desirable end" (2018; 193). Ethnomusicologist Timothy J. Cooley's edited collection *Cultural Sustainabilities* contains various essays on resilience. For this project, I primarily consider the work of the contributing ethnomusicologists Susan Hurley-Glowa and Rabbi Jeffrey A. Summit. Hurley-Glowa's "Alaska Native Ways of Knowing and the Sustainment of Musical Communities in an Ailing Petrostate" demonstrates Alaskan Native music culture's resilience, which "reflects the efficacy of [the state's] Indigenous people as stewards of the land" (2019; 103).

On the other hand, Rabbi Summit's "Digital Technology, Chanting the Torah, and the Sustainability of Tradition" showcases the transition from traditional structures having "developed and supported innovative means to transmit traditional music performance in a way that sustains traditional rituals while empowering their

style of Jewish expression and identity” (2019; 198). Finally, ethnomusicologist Shalini Ayyagari’s 2022 monograph *Musical Resilience: Performing Patronage in the Indian Thar Desert* depicts the pervasiveness of resilience within the lived experiences of Manganiyar musicians. She contributes to the discussion of resilience, positing that “when explored in all its dimensions, reveals power dynamics.” (2022; 8). The ethnomusicological scholarship of cultural sustainability and resilience informs this project’s approach to analyzing the expression of these concepts for the California min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen communities.

#### English Language Ethnomusicological Literature on Japanese Instruments and Genres

Despite the breadth of Japanese musical culture, the earliest English language monographs primarily detail gagaku, kabuki, noh, and shakuhachi. Min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen, while mentioned in these early tomes, do not receive the same attention to detail as the former genres. Ethnomusicological literature on Japanese music has focused on musical surveys, preservation of court/traditional music, popular music, folk music, hybridization, and music in the Japanese diaspora. I begin with William Malm’s *Traditional Japanese Music and Musical Instruments* (1959), which provides a comprehensive examination and analysis of Japanese music and detailed examinations of the most ubiquitous instruments. This work is still the primary English source for a detailed overview of Japanese musical systems. However, Henry Johnson made significant contributions to musical surveys with three works on the koto (2004), shamisen (2009), and shakuhachi (2010). Each book provides thorough organological, sociological, and ethnographic research. They trace

historical performers, gender roles, disability, and performance organizations. His most significant contribution is his detailed maps and flowcharts of genres, which help demystify the nebulous and overlapping categories. His work follows the example of scholars after Malm, who wrote on specific genres and instrumentariums rather than a vast survey.

Scholars writing on Japanese high art music consider the historical development of the forms and style, showcasing their robust transmission systems and musical infrastructure. Robert Garfias and Willem Adriaansz's respective books, *Music of a Thousand Autumns: The Tōgaku Style of Japanese Court Music* (1975) and *The Kumiuta and Danmono Traditions of Japanese Koto Music* (1973), provide a detailed overview of their respective genres. Garfias argues that *Tōgaku* (Tang dynasty music) is not an unchanged genre and that while the repertoire shrank, the performance practice continued to evolve. Adriaansz provides a detailed historiography of his two genres while undertaking a detailed musical analysis of the forms and conventions within the genres.

Ethnomusicological scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century attends to min'yō music with emphasis on Tsugaru shamisen, which demonstrates their practitioners' approaches toward tradition and change. Scholarship first appears in monograph form with Gerald Groemer's detailed and comprehensive historical, cultural, geographic, and musical analysis of the style in *The Spirit of Tsugaru* (1999). He largely follows the impact of the player Takahashi Chikuzan (1910-1998), which is why the book also includes Chikuzan's autobiography. Throughout, he provides extensive

transcription for stylistic shifts in Tsugaru shamisen and the approaches Chikuzan and other prominent players to the repertoire. David Hughes's text, *Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan* (2008), fills a similar role as Groemer's work as a comprehensive picture of the vast world of Japanese folk songs. The primary focus of the monograph is detailing the shifts and continued tension in min'yō music in dichotomies of rural to urban, local to global, and "traditional" to modern. He calls on 30 years of experience from 1977 to 2007 to fill a long-standing dearth in the Japanese music scholarship. Michael Peluse released an article, "Not Your Grandfather's Music," (2005), exploring the innovations in Tsugaru shamisen playing that maintain reverence for the style's past but simultaneously blurs folk, traditional, and pop. Nana Kaneko's master's thesis "Performing as One" (2013) demonstrates the success of Matsutoyo Sensei's pedagogical techniques in the diaspora by accommodating American sensibilities while emphasizing Japanese aesthetics. Keisuke Yamada's "Rethinking Iemoto" (2017) challenges current notions of the extant iemoto system by examining the sociocultural practices of individuals associated with the Oyamaru school of Tsugaru shamisen. He aims to rethink the organization's formative training and individual members' projects and creativity. The latest scholarship on Tsugaru shamisen is Gerald McGoldrick's "Tsugaru Shamisen and Modern Japanese Identity" (2017), which combines his extensive experience in the Japanese Tsugaru shamisen community discourse analysis. He uses music revival theory to perform his discourse analysis of the millennium revival. McGoldrick traces the 100-year recording history and Japanese ideas of modernity and tradition with the revival in the



70s and now to demonstrate how the genre simultaneously indexes rural Japan and the modern nation.

Further ethnomusicological scholarship contributes to a history of Japanese American music and resilience in the diaspora. Minako Waseda's dissertation "Japanese American Musical Culture in Southern California" (2000) traces an extensive history of Japanese American musicking and the transformation of their musical culture. Her work provides invaluable accounts from Japanese language sources and insight into how Japanese Americans adapted their musical traditions across generations and waves of immigration. Ethnomusicologist Susan Asai's monograph *Sounding Our Way Home* (2024) further delves into the history of Japanese American musicking in California and "how the politics of racism in this locale forced them to construct a collective identity against discrimination and rejection" (2024; 19). In this rich, nuanced, and thoughtful work, Asai emphasizes the heterogeneity and hybridity of Japanese American identity despite a white hegemony and Orientalist narratives.

Other ethnomusicological scholarship on Japanese music and dance offers insight into the transmission and maintenance of these practices. Dance and performance scholar Barbara Sellers-Young's "Teaching Personality with Gracefulness" (1993) focuses on the day-to-day practice of a *nihon buyo* (Japanese classical dance) master and her students in Oregon. She grapples with learning-without-understanding forcing Sellers to forgo the traditional participant-observation methodology while navigating the iemoto system's complexities. Jay Keister's 2004

work, *Shaped by Japanese Music: Kikuoka Hiroaki and Nagauta Shamisen*, continues the theme of genre-specific traditional music. Keister's ethnography details his time as a private student of acclaimed nagauta master, Kikuoka Hiroaki. His work shows how music thought to be unchanging can be shaped by an individual, especially when the form (as performed by an individual player) cannot be separated from the music. Ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn's *Sensational Knowledge* (2007) investigated the transmission of bodily knowledge across cultural divides through *Nihon Buyo* (Japanese classical dance). Her ethnography develops the idea that knowledge transmission from body-to-body informs our sense of self and how we orient ourselves to the world before us. In 2008, Kelly M. Foreman released her ethnography, *The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity, and Meaning*, which dispels the Western romanticization of geisha through her fieldwork and historical research. She lays out the genres and training of geisha, their history of performance in Japan, and their place and lives in modern Japan; at once a universally recognized and misunderstood but denied the same financial support and status that other institutions and traditional forms, i.e., "living national treasures."<sup>14</sup>

### Japanese Language Literature

Japanese music scholars and writers provide prolific output on min'yō, thoroughly cataloging and tracing the development of the regional styles. Among these scholars, Takeuchi Tsutomu is the most prolific, having 26 texts on Japanese folk songs detailing regional min'yō style. His 2014 work, *Bon'odoriuta: odorinenbutsu kara awaodori made* [Bon festival dance songs: from Buddhist prayer

dance to Awa dance festival] (2014), traces the evolution of festival dance from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) and its transmission and the merging of regional styles into what we recognize now as the Awa odori. Similarly, cultural writer Daijō Kazuo has multiple texts providing details on the history of Tsugaru shamisen and its crucial historical recording artists. His 1995 text *Tsugaru-jamisen no tanjō* (The birth of Tsugaru-jamisen) enthusiastically describes the cultural milieu of Meiji-era Tsugaru peninsula, Aomori prefecture, and the Nitabō (1857-1928; the mythic founder of Tsugaru shamisen). Sociologists Anthony Rausch and Suda Naoyuki released an abridged English translation in 1998, *The Birth of Tsugaru Shamisen Music*. Part 1 contains the abridged translation of Daijō's work, and Part 2 presents Rausch's argument relating Tsugaru shamisen to regional shamanism.

Reviewing the work of English language scholars on Japanese folk music, they note that Japanese researchers mostly catalog the folk music of Japan. (Groemer, 1994; Hughes, 2008; McGoldrick, 2017) These works provide important regional and historical context for min'yō music and dance. Most scholars are concerned with categorizing and classifying folk music into various schemas. On the other hand, Daijō's writings provide richly detailed vignettes that English-language ethnographers find more relevant but lack musical and scholarly detail.

### Music and Diaspora

Identity plays a significant role in sustaining min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practices in California. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong's 2004 monograph, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, covers a wide breadth of Asian American

music making. Her book details how musical performance constructs different identities and provides insight into an audience's reception or reconstruction of these ideas. For Japanese music, I focus on her taiko music chapters, where she questions its role in Asian American identity-making while it is a style of Japanese music popularized in Japanese American communities. She concludes that taiko as a genre and music-making practice means many things to the people who play it.

Even within a particular ethnic group, identity and its relation to music takes on multifarious forms, which allows multiple entry points for different generations to sustain the tradition. Ethnomusicologist Sylvia Alajaji's 2015 *Music and the Armenian Diaspora* demonstrates the shifting boundaries of Armenian diasporas concerning music and identity. She begins in the Ottoman Empire before the genocide; takes the reader to New York City immediately after; Beirut, Lebanon, the first and second post-genocide generation; and finally, Armenians immigrating to California from a post-civil war Lebanon. Her monograph provides an incredibly nuanced and sophisticated exploration of "Home," which she flags as a central concern for Armenian diasporic scholars (10). As home comes to mean many things across the diaspora, I find this helpful in examining the connection of the "hometown" of Japanese folk music and the role this plays within *min'yō* and the Japanese American community.

Similarly, musicologist Inna Naroditskaya's edited collection *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding* (2019) brings together the voices of ethnomusicological and anthropological scholars to articulate diasporic weddings as a

site of negotiation between multiple generations on identity, traditions, and assimilation. I pay particular attention to ethnomusicologists A.J. Racy, Meredith Schweig, and Tanya Merchant's respective contributions "Theoretical perspectives on Weddings, Locally and Beyond," "Like an Erhu Player on the Roof," and "Song, Sevdah, and Ceremony." In addition to music anthropologist Carol Silverman's "Negotiating Gender, Community, and Ethnicity." Beyond weddings, these entries offer essential insight into the role of music in multiethnic diasporic celebrations within the US and the role of community engagement in musical resilience. Within Bithell and Hill's 2014 *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, the eighth part investigates musical revivals within transnational settings and how such rearticulations inform the "constructions of identity and belonging" (34). Ethnomusicologists Caroline Bithell and Sean Williams contribute chapters on Georgian polyphony and Irish music revivals, respectively. At the same time, dance scholar Anthony Shay and music scholar Carol Muller provide chapters on Iranian dance and the remaking of South African Jazz, respectively. Min'yō revival in California follows similar trends to several of these chapters as it serves a vital role in Japanese American diaspora celebrations and festivals while cultural outsiders participate in min'yō affinity groups. In the latter case, Tsugaru shamisen as a revival practice is on the brink of global heritage with many practitioners across the globe.<sup>15</sup>

### **My Contribution**

Teaching musical instruments and dance imparts cultural values of gender,

sexuality, and race/ethnicity. The English-language scholarship on Japanese traditional music has focused on overviews (Malm, 2002; Johnson, 2010) or specific genres (Garfias, 1975; Keister, 2004; Foreman, 2008). This dissertation uses Japanese American folk music and dance communities to investigate musical resilience and sustainability in diasporic settings. Min'yō music presents itself as one of the least discussed musics but the most ubiquitous in Japanese American matsuri celebrations.<sup>16</sup> A history of min'yō participates in larger conversations within ethnomusicology concerning the role of music in *Nikkei* (Japanese people outside of Japan) communities in the 21st century. Min'yō offers insight into the unique position of Japanese American communities who are, historically, simultaneously connected to Japan yet removed as the sixth generation of Japanese Americans grows up. Min'yō groups across California still recruit and perform; there is less cultural significance now than when my mentor began her study of min'yō music in the late 1970s. These cultural shifts have called for teachers to adapt their style to suit a more American audience unaccustomed to the strict style of Japanese instruction. In this musical space, practitioners must navigate a culture that is increasingly foreign and a musical culture facing exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through digital and traditional fieldwork in California, this dissertation contributes to the ethnomusicological discourse about music resilience by investigating how min'yō and shamisen transfer and situate cultural knowledge to participants of various backgrounds outside of Japan. In Japanese American communities, min'yō becomes a performance of shared cultural identities. Performers

and audiences express their heritage in festival dances with various props and signifiers. Japanese American min'yō groups adapt and alter the music and dances to simultaneously cater to an Americanized audience and reflect changing trends, distinguishing their performances from those in Japan.

### **Theoretical Perspectives and Defining Terms**

Historian Eric Hobsbawm writes in *The Invention of Tradition* “that even historic continuity had to be invented” (1983; 7). Nations repurpose old materials, spaces, and practices that no longer serve a practical purpose for symbolic/ritual use. These materials and their new associations are not fixed but fluid and change to meet new symbolic needs while maintaining an unbroken line to the past. In Japanese folk music and dance, different styles and schools claim to represent an authentic version of the folk past through formal transmission systems and ties to their eponymous regions. Performers outside of Japan attend to the details of dress and performance practice as they are removed from the traditional space of the Japanese village.

Ethnomusicologist Tamara Livingston emphasizes the activist nature of revivals in “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory” (1999). She asserts, “revivalists position themselves in opposition to aspects of the contemporary mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in reference to authenticity and historical fidelity” (66). Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill broaden her view of revivalist as activist by considering revival as a “social movement” (2014; 9) In this sense, the

practice of Japanese folk music and dance in California is a social movement. Across this broad movement, different actors might appeal to an imagined Japanese rural past as a symbol of Japanese American identity, as a community-oriented practice, and as an authentic representation of folk performance.

Japanese folk music practitioners in California must contend with the legacy of Japanese incarceration and Asian hate. To do this analysis, I will engage with the work of postcolonial scholars Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Orientalism undergirds Asian American performance either through strategic self-essentialism or white interpolation onto the Asian body. Caught in this dichotomy, affinity group performers emphasize connection to Japan through material culture such as dress, props, and the shamisen. In these circumstances, non-heritage performers like myself are asked to do the same creating. Such a visual often leads audiences to questions of cultural appropriation. However, *min'yō* groups are also counterbalancing strategic self-essentialism by altering teaching practices, songs, and dances to suit a more Westernized audience. This juxtaposition of Japanese signifiers with changing customs in the Japanese American diaspora challenges the idea of a monolithic idea of Japanese people.

Working with various shamisen groups in California, I adopt the affinity group framework to analyze the participants and how they construct meaning and identity in these disparate contexts. I take up ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin's *Subcultural Sounds* for his breakdown of anthropologist Appadurai's "the global cultural economy" into *supercultural*, *subcultural*, and *intercultural* (1993;16).



Supercultural equating to Marxist philosopher Gramsci's *hegemony* (ibid; 27). In the case of California min'yō, I examine what structures of power have shaped Japanese American musical culture. Subculture diverges from hegemony and constitutes overlapping levels of cultural activity: Choice, Affinity, and Belonging (ibid; 55-56).<sup>17</sup> At this level, I investigate the agency of individuals as they interact with min'yō music and dance. Finally, intercultural appears as either a commodified system attempting to subsume local musics, diasporic links that subcultures set up across national boundaries, and affinity groups bound by shared interest through word-of-mouth (ibid; 69). I locate the links between the different groups in California and their connection to other groups in Japan and other nations beyond the US. Taken together, I study not only how Japanese American min'yō groups exist at these different levels but also theorize how others see and respond to them.

#### Language Use and Terminology

I present all individual Japanese names mentioned in this dissertation as family names and first names. I present Japanese American and all other names, first name followed by surname.

Min'yō, as used by my collaborators in MTK, refers to the music and the associated folk dances. However, the dances might usually be categorized as *minzoku geinō* (Japanese folk performing arts). With minzoku geinō as an example, I use the diacritical marks for long O and U sounds: Ō and Ū, respectively. Some translations opt for a more literal approach from the Japanese characters using “ou,” “oo,” or “uu.” Japanese pronunciation of “I” should be pronounced like the English letter “E.”

The Japanese “E” is pronounced as the English letter “A.” The final Japanese vowel, “A,” should be sounded as the “a” in “father.” I will use these for most Japanese words except those commonly used in English, such as Tokyo, Shinto, and Noh.

I follow Historian and Asian American studies scholar Roger Daniels by not using the word “incarceration” to describe the destruction of Japanese American communities, the seizure of their property, and their sequestration. Instead, I use incarceration. Daniels outlines incarceration as a legal process defined in both US law and the Geneva Convention for dealing with “enemy aliens.” What happened to the West Coast Japanese Americans was “lawless” as the US government barred them from becoming naturalized citizens (Daniels 2008).

## **Scope**

Initially, I conceived of my research as California-focused, with some supplementation of online communities. I participated in and sought out groups emphasizing min’yō shamisen, which excluded nagauta shamisen. My min’yō collaborators distinguish between Tsugaru shamisen and min’yō shamisen; I situate Tsugaru shamisen as a subcategory of min’yō music due to its musical and stylistic differences. I analyze the performance style of my collaborators in private lessons, group practice, and the rare performance for ideas of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity.

However, The COVID-19 pandemic and lock down in the US limited my two-year fieldwork. For example, I was to attend an international Tsugaru shamisen

workshop hosted by Bachido, and I was also beginning my training in the obon repertoire with MTK. These activities ceased with occasional contact until the Summer and Fall of 2020, respectively. As a result, most of my fieldwork examines the practice spaces of these various groups and the navigation of virtual practice. This limitation bound me to Northern California for most of my fieldwork. Japanese American obon and cultural festivals have also been stopped or moved online, making examining live music and dance with MTK rare.

## **Methodology**

My fieldwork with shamisen affinity groups began in Santa Cruz, CA, in the spring of 2018. Individual Tsugaru shamisen lessons with Kyle Abbott formed this early ethnography. Abbott, a professional shamisen performer and builder, operates from his studio and workshop in Santa Cruz while hosting the international shamisen community website, Bachido. Abbott's lessons provided instruction on the Tsugaru shamisen style and an opportunity to learn about founding Bachido members such as Kevin Kmetz and Mike Penny. Through this early work, I began to unpack the associations of gender and race with the performance of Tsugaru shamisen in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

In 2019, I ventured outside Santa Cruz to the San Jose Japanese American Citizen League building for weekend Tsugaru shamisen workshops. I met future collaborators at these workshops and gleaned further insight into intercultural musical communities and the role of Japanese identity in Tsugaru shamisen. Abbott split us

into roughly beginner, intermediate, and advanced groups. I joined the advanced group, which came with advantages and disadvantages in ethnography. As the advanced group regularly had two other members during my time, I grew to know them well and could ask detailed questions. We often received other guest participants, such as Su Bunjamin from Germany. My interaction with the beginner section consisted of listening to background conversation, while advanced members often helped the intermediate group. This work period offered insight into how participants relate to Japanese folk music and identity in California.

My fieldwork involving obon and matsuri musical practices began in the summer of 2019. Deborah Wong introduced me to Taiko performer Kenny Endo, who spoke about his work with Tsugaru players in America and Japan. From late June through mid-August 2019, I attended obons whenever possible in Northern California, which proved difficult as many celebrations were scheduled for the same weekend. Observing and participating in the obon dances, I began to meet future collaborators outside of the Tsugaru sphere-of-influence. I attended cultural events at the Lodi Buddhist church, the Buddhist church of Walnut Grove, and the Sacramento Buddhist Church. At the Lodi and Sacramento Buddhist Church, I met the Min'yō dance troupe Tanoshimi Kai, who performed traditional folk dances at the former event and folk music at the latter. After the performances, I spoke to them briefly about their practice in northern California and sustaining Japanese folk cultural practices. I also got the contact information for the Sacramento-based troupe, "Sakura Min'yō Doo Koo Kai," and their leader, Toshiye Kawamura. While MTK also

performed at the Walnut grove event, I could not see them. Beyond making connections at these events, I observed and participated in other activities such as calligraphy practice, touring the doll displays, and eating many Japanese festival foods. These meetings further familiarized me with the iemoto system, Japanese American attitudes, and involvement with Japanese institutions. I concluded that I would visit obon and Japanese cultural festivals in the San Jose Bay Area the following year.

After the obon season, I contacted a group I met at the Lodi, California obon, MTK. During the first two months of 2020, I attended three practice sessions and one private lesson. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down almost all group musical activities. My newfound collaborators and I hoped the United States would get the pandemic in control in time for obon season – it did not. Summer saw online obons and cultural festivals featuring the talents of individuals who prerecorded performances. I connected with one of the coordinators of the Sacramento Cultural Bazaar to get insight on how they adjusted to the pandemic. Unfortunately, traditional music groups could not gather for performances during the quarantine, which exacerbated health issues. As we exist during late-stage capitalism during an unmitigated climate crisis, the pandemic added a further obstacle to the continuation of cultural music practices where fundamental ideas of socialization had to be suspended for the health of communities. These circumstances challenged me to think beyond in-person participant observation research.

I shifted research to digital applications and interfaces as MTK and Bachido

adopted similar strategies for maintaining practice and community. I conducted interviews over the phone or with the Zoom digital meeting application. I first spoke to Karen Adachi, the coordinator of the Sacramento Japanese Food & Cultural Bazaar. I talked to her about preparing the “Bazaar at Home” event and not being able to incorporate the usual Japanese cultural displays, such as *min’yō* and *taiko*. As music and dance groups could not gather to perform, festivals pivoted to solo or pre-recorded and edited performances to display online. MTK and Bachido practices over the zoom app required an adjustment to allow one person to play over their phone or computer microphone at a time while the others played along on mute. MTK scheduled online practices on one Sunday every month. Morita Sensei operated One-on-one lessons similarly where she would call me through a video conferencing app, and we would both position the phone in such a way that the camera captured our finger position on the neck and the plectrum hitting the instrument face. While I could not record these sessions, I recorded these experiences in field notebooks. I noticed the differences in sensation and feelings between live music and video conferencing. Playing together over these video conferencing apps reinforced our sense of community despite these technological limitations. This experience gave me perspective on the importance of such technologies and digital applications for musical resilience.

For 2021, I focused primarily on my fieldwork with MTK as we shifted to in-person rehearsal and lessons. Online practices and lessons continued until June 2021, when each MTK member confirmed they received the two COVID-19 vaccinations.

Practices now took place on the second and fourth Sunday of every month. The first session of each month lasted three hours, with the first hour and a half focused on shamisen and voice, followed by a 15-to-30-minute break, and concluded with dance practice. The second session focused entirely on dance. When Sensei plays the shamisen or sings, she represents Matsutoyo Kai and assumes the name Matsutoyoshizu Sato. We alternated between Morita Sensei's house and a public venue such as a park for these group practices. At the house, Morita Sensei led the practices. Sensei entrusted the advanced members to lead practice outside of her house.

She conducted lessons from her house during the week up to twice a month for each member. Each lesson lasted approximately one hour but varied depending on how quickly I progressed through the contents. Live group practice and lessons allowed me to learn more about each member of MTK, conduct interviews, and record background conversations. Like online sessions, Morita Sensei prohibited video recording and photography (with rare exceptions), which meant I continued to record post-event thoughts in field notebooks or through voice memos. The juxtaposition of live and digital musical space felt especially apparent as more emphasis was placed on the body and movement. Observing and participating in both environments allowed me to observe and participate in negotiating Japanese folk music and dance traditions in the Japanese American diaspora.

This fieldwork with min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen affinity groups and their participants from 2018-2023 informs the central arguments of this dissertation. My

research indicates the strategies of resilience these groups employed not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but also in revitalizing interest and maintaining Japanese folk musical culture in California. The min'yō and Tsugaru groups juxtapose perspectives on Japanese folk tradition and futurity in presenting race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While they emphasize their connection to Japan through stylized movement and other material signifiers, they also contribute to the formation of Japanese American forms of music and dance specifically. This distinction marks a departure from the strict form and learning of the iemoto system of non-Tsugaru min'yō. The Tsugaru style prides itself on freedom of performance, with players being encouraged to improvise. In northern California, these Japanese folk music and dance affinity groups sustain this musical tradition in diaspora and adapt to appeal to newer generations and create a new shared style.

### **Chapter Outline**

In chapter two, I examine identity within min'yō music and dance performance and the construction of “Japaneseness.” In this chapter, I contextualize folk music’s role in Japanese identity and how that connects to the California diaspora and cultural outsiders. I then examine the position of women practitioners, particularly to MTK, building on the feminist scholarship of the double burden, or sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s *Second Shift*, as holding a double obligation as caregivers and culture bearers.<sup>18</sup> This chapter ends by highlighting the legacy of Orientalism in California and the broader US and how it continues to haunt min'yō



music and dance.

Chapter three investigates cultural and environmental sustainability after the COVID-19 pandemic and the California wildfires. The Japanese government and UNESCO promote dwindling practices of intangible cultural heritage through various interventions, which stabilize the practice by placing it in stasis. Jeff Todd Titon's work on resilience offers alternatives to vertical support systems by instead building hardy horizontal groups that manage "disturbance and change and guide the outcome toward a desirable end" (193). Local initiatives and community-led projects, like those for Tsugaru shamisen, offer an alternative to min'yō music and dance sustainability in diaspora. On the other hand, such projects must account for the material cost of their performing arts practices to ensure that resources are not over-extracted from cultural practices.

Chapter four explores Japanese aesthetics within min'yo music and dance and the spaces in which master and student navigate these traditions. I analyze the role of *ma* (interval, space, gap) within Japanese performing arts and its application within folk music and dance. Space extends beyond aesthetics for Japanese folk music and dance as I examine the iemoto system and its impact on transmission spaces. I explore these different spaces for Japanese folk music and dance as MTK and Bachido members shift across lesson, rehearsal, and practice spaces. In these multiple spaces, masters and students navigate Japanese performing arts aesthetics outside of Japan.

If the previous chapters detail the practitioners, the aesthetics of min'yō, and

the place of min'yō, then chapter five provides a history of displacement. Japanese folk music and dance supporters demonstrate resilience in this history as they navigate these shifts. I begin by briefly contextualizing the origins of min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen in Japan. As the gap between rural and urban populaces shrank in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, folk music and dance practitioners adapted or faced government pressure via emerging folk councils to promote a clean and unified Japanese past. Simultaneously, the first wave of Japanese immigrants landed in California, bringing Japanese musical and dance practices with them. I then draw on archival materials, historical work, and Japanese American oral histories to situate Japanese folk music in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century California. I examine the initial strategies and practices of Japanese American immigrants before WWII. Next, I look at Japanese incarceration through the lens of resilience as performing arts practices thrive during this period. Post-incarceration, I detail the changes made to Japanese American performing arts as a new wave of Japanese immigrants arrived and younger generations looked for new ways to express a Japanese American identity. Within these histories, musicians and dancers overcome displacement through resilient practices.

Chapter six, the concluding chapter, synthesizes these preceding arguments, contending that min'yō music and dance in California adapt to this new environment and changing demographics amongst Japanese and non-Japanese heritage performers to showcase the multiple imaginings of Japanese folk identity. Japanese folk music and dance performances interweave nostalgia, identity, and sustainability discourses

in the California diaspora.

## Chapter Two. Is Japanese Folk Music for Me?: Identity, Hybridity, and the Interculture

The smell of teriyaki and rich dashi broth fade as my partner and I leave behind the Buddhist Church of Lodi's cultural bazaar. Crossing the street, we enter the Japanese American Citizen League Community Hall to attend a min'yō performance by Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai. The interior hall is rectangular with a stage at the back. Audience members occupy half of the approximately 100 folding chairs set out before the stage. A stout woman with long graying curled hair thanks the audience for watching Aunty Amy's Hula Dancers. They applaud. My partner and I dash to seat ourselves in an empty row. Spectators leave, enter, and converse as we wait for the next act. Approximately 25 audience members remain who are mostly Japanese. Yukari, a Japanese woman approaches the microphone with short black hair. Her chin length hair is tied back, and she wears a cyan and black *happi* (traditional Japanese festival coat) with a yellow flower pattern. "Good afternoon. We are Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai of Northern California a nonprofit organization committed to the education and performance of min'yō, traditional Japanese folk dancing. We hope you enjoy our presentation of min'yō." The audience fills the community hall with applause.

Yukari introduces their first song "Shigesu Bushi" (song of Shigesu). Canned music plays as three women emerge from behind the curtain with red and gold *sensu* (folding fan). One is dressed the same as the announcer in a *happi*, while the other two are garbed in cyan kimono with gold obi. The music opens with orchestral strings

and shamisen playing a repeating dotted-eighth sixteenth pattern in a duple meter over eight bars and repeats. A nasal voice enters, and the women begin their dance. The dancers begin by hiding their faces behind the *sensu*, turning to the left slightly, and pivoting on their front left foot. They then grab the cloth around their neck, so their left elbow points out at 90° from their body while they hold the unfurled fan out on their right and they turn counter-clockwise. The dancers make big arcing sweeps with their fans toward the audience before gesticulating to the right and the left with their other hand. The footwork looks intricate as they pivot slightly, take exaggerated steps, and tap the stage.

At the dance's end, the women exit the stage and change. Yukari returns with her hair tied back in a *hachimaki* (headband) and introduces their next song "Shan Shan Kasa Odori" (shan shan is onomatopoeia for the sound of the tassels, so the song is "shan shan umbrella dance). For their final dance, "Joban Tanko Bushi" (coal mining song of Joban), she announces a twist: volunteers will join MTK on stage. I look around the room to see if other audience members raise their hands. As no one volunteers, I raise my hand. "Oh, yes! Please, come up and bring your partner." On stage a younger woman, Samantha, directs us where to stand in the circle. As she does, three more audience members join us on stage. Samantha and her mother, Linda, guide us through the dance as Yukari distracts the audience by explaining the song's history. Linda wears the happi outfit above while Samantha wears the cyan kimono. Both have long black hair worn in a tight braid. They instruct us to imagine that we are walking forward swinging a pickaxe to mine coal. Linda claps while

Samantha leads us through the movements. As I learn these steps, I feel a bit guilty for dragging my partner up on to the stage as the movements feel a little silly as we work through them. I did not anticipate an interactive portion of the show and excitedly committed both of us to the performance. Samantha and Linda make the mining pantomime look so graceful and smooth while we barely manage to move in tempo. When Yukari completes the dance overview, the music begins. I step forward “swinging” my pickaxe, move backward to load my cart, and push it away. At the end of the dance, MTK thanks us for joining and we exit from the back of the stage.

I recall my first meeting with MTK at the 2019 Lodi Buddhist Church’s obon cultural fair. When they invited the audience to dance, it was a moment to break the fourth wall between the stage and spectators. They employed this moment at most performances, which bring willing onlookers further into Japanese folk music and dance. This praxis proves useful as it not only engages people both in and outside of the diaspora. Ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin situates intercultural as a cross cultural musical interaction and he elaborates on three types: industrial intercultural, diasporic intercultural, and affinity intercultural (1993; 61-68).<sup>19</sup> The first is the commodified music system which dominates the globe controlling local music scenes and stifling competition. The second emerges from a group that learns or consumes across many different regions and culture areas to arrive at a shared music. The third is a group bound by shared musical interest not mediated necessarily by industrial means or a diasporic community but by word of mouth.

Min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners occupy space between diasporic intercultural and affinity intercultural. MTK, Matsutoyo Kai, and Bachido San Jose perform in Japanese American spaces such as the Buddhist Churches of America where they perform the regional folk music and dance from across Japan. On the other hand, public-facing events like the Cherry Blossom Festival, or the California State Fair engage audiences outside of the diaspora. Upon first meeting Morita Sensei, she said to me “it doesn't matter who you are, or where you come from, if you want to learn min'yō you are welcome here” (personal communication December 2019). Sensei enthusiastically demonstrates this at most performances by inviting audience members up to the stage to learn a dance as described in the opening vignette. She then later petitions them to join the kai. Morita Sensei, and the members of MTK emphasize Japanese folk music and dance appeals to people beyond the Japanese American diaspora. These intercultural interactions present opportunities to expand min'yō music and dance which lead to a musical hybridity.

Tanoshimi Kai and Bachido demonstrate resilience by engaging in hybridized folk music and dance, which emphasizes the Japanese aesthetics while adapting to shifting values in the diasporic setting. By hybridity, I mean the simultaneous pressures to adapt to American (white) culture and to express racial or ethnic pride through musical culture. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues against an essentialist and fixed definition of cultural identity and diaspora writing that “The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity'

which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” (1996; 235). Japanese folk music practitioners experience this hybridity and diversity firsthand in cultivating a space for a min’yō aesthetic. As Morita Sensei explains to me, she modifies the dances to adapt to changes in Japan, to the changes in bodies, and to things she thinks the audience would like (personal communication 08/2021). This approach is analogous to the Tsugaru shamisen of Bachido whose members expand the boundaries of the genre by incorporating a wide range of musical styles. They perform both traditional Tsugaru pieces as well as modern compositions. I view these present-day intercultural interactions through the lens of California’s orientalist past to highlight the improvements while acknowledging the continued investment in whiteness. Participants who cross through these hybrid and intercultural spaces come against issues of identity and perform min’yō music and dance in California.

For practitioners, participation in min’yō music and dance or Tsugaru shamisen is an affirmation of Japanese identity, which further sustains these styles of folk music. Mixed-race and non-Japanese members encounter moments where they are identified as “Japanese.” This interpolation typically involves some variant of the phrase “you are more Japanese than me.” I have been identified in such a manner, as have other collaborators. These encounters made me think what makes someone Japanese? In these moments it is playing and dancing to Japanese music, attending cultural events, and being involved with community. Anthropologist Dorinne Kondo highlights in her work, *Crafting Selves*, Japanese people assumed she was native and were confused when she did not perform the same embodied customs (1990; 11). In



my fieldwork, I have found Japanese Americans do not hold this expectation but recognize when people do move and act in a Japanese manner. On the other hand, a non-Japanese person will become “Japanese” by performing these different aspects of culture. These two instances – people of Japanese heritage and non-Japanese people performing “Japaneseness” counters claims and theories of the uniqueness of Japanese culture (Befu, 2001; 1). I understand this interpolation to equivocate Japanese culture with Japanese race, but as I allude previously, Japanese theorists assign the appropriation and naturalization of foreign culture as an essence of Japanese identity. Yet, this fusion does lead to a coherent ideology as people of the Japanese archipelago share the same customs and habitus from a shared culture. Outsiders in America are not becoming Japanese but are performing Japanese customs at a level recognizable as “Japanese.”

Practitioners of Japanese music engage in the continuation of their respective styles while also performing outreach and education in and beyond the Japanese American diaspora. Through these intercultural interactions, people outside of the diaspora learn and participate in these practices. Japanese Americans have a higher rate of outer marriage compared to other Asian American groups, which leads to families and children that identify with multiple races, ethnicities and cultural practices (Pew Research Center, 2012). While many of the practitioners I work with are full Japanese ancestry, there are mixed heritage and non-heritage members performing *min'yō* music and dance. Musicologist Eric Hung asks whether creative works in the Asian diaspora has to be made or performed by Asian Americans. “Do

they have to be about the experiences of people of Asian descent or at least evoke Asian genres, instruments, or philosophies? Do they have to be both” (2009, 1)? I apply his question to the practice Japanese folk music outside of Japan as practitioners adapt to shifting identities, hybridization, and the legacy of intercultural contact between white and Japanese Americans. Through my work with Tanoshimi Kai, Bachido, and their affiliates, I find min’yō practitioners of all backgrounds and levels furthering their engagement with Japanese culture and what they are afforded by their different subject positions. In this chapter, I argue min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen participants demonstrate resilience by navigating issues of identity, through their work with Japanese folk music and dance in intercultural space to continue a recently invented tradition, which represents an romanticized Japanese past.

To unpack the role of identity and its role in sustaining Japanese folk musical practices in California min’yō, I examine the legacy of white imagination and the Orient. This builds on some of the historicization of space in chapter 2, notably the concept Sueyoshi’s “white leisure” (2018) and the Sheppard’s *Extreme Exoticism* (2019). In this context, I examine Kyle Abbott’s work with Bachido as an international Tsugaru shamisen website as well his and his collaborators musical output as they engage with Japanese folk music and their performance of identity. I place myself in this section as well to add to the analysis of performing Japaneseness. To be interpolated as Japanese is simultaneously acknowledges a commitment to these cultural musics while marking whiteness. I then move to their involvement with the film *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016) and the racial politics that guided the sound

production. I end by juxtaposing this continued orientalist view in Western media by analyzing women's role in Japanese folk music and dance as doubly burdened caretakers and culture bearers. Focusing on Tanoshimi Kai, I consider their adaptations to min'yō dance practice and my positionality in the group as the only male dancer and non-heritage performer. Min'yō practice in California unveils complicated questions of identity, cultural heritage, and the legacy of Orientalism.

### **Min'yō, Tsugaru Shamisen, and Japanese Identity**

I ascend the steps to the wood and glass door, shaded by the numerous trees and a balcony, and open the door. Kyle, already inside, leads a group of beginners in a long classroom. "Oh, good! You're here! Chris and Pedro are already upstairs." Two senior members of the group, Chris and Pedro, know the advanced Tsugaru shamisen pieces.<sup>20</sup> "Okay, I'll head up and join them," I respond, returning to the main hallway. I come to the stairs and hear the two senior members strumming on the shamisen. Rushing up the carpeted staircase, I greet them. "Hey, what are you all working on?" Pedro has dirty blonde hair that is kept short, a fair complexion, and glasses. Chris has black hair with a slight tan. "We were working on 'Tsugaru Aiya Bushi'. Do you know that one?" Chris asks, and I respond, "no, Kyle has me working on 'Kita no Hibiki.'"<sup>21</sup> "I haven't played that in a while. Can we look at your music while you set

up?” “Of course,” I answer pulling out my sheet music. Chris and Pedro study the sheet and start plucking out the phrases.

% = Repeat the previous measure

Figure 6: Excerpt of “Kita no Hibiki”

Once I’m set up Pedro says, “if we’re doing the opening, I can do the easy part.” He places his fingers low on the neck and begins striking up and down with the bachi while pulling his ring finger off of the 18<sup>th</sup> position to sound the 16<sup>th</sup>. This lets out a rapid series of high-pitched strikes. After six measures of duple time, Chris and

I enter with the melody. We practice this intro for about an hour until Abbott says, “hey, can you help teach something down here.” Together, we grab our cases and walk down the stairs.

First, I explain the above notation that both Bachido and MTK use. This notation for min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen music uses the tablature format. The three lines correspond to the three strings of the shamisen. The top line corresponds to the highest-pitch string, which is referred to as the third string. The middle and bottom lines refer to the second and first strings. An Arabic numeral on one of these lines indicates that the player should depress the string at the corresponding position on the neck. The numbers indicate a position on the fingerboard. By default, the numbers take up one beat per measure. If the numbers have a line below them, as in the first system and second measure, they represent half of a beat. The player should use their index finger to perform this action unless a Roman numeral of II or III appears below the Arabic numeral, where either the middle or ring finger should be used. For example, the notation in the first system and first measure above has “II” above the “5”, which indicates the player should use their middle finger to depress the fifth position for the second string.

Other symbols that can appear on the page are the katakana characters “ス” (su), “ハ” (ha), and “ウ” (u). “ス” represents “*sukui*,” which means to scoop up, and indicates the player should pluck the corresponding string by “scooping” the bachi up and away from the face of the shamisen. Look to the first system and measure for the

“ス” below the “16”, which the reader should interpret as pluck up on the open third string. “ノ” symbolizes “*hajiki*,” which means to pluck the indicated string using one of the fingers, which depresses that string. In the first system and sixth measure, this character specifies that the player should sound the “16” by pulling the index finger off the “18” position so that it plucks the string. The character “ウ” symbolizes *uchikomu* (shortened to *uchi*), meaning “to hammer.” The player sounds the string by rapidly and forcefully “hammering” the specified finger into the indicated position on the fingerboard. See the second system and measure, in which the notation instructs the player to hammer their ring finger onto the fourth position of the first string.

Bachido and Tanoshimi Kai demonstrate two philosophies governing practice spaces in sustaining Japanese folk music. While MTK gathers as a group to rehearse for performance, Bachido’s classes at San Jose allow advanced members to work together in a group setting to practice and educate each other on the different Tsugaru pieces. At the San Jose group, Abbott encourages the advanced group to work together and help each other learn the pieces. Through this pedagogical practice, the advanced members get experience teaching others and demonstrating techniques, reinforcing our learning. Abbott focuses on beginners who need closer attention to correct form and technique. In the end, he calls us down to help the intermediate members. These members begin the *min’yō* piece “Yasaburo Bushi” (melody of Yasaburo), which combines the *hajiki* and *sukui* in several places quickly. All these elements of group practice differ from Tanoshimi Kai, where the members are never separate. We rehearse the same song and dances despite different ability levels.

Morita Sensei leads us through all these and is the only person who can correct other group members. She occasionally suspends this rule so other members can lead through basic motions and steps. The race and ethnicity of members further differentiates these groups. Morita Sensei, a Shin-issei Japanese American, holds an appeal to authenticity in teaching Japanese folk culture. As she is from Japan, members greater emphasis on her ability to apprehend and disseminate Japanese culture. Whereas, Abbott, as a white man, holds the responsibility of instructor in teaching both Japanese heritage and non-Japanese heritage students.

Japanese identity continues to hold value for the maintenance of Japanese musical traditions. The theories of *nihonjinron* purport that only a person of Japanese heritage can understand the culture. Anthropologist Harumi Befu writes “their own uniqueness and that of Japanese culture figure prominently in their conscious thinking. When they characterize there are most likely to do this by emphasizing the uniqueness of Japanese culture or of some features of it, be they group orientation, hierarchy, harmony, or *amae* (social and psychic dependency on others) (2005; 5, 66). Kyle claims the only students he has said have ever raised concerns have been mainland Japanese students. They did not want to learn from a "*gaijin*" (literally meaning outside person). Befu continues *Nihonjinron*, or theories of the uniqueness of the Japanese people, which proposes learning the nuances of the Japanese language requires Japanese ‘blood’ (2001; 4). For these Japanese students, Abbott cannot provide adequate education without Japanese heritage. His tutelage under Kevin Kmetz, the Nitta family, Tokyo Wagakki (a prestigious shamisen maker), and

numerous other shamisen aficionados do not matter because of his race.<sup>22</sup> His friends, acquaintances, and business colleagues believe anyone can participate and learn Japanese culture, which is why they continue to provide support to Bachido. This means anyone can learn, appreciate, and even master a Japanese art form and that no one requires Japanese blood to achieve cultural competency. While coming to understand a new culture is difficult, outsiders can master the intricacies of Japanese culture to participate in min'yō and other Japanese performing arts. Further, in learning min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen, Abbott and his friends, trained through the *kata* (pattern; mold; style; type) necessary to reach advanced levels of min'yō playing. I recognize such *kata* perhaps extend beyond the music into rituals within Japanese musical space.

Performing Japanese identity requires the execution of specific forms and conduct in a ritual manner in theory, but different pedagogical approaches in diaspora might lessen this intensity. Japanese and religious studies scholar Ian Reader cites the Japanese sociologist Ōmura Eishō's assertion that Japanese religion instills a focus on "action, custom, and etiquette" (1991; 9). In the performing arts, I connect this to the *kata* beginning students in different Japanese performing arts undergo (Hahn 2007; 42-3, Yano 2002; 90). Morita Sensei and group members, Denise Devela and Samantha Liang, explain Matsutoyo Iemoto expects proper etiquette during lessons where the student plays the requested pieces with no complaint or explanation while mastering the form. On the other hand, Morita Sensei instills the same *kata* and teaches the correct etiquette but does not wish for the intensity of the lessons to scare



people unfamiliar with these cultural expectations away from min'yō.<sup>23</sup> In the San Jose practice, space the concept of kata is not mentioned, but survives in spirit as players strive to execute techniques correctly.

As min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners encounter these different ways of being and knowing the body, they participate in the negotiations of teaching philosophies and change within these musical traditions. In her book, *Music in the Armenian Diaspora*, ethnomusicologist Sylvia Alajaji asserts, “music inhabits a peculiar space that allows it to traverse the multiple identities people are often grappling with and maneuvering between. The musics of diasporic or exilic communities not only reveal the shifts in ‘processes of becoming,’ but illuminate the complexities of the process themselves” (2015; 19). Tanoshimi Kai’s members encounter the complexities of this process as they navigate their identities as Japanese American women, as mixed heritage, and as women. On the other hand, I, and other non-Japanese practitioners (particularly white ones) engage with facets over own identities as we participate in min'yō. We start to see physical manifestations of whiteness as a system and its effects on our fellow aficionados. Min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners navigate the role of identity in sustaining these musics, whiteness becomes another source of support.

Japanese culture splits from racial identity as outside participants take on aspects of Japanese culture in their pursuit of min'yō music and dance. Abbott and I have both experienced moments where a Japanese American person qualifies our Japaneseness. Abbott relates that San Francisco Bay Area shamisen maker, “Jerry,”

remarks to other Japanese Americans, “Kyle is more Asian than the rest of us.” (Personal communication, August 2018). I continue to experience this interpolative moment. First, interviewing to join Tanoshimi Kai, I list off the different elements of Japanese culture I study, my previous experience, and hobby cooking Japanese food. Eugene Morita exclaimed, “wow, you’re more Japanese than me” (Personal communication December 2019). The second time, interviewing Kay, she says of me, “you are very Japanese” (Interview with author, June 2023). This phenomenon extends beyond the shamisen world in California with taiko participants in the US experiencing a similar moment. Abbott and I both feel discomfort in these moments. In participating in min’yō music and dance we perform Japanese culture and this moment of identification shocks as if we were accused of yellow face. White outsiders feel discomfort as they interpret this identifier as racial rather than cultural. This unease comes directly from the system of whiteness that allows us to ignore elements of race and culture people of color contend with daily. It is also a moment where whiteness grants further legitimacy to a practice. Japanese American history contains years of ostracization by US culture – white culture. White participation or validation can uplift a maligned minority practice. Thus, acknowledging or granting white participants as “Japanese” might lend more credence to the practice.

White participants encounter the invisibility of their racial identity while participating in Japanese performing arts. My and Abbott’s above anecdotes reveal an embodied whiteness being able to enter and participate in min’yō without considering or fully understanding that moment of racialization. Queer and feminist theory

scholar Sara Ahmed shows that bodies of color experience a disorientation in white spaces where they fail to “sink into the ground” (2006; 159). Ahmed unveils this total encompassing white space as being more than a system of whiteness but something that is tangible and lived. For Kyle and me, the flash of discomfort – perhaps disorientation – of being identified as Japanese is a reminder of my whiteness. Here, in Japanese American spaces, the ground does not yield in the same way. In that moment we as white participants receive the reminder, while we are encouraged to participate and learn, we do not always stand on stable ground. Non-Japanese practitioners in Japanese performing arts encounter a similar phenomenon.

Practitioners of Japanese performing arts take on elements of Japanese cultural identity through their participation. While taiko represents a sonic identity of Asian America, the representation privileges Japanese sounds and aesthetics over other identities. In his article, “She’s Really Become Japanese Now!” ethnomusicologist Paul Jong-Chul Yoon argues Asian American identity formation within taiko privileges an expression of Japanese sound and appearance (2001, 419-20). The title comes from Chinese American and Korean American families responding to their daughters performing Japanese identity. On the other hand, min’yō performance always represents Japanese culture instead of a pan-Asian American music. Members of both enculturate to Japanese movements, dress, and sound production. Both wear *happi* (traditional Japanese straight-sleeved coat now primarily worn to festivals) and learn to strike the drums, shamisen, or sing in a Japanese manner. To do Japanese performing arts the member will entrain to Japanese

ways-of-being to participate correctly. This manner of participation stems from an underlying current in Japanese culture on proper conduct.

Experienced min'yō practitioners help the newer Japanese Americans, mixed heritage, and non-heritage performers enculturate the different customs. Matsutoyo Kai continues of the rituals around performance and rehearsal that those without a Japanese upbringing would not know. Tanoshimi Kai member Denise Devela relates to me, “Gene [Morita] is my actual uncle, but everyone in the group is so nice and they look out for each other. My mom is white, and my dad is Japanese so growing up, I never learned the culture” (Interview October 2023). Devela shares at one such event Matsutoyo Iemoto’s daughter helped her get the correct gesture and Japanese phrase to ask Iemoto to tune her shamisen. Similarly, group members aid each other in this endeavor by helping newer members learn the customs and navigate social interactions. Californian min'yō participants work together and aid each other to learn both the culture and music, which appears as “being Japanese.” This cultural labor is unequal though, as mostly Japanese-heritage women enact this work while fulfilling a double obligation as caretakers.

### **Gender Identity and Double Burden**

Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai’s performance extend beyond the Japanese American diaspora in the presentation of Japanese identity. I wrote in chapter 2 the group performed for the Japanese consulate at special event in Sacramento for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. They have also performed numerous times at the state fair since 1989. On all these

stages, facing multicultural crowds, in white spaces their performance harkens to what ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong describes as, "the risk of reinscription, appropriation, or orientalist misreading is ever present in Asian American performance; the possibility of empowerment stands side by side with the susceptible audience that consumes with the greedy expectation of orientalist pleasure and is inevitably gratified" (2004, 7). It is with these risks in mind that Tanoshimi Kai performances often include an invitation to the stage, which breaks down the wall between voyeur and dancer. Morita Sensei describes participating in multiple events outside of the Japanese American diaspora from Mexican culture fairs in Modesto to the Japanese Culture night at Sacramento State University. Participating in these events and inviting non-Japanese to the stage Morita Sensei heeds her own words "that it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from" if someone is not Japanese (personal communication December 2019). Audiences' members, now dancers, perform the same moves as the kimono or happi wearing women undoing some of the work done by the orientalist gaze. Tanoshimi Kai's choice to wear kimonos for dances reflects Spivak's strategic essentialism.

The kimono is an unambiguous sign of Japanese identity, and its charm is the shimmering colors of the silk. Morita Sensei shares with me chose for the group to wear kimono because of their beauty rather than yukata (Interview Morita and Nagato 2021). Spatial Scientist Lon Kurashige draws on interviews and accounts from Nisei of the 1930s and 40s imploring Nisei women to wear kimono (2002; 47, 56-7). Anthropologist Carol Silverman writes that "essentialism helps define distinctive

musical symbols of regional and ethnic identity in a competitive and politicized play field. In other words, if you don't define and defend your own music, you can't sell it as your own" (2012; 262). As Morita Sensei choreographs and costumes the dances, using the kimono also sets a distinct style for Tanoshimi Kai. Her choice, however, is not informed by the orientalist fantasy of Japanese women in kimono, but a strategic employment of the formal dress as material referent to Japan. Japanese formal wear plays a significant role in the presentation of Japanese cultural identity. Morita Sensei said many of the Tanoshimi Kai members never wore a kimono before they joined the group (Interview with Morita and Nagato 2021). Tanoshimi Kai offers a chance for members to wear the kimono which still retains significant marker of "Japaneseness." Morita Sensei delights in sharing Japanese culture with other women of Japanese descent.

Japanese American women express Japanese cultural identity through participation in Japanese folk music and dance. Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai continues to be primarily women from its founding in 1988 to the present (I am the only male main performer) and continues its mission of education on Japanese folk dance in northern California.<sup>24</sup> However, of our currently seven regular members, Morita Sensei and Kay are Shin-issei (new first generation), while Yoshiko Nagato and Linda Liang are sansei (Third generation). The previous members are post-retirement age. Denise Devela and Samantha Liang are mixed heritage, white and Chinese respectively, under retirement age and active, current members. These women take on the role of perpetuating Japanese folk dance by staging performances at California

State University of Sacramento, multicultural days throughout Sacramento and San Joaquin counties, Sacramento's Fairytale Town, the California State Fair, Cherry Blossom Festivals, and Japanese Cultural Bazaars. The women of Tanoshimi Kai hold the role of culture bearers, but also hold obligations to their families as well.

Performing Japanese identity as a woman involves both passing cultural identity and homemaking. While Tanoshimi Kai practice, rehearse, and stage these dances, they also care for their husbands, parents, children, and relatives. Cultural studies scholar Beth Holmgren cites the double burden of women in Russia who labor and continue to 'shoulder housework and family care on their own. (2013; 537). Japanese women bear the dual burden of cultural work and family care. Past members such as Yukari Sekine and Ai Nozaki left the kai shortly after I joined to further support their families. When I first joined the group, Sekine was preparing to take over for Sensei who felt she was growing to old run Tanoshimi Kai full time. Sekine returned to Japan, as the eldest daughter to care for her elderly parents. Nozaki, on hiatus, stepped back from Tanoshimi Kai to aid her children in the transition from high school to university, which was further complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Everyone was sad to see both members leave, but members replied with variations of "it can't be helped." Women in this context, only participate in the production and performance of Japanese American min'yō so long as it does not interfere with their role as caregivers. Fortunately, Tanoshimi Kai members' husbands and sons provide support to the group.

Men supporting Japanese American women's min'yō dance is a unique expression of masculine identity. The men of Tanoshimi Kai assist the women by playing taiko and *kane* (bell) as well as transporting them to all performance events and loading and unloading all equipment. Feminist scholar bell hooks situates masculinity in a model of domination contingent on "subjugation, subordination, and submission" yet it can be replaced with a partnership model that is "relationally oriented" or a feminist masculinity "one's capacity to be responsible for self and others" (2004; 24, 116). Yoshiko's husband and Samantha's brother join us for performances to play kane and taiko respectively. Eugene Morita used to play taiko and built many of the props the group continues to use. Additionally, Kawamura said Eugene always drove Sensei around and would sit with her husband at every festival when he developed Alzheimer's disease (Kawamura 2021). Men adopting supportive roles in this kai further enables women's participation. This arrangement flips the typical dichotomy with women supporting male professionals. However, this comes at a cost, as women are the majority of min'yō practitioners in northern California, embodied cultural knowledge becomes gendered. Men may be less likely to join as the genre becomes more associated with femininity. Despite men's supportive role within Tanoshimi Kai, women provide further support for the perpetuation of the style.

Cultural identity and associated performing arts such as min'yō provide an anchor for immigrant communities. As a Shin-issei Morita Sensei arrived in America disoriented but joining the local min'yō group grounded her. In her shamisen office



with music between us on a small knee-high table, surrounded by shamisens, sheet music cabinets, a copier, and a shrine. In this space and context, she is Matsutoyo Shizue Satō. After one of our lessons here, while storing her shamisen, she spoke to me about growing up in Japan and arriving in America. "We were very poor when I grew up. I took care of my sisters. I didn't have time to play music or anything. When I came here [America], I couldn't speak English and stayed home for a long time because I could only talk to other Japanese people... Eventually, I got a job at the hospital and learned English little by little" (interview by author 4/30/2021). She felt disconnected at this time, being a first-generation immigrant, and as such, felt a close bond with others who shared that status, like her mother-in-law, Masano Morita, and Matsutoyo Satō. Such familial relationships extend beyond bloodlines in *min'yō* practice as the *iemoto* system influences the relationships within these Japanese folk music and dance groups.

Morita and Matsutoyo grew closer during the pandemic and would call each other outside lessons. "We feel more like sisters now when we talk." Sensei says, "We talk about the old days and laugh... I think it is because we're the only ones left from back then" (2021). Ethnomusicologist Tanya Merchant writes, while "women were not historically part of the master-apprentice oral transmission of *maqom* and traditional music, the intensity of the relationship maps easily onto associations with the mother-and-child relationship" (2015; 178). I see an extension of this within *iemoto*-like system employed by Matsutoyo Kai and its effects on Tanoshimi Kai members. Denise Devela shares that while Eugene Morita is literally her great uncle,

the women of Tanoshimi Kai metaphorically “aunties – they look out for me.” (Interview October 2023). After fourth lesson, she said to me, “if you need to know anything about Japan or min’yō you ask me. I’ll be your min’yō grandma, okay?” (Personal communication June 2021). Here, participating in min’yō is like having a second women-driven family and an important resource for the maintenance of a Japanese cultural identity.

### **The Japanese American Stage and the Legacy of Orientalism**

While Japanese American practitioners can accommodate and aid both heritage and non-heritage performers in enculturating min’yō, a profound legacy of anti-Japanese sentiment lingers in California’s recent past. For the American practitioner (even those of Japanese descent), the history and development of the tradition are exoticized and mystified, likely due to the apparent distance between Japan and America and the incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during WWII. Literary scholar Edward Said reappropriated the term “orientalism” to describe primarily North Africa, West, Central, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent, East Asia in fantastical and imaginative ways that neither represented the culture or the people of these locations but further the aims of Western empires (1978; 15). Sonic orientalism of Japan extends from pieces such as *Madame Butterfly* and the *Mikado* reverberate in American popular consciousness into popular music like rock band Weezer’s 1996 album, *Pinkerton*, and Katy Perry’s 2013 VMA performance of the song “Unconditionally.” This last performance employed tired orientalist troupes as in

Madame Butterfly that Japanese women embody unconditional love and sensuality.<sup>25</sup>

It is in this sonic environment that min'yō groups challenge and assert a Japanese cultural identity that dismisses orientalist and exotic troupes.

Modern Tsugaru shamisen incorporates elements from multiple genres into its virtuosic playing style that attracts players from outside of the region.

Ethnomusicologist Henry Johnson also contends that "the extent to which Tsugaru Shamisen has been popularized by youth culture is found with the Yoshida Brothers" (2006). The Yoshida Brothers are a Tsugaru shamisen duo known for their aggressive and virtuosic playing style and their mastery of the traditional pieces as well as incorporating popular music into their playing. Similarly, Ethnomusicologist Megan E. Hill argues the overlapping contextual factors of traditional Tsugaru shamisen and music, Asakusa's association with the shamisen, and the "global 'coolness'" of Tsugaru shamisen "create an entanglement of contradictions, the phantasmagoric products of modern musical place making" (2019; 82-3). Both scholars situate the style as being popular with the youth and "cool." The 'global coolness' she associates with Tsugaru shamisen corroborates the portrayal of the style as modern and youthful with appeal beyond Japan. Bachido serves as the prime example with players such as Kevin Kmetz, Kyle Abbott and Mike Penny fusing rock, metal, American folk music, and jazz into their work. Their recognition inside of Japan stems from their success in traditional competitions and collaboration with Japanese players. Despite their genre fusions, Abbott maintains the Bachido site as an entry point for cultural outsiders to gain basic knowledge about Tsugaru Shamisen.

Tsugaru shamisen ties cultural identity frequently to the masculine qualities of its music. Abbott's Bachido website provides an overview of the Tsugaru Shamisen and its ties to regional identity writing:

The Tsugaru style of shamisen is said to have been created by goze, blind female musicians who belonged to a guild and traveled widely, singing epic poems and popular songs of the time accompanied with the shamisen. However, blind men of northern Japan had no guilds, so they had to become independent beggars. This involved apprenticing under a seasoned veteran of begging. Under the guidance of an experienced beggar, the younger blind man would learn the basics of shamisen and begging. These men, called bousama (sarcastically meaning "honorable monk,"), were definitely at the bottom of the social ladder. They traveled through farming and fishing areas, where they would be able to play for food in order to survive. They would also play at festivals which were relatively lucrative events for them. Their playing style didn't start out much different from the goze of the south. But because of the flurry of the festival, and the natural competitive qualities that comes with being a man, the style became faster and louder in order to attract a larger audience (Abbott 2018).

While this provides a fundamental overview of who the *bōsama* (honorable monk) and *goze* (blind female itinerant musicians) were, it does not provide information on the formation of the style and attributes it solely to a facet of the male gender without flagging the gender shift from women to men. Western audiences interested in Tsugaru shamisen would be unlikely to distinguish between Japanese fact and fiction as they're often dependent on the most readily available English languages sources. However, many of the Bachido members are heavily invested in the dispelling of such fantasies to de-exoticize Tsugaru shamisen. Abbott and Bachido provide a basic overview of the genre for beginners while steering clear of orientalist appropriations.

For practitioners of Japanese performing arts like min'yō, outsiders readily appropriate important aspects of Japanese identity making for their own identity

formation. While Abbott avoids appropriating and projecting his own desires onto Tsugaru shamisen, past Americans who used the shakuhachi in this manner. Ethnomusicologist Jay Keister writes that Westerners appropriate foreign culture to fulfill spiritual fantasies not based in religion but “by an encounter with a cultural Other” (2005; 50). In Keister’s work Westerners reject not only the religiosity surrounding the music but the cultural context surrounding it as well. This orientalist approach allows them to use Japanese music or the shakuhachi however they desire. In my work, no one attempts or expresses any desire to sunder Tsugaru shamisen from its cultural context. Yet, the film *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016) did separate the sonic qualities of Tsugaru shamisen from its context.

*Kubo and the Two Strings* is a stop-motion animated film from Laika studios stylized to look like origami. The film follows the 12-year-old Kubo and his magic shamisen (the eponymous “two strings”) as he journeys across feudal Japan to find his father’s armor. Kyle relays to me his involvement with the film. Laika contacts Abbott for a visual reference. “I ask if they would keep me in mind for recording” (Personal communication, 2018). The studio responds to him about a month later, they hired a Japanese shamisen player for the part, but they want to use his shamisen. “I was angry they passed me over and wanted to use my shamisen.” Laika says that they had want to have him but faced increased public scrutiny for casting very few Japanese or even Asian heritage voice actors. (Pond 2016, Pedersen 2016). Kyle proposed a counteroffer to lend his Shamisen if he came as well. Laika agreed and said they would contact him when the time came.

The commodification and commercialization of min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen and Japanese identity through *Kubo*, while a viable tactic for cultural sustainability, reveals the darker possibilities in hybridity and resilience. Laika hire Kmetz to do the shamisen soundtrack performance and the London-based Hunter Ishikawa to “record plucks and extramusical features of the shamisen” (Abbott personal communication 2019). Abbott suspects, “I think they passed on me because I am white.” Writing on intercultural contact between whites and Asians in late 19th century San Francisco, historian Amy Sueyoshi argues it is a site of confluence for the making of the American “oriental.” “While these narratives appear to reveal the power of individual passion, they more broadly illuminated how regimes of power and privilege based on race and class would become inescapable in the pursuit of pleasure” (2018; 12). Likewise, Deborah Wong writes on this “dark side cultural contact, in which cultural artifacts quickly become commodified stereotypes and culture bearers know that their heritage work is illegible” (2019b; 78). Abbott surmises Laika passed over him to rectify backlash at not casting Japanese or Asian American voice actors. White voice actors supply the voices for a Japanese-inspired tale with the only George Takei as a Japanese American voice in a supporting role. Despite Laika’s emphasis on acquiring Japanese heritage performers in Kmetz and Ishikawa, the white indie-pop vocalist Regina Spektor is the credited artist.

*Kubo and the Two Strings* perpetuated orientalist desire in popular culture by presenting a shallow hybridization of Japanese and American cultures. Kmetz plays on the song "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," by The Beatles, but it is billed to

singer-songwriter Regina Spektor. This superficial cover employs the shamisen as a stand in for the electric guitar, but not the unique playing style associated with Tsugaru shamisen. Cultural studies scholar Eric Lott writes that blackface minstrelsy betrays an erotic interest in blackness – for white people to “try on the accents of ‘blackness’ and the demonstrates the permeability of the color line” (1993; 6) In this case Laika studios try on the “accents” of Japaneseness and, despite the inspired and well researched setting of the film, the shamisen fails to stand out. The film is a sophisticated orientalism in that can incorporate so many Japanese elements in an appropriate manner, but musically it only tries on Japanese sound without understanding it. The San Jose shamisen group players, Chris and Pedro, express that Kubo failed to promote the very thing that inspired it.”

*Kubo* uses the shamisen as a signifier of sonic Japaneseness, but its commodification fails to inspire or ignite interest in Tsugaru shamisen. Chris offers that “[the characters] don’t even mention the name of the instrument in the film, so how would the viewer figure it out? I think more people joined from the Yoshida Brothers’ Wii commercial or Mike Penny’s YouTube videos than from Kubo” (2018). Perhaps the origami styled animation and Japanese cultural influences were only ever going to attract Japanophiles. Ethnomusicologist Shalini Ayyagari reveals a third facet of resilience that “does not always look like prosperity, and it does not always result in redemption” (2022; 8). Abbott found that despite Laika trying to involve several founding Bachido members, enrollment didn’t increase after the film. He says, “we would be at events, and I would hope people might come over and say something

about the film and shamisen, but it never happened” (Personal communication 2018). Visiting Bachido affiliate, Su Bunjamin, responds that her group in Germany cosplayed and performed outside of theaters when the movie opened, but they had no additional enrollment as a result.

## **Conclusion**

Identity plays a crucial role in the cultural sustainability of min’yō and Tsugaru shamisen. The American practitioner must navigate a legacy of anti-Asian sentiment and fantasies of Japan when approaching Japanese folk music. Often, they will find themselves grappling with identity as they engage with Japanese culture. Bachido established itself in the global Tsugaru shamisen movement and participates in the Japanese American community. Heritage and non-heritage participants encounter the oddity of playing this particular music that evokes a Japanese identity, but it is not an identity they ascribed to themselves. Bachido further encountered issues in racial politics as they participated in creating the *Kubo & the Two Strings* film, which could have been a celebration of Tsugaru shamisen and the Californian (and North American) subculture. Instead, the film showcased the infiltration of American superculture by relegating it to a superficial element in its film.

The Lodi, California based Tanoshimi Kai face similar issues of race and identity in the practice of Japanese folk music and dance. They come from a lineage of women min’yō performers who teach not only how to do min’yō but how to perform as a min’yō practitioner beyond the practice room and the stage. For Sensei,



this comes from her tutelage under Matsutoyo Sensei, but also her connection to her mother-in-law, Masano Morita. Her students and group members use the language of obligation to talk about her. The women of min'yō here take on the role of mother as they care for and teach their min'yō students. As women already dominate, min'yō in northern California, men appear less and less likely to participate in such a group beyond a supporting role.

Tanoshimi Kai then challenges some of these ingrained ways of being in hopes of gaining new members and keeping current ones. While Japanese performing arts are entwined with the iemoto system, the group work to alter min'yō beyond this single hierarchical model. Sensei does not care for her style to continue or for someone to assume her matriarchal position when she retires. She expresses a desire for min'yō to continue in America after her time and that our ways of being in Japanese folk music must change for live min'yō music to continue. In the next chapter, I write about the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change's threats the continuation of min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen in California.

### Chapter Three. “Until Next Year:” Cultural Heritage Policy, Precarity, and Cultural Sustainability

Tanoshimi Kai invited me to their group practices in December 2019, and I attended my first two in February 2020. However, COVID-19 quickly spread during February, leading the government to call for emergency stay-at-home orders. Sensei canceled all lessons until further notice, and I waited. Bachido started online practices to supplement the loss of the practice space of the San Jose JACL in April 2020. They canceled their summer workshop with Tsugaru shamisen and taiko players. The Sacramento and San Jose cultural festivals I watched online did not feature traditional min’yō music and dance. However, the San Jose obon did feature the Chidori Band, a Japanese American band formed in 1953 to provide bon odori music for Issei. Chidori Band is a regular participant in the San Jose obon. The others I planned to attend, such as Stockton and Walnut Grove, were canceled for 2020. Most featured a set dancer with prerecorded music for people to dance. Others featured members from the *sangha* (the members of the Buddhist church) performing musical talents unrelated to Japanese culture but essential to Japanese American culture, such as solo voice and piano performances from members. Tanoshimi Kai resumed lessons over Zoom<sup>26</sup> in November 2020 as the pandemic and the shelter-in-place orders remained in effect.

#### California COVID-19 Timeline

January 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Orange County man tests positive for COVID-19 – the first recorded case in California (OC Health Care Agency)
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January 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	The World Health Organization announces COVID-19 as a global health emergency (WHO)
March 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	After multiple California counties declare local emergencies, Governor Gavin Newsom announces state of emergency for California (Office of Governor)
March 11-13 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO). President Trump declares a national emergency (Washington Post). California K-12 schools begin shutdown (Office of Governor).
March 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Governor Newsom issues statewide shelter-in-place order (Office of Governor; 2020).
July 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	After easing restrictions to allow some businesses to open on June 12, Newsom orders closure again after COVID-19 hospitalizations nearly double (LA Times).
November 16 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Newsom adds Californians must wear masks outside of home and nonessential businesses are to close (CalMatters)
December 11-18 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	FDA approves the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and Moderna vaccine
December 29 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Shelter-in-place orders extended to indefinite (Reuters)
April 15 <sup>th</sup> 2021	Californians 16 and older eligible to receive vaccine (CalMatters).
May 6 <sup>th</sup> – June 10 <sup>th</sup> 2021	Californians who received first dose of vaccine in April now eligible for second dose of the vaccine
June 15 <sup>th</sup> 2021	California reopens; businesses and counties may still require masks (CalMatters).

The Zoom lessons continued until late May 2021, once all Tanoshimi Kai members received two vaccination shots. Like many musical and performing arts groups, we adapted to the digital environment as best we could. In some instances, we thrived: we could all share what we had been practicing with the group while the others played on mute. In others, we struggled; the occasional dips in download speed

made following instructions or receiving information difficult. As the stay-at-home orders lifted, we prepared for summer events should any arise. Speaking with Adachi, a planning member of the Sacramento Buddhist Church Cultural Bazaar, she says, “We start our planning early in the year, so we didn’t know if the state was going to reopen or not ” (personal communication May 2021). Alas, smoke from the California Dixie wildfire (July 13<sup>th</sup> – October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021) choked out the remaining small festivals in northern California. Morita Sensei and the group assured everyone it would always be next year. What can groups like Tanoshimi Kai do to continue their practice in the face of climate change and global epidemics? How do already



Figure 8: Sacramento Bazaar at Home Promotion



Figure 7: San Jose Obon at Home Poster

precarious practices adjust or adapt to even more instability?

This global contagion exacerbated the min’yō practice’s precarity, as I learned in the US. I imagined a relatively straightforward fieldwork experience – attending practices, participating in different events, making connections through Tanoshimi

Kai members, and traveling to Southern California to meet Matsutoyo Kai – but the pandemic dashed every research plan I had prepared. As cultural anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, precarity reminds us that we are not in control and that the world is not teleological. Nevertheless, we might find other ways of being disregarded because they “never fit the timeline of progress” (2015; 21). Economic precarity and the rising cost of living brought the popularity of hustle culture, which adds to the hurdles prospective members face when joining MTK. Journalist Charlotte Cowles cites student debt, racial wealth inequities, the Great Recession, and a growing wage gap between baby boomers' and millennials' incomes (NYT 2022). Fellow columnist Erin Griffith delves into hustle culture, which promotes toil as glamorous, but “convincing workers to beaver away is convenient for those at the top” (NYT 2019). As new practitioners join min’yō or Tsugaru Shamisen groups in the currently precarious economy, they will struggle to acquire instruments and accessories. Shamisens are expensive instruments and challenging to acquire.<sup>27</sup> There are few remaining groups with licensed teachers as the process is long and expensive. As a result, membership dwindles as participants need to travel further for lessons, practice, and performances. Instrument makers raise prices with inflation as traditional material supplies become endangered or suppliers fold. Yet, min’yō practitioners find new ways to accommodate the changing needs of participants and address the precariousness of modern life.

Practitioners and groups search or organize efforts to stabilize fading traditions and practices in uncertain times. Ethnomusicologists Caroline Bithell and

Juniper Hill cite dissatisfaction with a modern and alienating world; bolstering of ethnic, minority, or national identity through performing arts; political; and practical response to natural or human disasters as motivating factors for folk music revival activism (2014; 11-12). Governments and NGOs have already worked to stabilize and promote traditional performing arts as an intangible cultural heritage. In this view, governments and organizations respond to local efforts and aid in safeguarding these traditions (Arisawa 2012; 181-2, Foster 2015; 81). Officials in Japan, China, and Korea pioneered the “preservation” of intangible culture long through their legal systems before the creation of UNESCO. However, while many institutions and their partners successfully implement measures to promote intangible culture, they suspend it at a particular time. Diaspora practitioners of intangible cultures, such as Japanese folk music and dance, have an even more difficult time maintaining these traditions.

Min’yō, as I have understood through my collaborators, would benefit from a paradigm shift from promotion and preservation to sustainability and stewardship. A cultural sustainability model offers an alternative that approaches music as an ecosystem rather than a resource to be managed. As ethnomusicologist Jeffery Todd Titon contends

To use an ecological analogy, representations of music at cultural heritage sites managed for tourists run the risk of being like chemical fertilizers, artificial stimuli that feed the plant but starve the soil. On the contrary, partnerships aimed at encouraging a balanced, healthy, life-supporting soil at the community level bring about musical continuity through adaptation, which is to say growth and change. Music is conceived, then, not as something directed from a stage at an audience by a master artist but as something we may all make in our quotidian lives, an activity that connects people, a way of being human

(2009; 176)

Although a sustainable path – at first perhaps more precarious, path eschewing governments and NGOs – can later yield a healthy musical culture with community members and experts working together to cultivate Min'yō 's folk aesthetic as it adapts and changes for new generations. As I learned from my group, the importance of community relationships in min'yō – reinforced through Jōdo Shinshū's emphasis on everyday, communal experience – already contains the necessary components to adapt and thrive. I argue in this chapter that min'yō practitioners in California occupy a space between folk music revival cultural and environmental sustainability.

I analyze Min'yō music as a practice between rearticulation, sustainable practice, and our entanglement with climate change. This chapter begins by examining Japanese laws and practices around intangible cultural heritage. I trace the establishment and transformations of these laws and their effect on Japanese performing arts. Next, I discuss cultural sustainability and resilience, focusing on the impact of the pandemic and climate change on Japanese folk music practice in California. I detail participants shifting to digital spaces to continue practice, rehearsal, and events and the transition into physical locations once California lifted the stay-at-home orders (see table). The contrast between online and in-person spaces highlights the significance of live transmission in sustaining musical practices. Finally, this chapter examines the shamisen instrument as players, makers, and sellers navigate the pandemic and its aftermath. Traditional material suppliers over-extract and exploit their resources, which are now endangered (See Post 2019 & 2002;

Hurley-Glowa 2019). For Japanese folk music and dance to continue in the diaspora, practitioners and cultural wardens must shift paradigms from promotion/preservation to stewardship. I do not argue for cultural assimilation via a “melting pot,” but that music and culture adapt to the needs of newer generations while still maintaining ethnic identity, culture, and traditions. This adaptation means integrating and appealing to a digitally connected generation that draws from Japanese folk music and dance.

### **Intangible Cultural Property Laws**

The initial rhetoric for intangible cultural property focuses on preserving these arts rather than stewardship. Preceding UNESCO, the Japanese government involved itself in managing, preserving, and promoting its intangible cultural heritage. The Law for the Protection of Cultural Property (bunkazai hogohō) passed the Japanese Diet in 1950. This law affirms the state's responsibility to recognize and select which performing arts should be preserved for "the correct understanding of the history and culture of Japan." Those groups and practitioners selected shall "faithfully cooperate with measures taken by the government and local governments to fulfill the purpose of the law" (1950; 4). Significantly, they amended the law in 1975 with five categories of recognition: folk cultural properties, groups of historic buildings, intangible cultural properties, monuments, and tangible cultural properties. The music falls into both folk cultural and intangible cultural properties as Japan's folk music



and customs are their own separate intangible heritage. Japan followed other East Asian countries in establishing laws to preserve their cultural music.

Japan joined China and Korea early, advocating for intangible cultural preservation through government intervention. However, China rapidly adopted policies during the 1990s to elevate and promote folk musics in a different way than Japan. Ethnomusicologist Helen Rees writes that festivals sponsored through community partnerships and government initiatives offer a “visible endorsement of value for the genres on display” (2012; 53). However, she adds, “folk artists honoured as transmitters receive an impressive certificate, although this does not inevitably translate into an effective transmission scheme if local youngsters are not interested in the art” (Ibid; 33). In America, Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai receive visible endorsement through prestigious events such as performances at the Japanese consulate and numerous Japanese American cultural organizations. However, similarly, ‘local youngsters’ join in fewer numbers than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The leader of Sacramento Min’yō Dō Kō Kai, Toshiye Kawamura, corroborates that the young ones “we’ll have boys and girls, and they’ll go off to college and they won’t come back.” They migrate to larger cities like San Francisco or Los Angeles (interview by author 2021). The efficacy of such vertical<sup>28</sup> implementation should be questioned, as Rees does, in advocating for horizontal stewardship. However, once governments and NGOs exist, communal practices find it challenging to undermine their institutional power.

The institutional top-down management and aesthetic valuation of intangible cultural properties place many Japanese folk practices in a precarious position. The Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) mainly recognizes *min'yō* songs through the context of *matsuri* (festivals). The remaining songs depend on creating a local *honzonkai* (preservation society) for preservation or promotion efforts.

Ethnomusicologist Shino Arisawa offers insightful analysis juxtaposing the designation of *ningyō jōruri* (Japanese puppet theater) as the agency granted Bunraku intangible cultural property status, whereas they qualified the Awaji Island and Awa traditions as ‘folk’ despite having professional performance troupes. Arisawa contends that the distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ is now determined less by a past elite/commoner binary but by “current artistic values and performance contexts” (2012; 195). For intangible folk cultural properties, the national government funds local governments to provide for preservation groups or artists, but only for specific purposes such as training and repair. Thus, these professionals are tied to a specific locality and dependent on festivals and performances. On the other hand, intangible cultural properties without the folk designation receive direct support from the central government. Legislative, policy, and initiative changes may also carry unintended consequences by hiding underlying inequalities in representation.

In addition, the Law for the Protection of Cultural Property obfuscates the national homogenization intentions through UNESCO's ICH. The Fundamental Law for the Promotion of Culture and the Arts (enacted in 2001) anticipated the ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

at UNESCO's 2003 general conference. Anthropologist Hideyo Konagaya points to critical changes in the law, changing "protection" to "promotion" while "cultural heritage" seems to be used as a generic term that includes 'cultural property,' without making a clear distinction between them. Because of the vagueness of its meaning and usage, it has been flexibly applied to expand the policy agenda" (2020, 47). Konagaya continues that while this might lead to new opportunities for Kumiodori performers, ICH "cannot replace cultural property, of which the non-folk and folk division has been entrenched in Japanese cultural discourse" (Ibid. 61). Despite the removal of folk and non-folk designations the state still uses the existing systems and pathways to manage, maintain, and protect cultural properties often with little input from the community. According to ethnomusicologist David Hughes, hozonkai starts from organization efforts by private parties ("although frequently with governmental prodding") (2012; 213). In the US, the min'yō organizations I encounter all emerge from the collaboration and organization of individuals rather than from government initiatives. However, the Japanese policy agendas and designations still affect the perceived legitimacy of cultural arts, with some still carrying the stigma of 'folk.'

Adopting the Iemoto systems by min'yō hozonkai offers legitimacy to Japanese folk music and dance but at the cost of the original communal practice. As Japanese Americans struggle to continue the system as newer generations are removed from the cultural context, Japanese folk practices also express antipathy toward the system. In her work on the Chichibu Night Festival in the eponymous town in western Saitama prefecture, ethnomusicologist Jane Alaszewska cites her

collaborators and other local musicians “vehemently oppos[ing] the iemoto system as alien to the festival tradition” but despite restructuring and reclassifying the practice the iemoto system stuck (2012; 204).<sup>29</sup> During my fieldwork, I discussed with two prominent Japanese American musicians who worried that the iemoto system and its teaching methods alienated younger Japanese Americans interested in the traditional and folk arts. They also expressed worry over the cost associated with the iemoto system. Morita Sensei commented at the end of a lesson in June 2023 that it is a delicate balance in deciding lesson and rehearsal fees; too high discourages new members, while too low raises the difficulty of maintaining the Kai.

Organizations like Tanoshimi Kai base themselves on Japanese preservation societies. As folk music came from daily village practices, jobs, celebrations, and rituals, there was no formal teaching method as hozonkai formed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hughes provides the first preservation societies that modeled their teaching structures on the iemoto system of classical genres.<sup>30</sup> Hozonkai founders hoped adopting this system would legitimize min’yō music and dance. However, he notes that a profit motive drives the iemoto system, while hozonkai might issue certificates as incentives instead of for-profit (2008; 215). Unlike the Japanese preservation societies, which focus on only one song or dance, Tanoshimi Kai and Min’yō Dō Kō Kai perform dances from many regions in Japan.

Similarly, they charge lower prices, between \$10 and \$20 per rehearsal, as the focus is on preservation. They include a vast repertoire of dances as they perform in Japanese America, emphasizing a shared Japanese heritage rather than a specific

ancestral village. However, the extremely hierarchical nature of the iemoto system led to clashes with these folk practices, which were communally based rather than focused on a single lineage. Unlike *min'yō*, the Japanese government designates some intangible cultural property with UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage despite many arts receiving significant state support.

### **Japan's UNESCO and Performing Arts**

Japan successfully applied and received ICH for eighteen practices between 2008 and 2010, nine performing arts. The Japanese government lists *Nōgaku*, Bunraku Puppet Theatre, Kabuki, Gagaku, and Chakkirako without origin. In contrast, the practices designated initially as intangible folk cultural properties - Hayachine Kagura, Akiu no Taue Odori, Dainichido Bugaku, Traditional Ainu Dance, and Kumiodori all list their prefecture or region. Performance scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett comments on the blending of national traditions with folk practices through ICH: "admitting cultural forms associated with royal courts and state-sponsored temples, as long as they are not European, the intangible heritage list preserves the division between the West and the rest and produces a phantom list of intangible heritage, a list of that which is not indigenous, not minority, and not non-Western, though no less intangible" (2004, 55–57). Japan uses the ICH to support, fund, and promote the arts. These national genres coexist in the list, with the latter folk performing arts implying equal weight.<sup>31</sup> However, the situation in local settings does not reflect an equal division. In the case of Kumiodori and Ainu dance, while the

designation legitimized their performing arts, it did little to further them as living traditions. The state's desire for cultural homogeneity extends to minority groups performing arts, such as the Ainu and Ryūkyūans.

Like Ainu and Ryūkyū practices, the lyrics and practice of min'yō songs I learned from the Matsutoyo and Fujimoto Kai repertoire offer a temporalized view of Japanese folk life. In ethnomusicologist Gillan's research, the Ryūkyūan officials and educators added Kumiodori to the school system with a degree in traditional Okinawan performance, legitimizing the musical style (2012, 225). However, the institutionalization of the music challenged the Kumiodori lineages and created a new professional class of performers, but ultimately, little changed in the practice or promotion of the genre (Ibid., 227). Comparable recognition for Matsutoyo Kai, Tanoshimi Kai, Min'yō Dō Kō Kai, and Bachido led to no further increase in students. Min'yō practitioners seeking similar legitimization will likely not enliven the practice or proliferation of the folk style in the US. Instead, community engagement on the part of these groups encourages new membership.

Min'yō groups' preservation of 'authentic' songs and dances offers a frozen image or sound of rural Japan. The Japanese government uses Ainu and Ryūkyūan dance and music in state-building, and resultantly, these promoted practices have stagnated after receiving ICH designation. The Ainu's persistent petitioning of the Japanese government led to increased support for their cultural practices (Their demand for guaranteed seats and representation at the national level was ignored). Ethnomusicologist Justin R. Hunter "contend[s] that the ICH application does little to

accurately portray traditional dance, and by extension the Ainu people, as it existed in 2009 and today. The language used follows the same museumized views of historicization and describes Ainu dance as it was and not as it is" (2015, 55). For US min'yō groups, Japanese or UNESCO conferences of ICH or ICP status would likely produce a similar deleterious effect. These groups already tour and demonstrate the past Japanese folk songs and dances with context but offer no view of min'yō in the present.

In this sense, min'yō becomes a tangible facet of Japanese culture – something readily called upon for display – rather than an ephemeral, living thing. Like Hunter, ethnomusicologist Keith Howard identifies intangible cultural heritage designation as a force of stagnation in Korean folk music. He writes,

“Intangible heritage differs from tangible heritage because it requires promotion through performance and creation as a lived experience. If it were possible to posit an authentic archetype of the intangible, to maintain an original form would still require imagining permanence where there is none. Permanence comes with the display of a museum artefact, leaving a tangible object that, while observable, requires neither performance nor creation. Permanence makes the intangible tangible but snuffs out its life (2012; 139).

For min'yō to continue as a living practice, practitioners might reexamine what might be done to create a sustainable practice. One that simultaneously appeals to more than those only interested in depicting rural Japan; it is also a modern, vibrant practice. Perhaps similar to the practice of Tsugaru shamisen, the players of which continue to innovate and expand beyond its origins and regional boundaries.

## **Min'yō and Tsugaru Shamisen**

As shown in Chapter 2, Japan's legacy of omitting and sanitizing min'yō music for national culture and identity continues under this law. The Japanese nation-state employs "cultural determinants (religious values, language, patterns of social and economic organization), rather than genetic or physiological markers, have been deployed to signify the existence of an immutable and homogeneous Japanese identity" (Weiner 2009: xiii). In needing to meet the Japanese government, these performing arts practices alter themselves at the government and NGOs' behest to receive support, reinforcing the illusion of a homogenous Japan.

The people of the Tsugaru region occupy a similar space marginal position as the Ainu and Ryūkyūan, but they are considered an internal other. The locale sits on the northernmost point of Honshu in Aomori prefecture, with dense forests and mountains separating it from the rest of Japan. This geography functions similarly to the separateness of the Ainu in Hokkaido and the Ryūkyū people on their southern islands. As their music represents a cultural past, the Tsugaru shamisen represents roots music for the Japanese people. Min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen were heavily promoted before and during World War II to create a mythic national past through folk music. After the war, Dazai Osamu (1909-1948), Tsugaru's premier writer, wrote on "not only an anger felt by the people of Tsugaru but an anger felt by all rural people who had been scorned, controlled and discriminated against in the process of modernization and centralization of Japan's nation-state" (1944, 63). This sentiment is reflected today as sociologist Anthony Rausch concludes from his surveys that the



music of Tsugaru shamisen fills "one with a dynamic feeling of place on the one hand also being a vanguard and evolving musical style adaptable to any musical expression on the other" (2010, 140). As a living tradition, the style exists between popular genres, incorporating various musical styles and engaging in song competitions that are characteristic of folk music revivals. Tsugaru shamisen fans and players situate the music as the essence of the region, but one capable of extending beyond those boundaries with the popularity of national performers.

While the split between preserving older social forms of music making and promoting competitions, Tsugaru shamisen practitioners unite to adhere to a tradition of innovation. Scholar Daijō Kazuo is a significant force informing the free-spirited approach to Tsugaru shamisen, promoting Nitabō as the sole creator of Tsugaru shamisen. Ethnomusicologist McGoldrick speculates, "Daijō collapsed all of the early players into the person of Nitabō" (2017, 17). However, Daijō's most impactful mythologizing is attributing Nitabō as saying something to the effect even monkeys can copy; one needs to learn their style of Shamisen (Daijō 1998, 57 as cited in McGoldrick, 22). Regardless of the veracity of these claims, the improvisatory spirit can be seen in both the more traditional Tsugaru competitions and modern compositions and recordings.

Practitioners continue to pick up the style of attending various schools nationwide. The Nitabō myth's influence on Tsugaru shamisen keeps it a living tradition. New performers include and innovate on the style, such as the Wagakki band, promoting Tsugaru shamisen as a sustained and modern practice. In the case of

Tsugaru shamisen competitions, performers draw from an entire repertoire of shamisen recordings and compositions to perform their rendition of one of the Top Five Tsugaru pieces (godai Tsugaru). However, they almost always choose "Tsugaru Jongara Bushi." The genre's sustained popularity might offer something for other Japanese folk music and dance practices for incorporating modern elements that attract younger players while still attending to its stylistic conventions. However, both min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen struggle against the increasing environmental disasters, disruptions to the supply chain during the pandemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese American folk music practitioners search for alternatives to the current practices that offer greater resilience and amenable methods of sustainability.

### **Disaster and Musical Resilience**

While Tanoshimi Kai, Matsutoyo, and Bachido had different experience levels when approaching virtual lessons, all groups were on equal footing when adapting to virtual group practice/rehearsal. Bachido launched group lessons early in the pandemic in April of 2020 once a month. Tanoshimi Kai waited to see if the pandemic would end, and with no end in sight, they started online rehearsal in November 2020. During the group rehearsals with Tanoshimi Kai, we only once tried to play together, which produced a cacophony of voices and strings. After, we would all mute when someone would play. Morita Sensei would often sing and play while we would follow. We would then go around the room with everyone taking a turn to lead. We would also present a song we had worked on over the week. Like the

individual lessons, the group rehearsals lacked the somatic feedback we get from in-person lessons and rehearsals. I attribute Bachido's rapid transition to online as aided by their presence online and being younger. Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai both waited before committing to the online format and did not have online and less technological experience.

The 2021 California wildfires that led to Buddhist churches canceling obon. News stations speculated that California would lift pandemic restrictions for the summer. As the entire US population gained access to the COVID-19 vaccines, Tanoshimi Kai recommenced in-person rehearsals and okeikos in April of 2021. We started practicing and committing pieces and dances to memory for upcoming Bon festivals. California Governor Gavin Newsom ended the stay-at-home order in late May/early June. However, many churches had already prepared for another year of distance obons. Members of Tanoshimi Kai and I expressed concern at the premature repeal of stay-at-home, especially as the percentage of people who had received a vaccine was still low. COVID-19 was not over or slowing down.

Some smaller churches in northern California were still poised to host the festival, which I was excited to attend with some other members of the Kai. Our group was also to perform at an open farm day at the Wakamatsu Farm in Placerville, California. We had already planned our set list and choreographed our entrance and exit as the wildfires burned the northern part of the state. While the Dixie Fire turned the sky gray for most of the summer, the River Fire in Placer County ensured the

cancellation of the event. Despite the reopening of California, return to in-person practice, and scheduled events, we still had another year without performing.

Buddhist churches and the JACL posted guides online for the obon dances, but Tanoshimi kai did not hold dance rehearsals over Zoom. The former groups wanted a way for the community to continue this social dance from the safety of their homes. These videos featured one dancer leading people through the steps. Outside of the pandemic, churches accomplish this task with several obon practice nights for community members to come and learn the dances. Everyone then gathers for the obon celebration to dance together. In the pandemic years, these online dances featured either one person or a recording from a previous year's celebration for viewers to dance along. In conversation with ethnomusicologist Tanya Merchant, a similar phenomenon was described in pandemic-era contra dance. She described one community leader discouraging newcomers from participating in these digital events as they would not be beginner-friendly (Merchant; 2022). As someone who has watched and followed the online obon dances over the years, I agree that while the communities tried to make the best of the situation for new participants, the videos missed out on the communal aspect, for which beginners have no context.

My work with Tanoshimi Kai and Bachido during the pandemic offers insight into ethnomusicologist Jeff Tilton's concept of resilience, which "refers to a system's capacity to recover and maintain its integrity, identity, and continuity when subjected to forces of disturbance and change. (Tilton 2020; 193). While the pandemic and environmental disasters provided the most significant obstacles to cultural

sustainability, these groups further explored different methods of reaching new members and appealing to younger members of their groups. Both managed to adapt to the rapid changes brought on by the pandemic, hosting lessons and rehearsals over video conferencing applications.

I volunteered my Zoom application to host group practice and lessons. However, Morita Sensei preferred to use the LINE app for our private lessons. I did not notice a significant difference between these two services. Instead, both services required me to use different media. I used Zoom on my desktop computer, where I had access to high-quality headphones. On the LINE app, I had to use my phone, which was a lower-quality stream than Zoom. Morita Sensei used a tablet to stream herself, so the capabilities of its microphone limited her. The stream depended on the internet performance at the time – clear visuals and high framerate, frame-by-frame movements, and dropped calls.

Digital lessons require students to adapt to new interfaces and teachers to learn new ways of engaging with them. I remember from Zoom lessons that I took turns listening to Morita Sensei; she often asked me how I was and other pleasantries. I would check in with her and then proceed to the lesson. Fortunately, I was able to get the Matsutoyo Kai songbook. And then she would tell me which songs to play, usually by number in the book, sometimes by name, and often she would say both. Then, I would listen to her play the song. She angled her camera so I could see both the neck of the shamisen and the body. Therefore, I could see her fingers and the bachi while she played. However, even with such adjustments, I found it difficult to

follow and later learned she did. We both miss the immediate response in-person lessons afford, providing a clear view of the instrument and details not captured by the camera.

The physical space of lessons is challenging to capture in an online format but not impossible and could be used to reach new min'yō practitioners further. I missed the tactile/haptic/somatic feedback of an in-person lesson. Digital lessons offer aspiring min'yō practitioners an entry if teachers or min'yō groups do not live near them. Ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller writes, “While this emphasis on *convenience* (emphasis original) sheds light on the practical appeal of lessons and the way that they fit into students’ everyday lives, lesson *repeatability* draws attention to the distinctive pedagogical qualities of prerecorded video lessons” (2012; 165). These specific things are not considered or spoken aloud, like how to hold the bachi, strike the strings, produce the desired sound, etc. Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai were thrust into conducting these virtual lessons. The process was difficult to adjust or ascertain what I was getting from the lessons. Aside from getting the tune and the correct timing, the technique's details must wait.

On the other hand, Bachido already hosted lessons on their website and YouTube, so Abbott and the other contributors to the schoolhouse experienced the challenges of virtual transmission. Abbott and Chris Took developed a free web series for the body mechanics of Tsugaru shamisen to help students properly orient their bodies to the shamisen. The first video elucidates the ergonomic way to hold the bachi plectrum and guides viewers on where pressure should be applied, how the

fingers support the plectrum, and what to avoid. The series progresses to striking the strings and then to the proper rotation when striking the strings.

Miller describes a similar level of detail when writing on YouTube guitar lessons. As she interviews a guitar instructor, he describes his consideration in approaching how to describe something as simple as holding a guitar plectrum to students. “Teaching technical fundamentals is one of the most difficult things to do in the online format, because students are still cultivating a physical relationship with their chosen instruments. This is why David spent 11 minutes explaining how to hold the guitar pick, zooming in with the camera and encouraging me to get to know its dimensions, angles, and texture” (2012; 166). Similarly, in the first video on Bachido’s body mechanics playlist, Took uses all seven minutes and 16 seconds to demonstrate how to hold the bachi. He zooms into his hands, explaining the function of each finger, the thumb, and the palm to support the plectrum. While demonstrating the addition of each finger, he shows the position from different angles and describes the sensation the viewer should feel.

The metaphorical language might aid new students in reaching a desired sound or correct playing but can also lead students astray. Took uses a virtual format to teach shamisen. While providing these detailed instructions, Chris avoids euphemisms and other illustrative metaphors. Metaphors both aid our learning but also impact future engagement through that lens. Cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is more than “a matter of language,” but that the conceptual structure of human thought processes is “largely metaphorical” (1980;

18). One such metaphor Took refers to in the video is to imagine a string pulling the plectrum's left edge down through the instrument's body. This approach might help the student conceptualize the correct motion and sound. However, as Chris argues, using this language gives students the correct result. Still, they might not learn or understand how their body moves to make that sound because they focus on the imaginary string rather than the kinesthetics.

The combined effect of COVID-19 supply-chain disruption and the wildfires led to a spike in lumber prices. Lumber prices hit record highs as suppliers marked up their limited supply. (cite). As most shamisen and min'yō products ship from Japan, acquiring essential accessories was difficult. Morita Sensei stocked spare strings, and Bachido was limited to selling whatever Kyle Abbott stored in the US. Something that was a burgeoning global intercultural practice and situated explicitly in a communal context for the celebration of Japanese American culture ceased. What was celebratory and nostalgic shifted to moments of disconsolation and sustained quiet resilience in response to these world-shattering events.

### **Materials and Shamisen**

Shamisens are the most difficult thing to acquire for someone looking to get into this practice. As I ventured into the min'yō world, Ethnomusicologist Jay Keister encouraged me to shop on eBay for shamisens at a lower price than the leading shops. Bachido's entry-level "The Beginner's Shamisen" cost about \$500 in 2016 but increased to \$700 due to the rising price of *Karin* (Burmese rosewood, *Dalbergia*



*oliveri*) wood. To keep the price at \$500, the builder refurbished used *hosozao/nagauta* (thin-necked) shamisen. However, for those wanting a Tsugaru shamisen, the entry price is now \$2000 on the Bachido website. This price is too expensive for someone looking to start shamisen playing. Interested people can scour eBay or similar sites for shamisen with “cut-skin” to save money. I recall seeing instruments on the low end, \$10-\$50, and \$200-\$300 at the higher end in 2017, but now the bottom pricing starts around \$70, with the higher end reaching \$500.<sup>32</sup> If someone purchased a cut-skin shamisen, they could send it to be reskinned, of which I have heard of only two options. First, Tanoshimi Kai sent their damaged shamisens to Japan to be reskinned, which took one to two months. Second, the only online option is to send it to Bachido for reskinning at approximately \$100 synthetic and \$200 natural per side.<sup>33</sup>

Bachido offers both synthetic and natural skins. Abbott developed his style of skin out of treated canvas. Whatever process the material undergoes brings it to the same quality as high-end synthetic skin. Their natural skin is made of goat skin, which offers more excellent durability than other traditional shamisen skins. I should write on the wood of the shamisen to the best of my ability. Abbott’s blog post, “Shamisen Materials,” on the Bachido site lists the three “standard” kinds of wood: Karin (Burmese rosewood, *Dalbergia oliveri*), *Shitan* (red sandalwood, *Pterocarpus santalinus*), *Kouki*, (high-grade red sandalwood in this context) (2018).<sup>34</sup> Karin wood originates from a wide range: southeastern Asia, northern Australia, and the Western Pacific Islands. *Shitan* comes from the southern end of the Eastern Ghats in South

India. This wood is valued in most of East Asia, particularly China, for hardwood furniture. For the shamisen, this wood is prized for the neck and the instrument's bridge. Due to its slow growth and small range, the wood is quite expensive, creating a large smuggling ring.

Abbott's *Shamisen of Japan* includes detailed instructions, resources, and recommendations for the reader to build their shamisen. He recommends a combination of African padauk (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*) for the *dou* (body), bloodwood (*Brosimum rubescens*) for the *sao* and *tenjin* (neck and headpiece respectively), and ebony (*Diospyros ebenum*) for the *itomaki* (tuning peg).<sup>35</sup> The price for the lumber comes to roughly. In a Building/Repair post from July 2012 on the Bachido website, user Aidan\_Camacho asks what they should look for when building a shamisen. Kevin Kmetz responds that any wood that floats in water is not good, so look for any heavy wood that sinks in water. In conversation with Abbott, he explained that any wood with a hardness of 1,200 or greater can be used for crafting shamisen.<sup>36</sup> Oak is the lightest wood he recommends at 1,200, while the standard karin and kouki are 2,710 and 2,940, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

Before delving further into these woods and materials, I highlight the shamisen's connection to these often-endangered species. Karin and shitan are listed as endangered by both The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (aka The Washington Convention and hereafter referred to as CITES) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (hereinafter, IUCN), with both in appendix II and Red List as endangered respectively.<sup>38</sup> In writing on

shamisen materials, ethnomusicologist Keisuke Yamada writes, “Rather than questioning whether/when dog skin becomes extinct, it is more meaningful to look at how people react to fears of this development and how their concerns become expanded. Therefore, the extinction discourse concerns loss and disappearance and strategic action, emergence, recovery, and development” (2017, 374). In the case of shamisen wood, the rising price and endangered status spur innovation and divergence in tradition to provide quality instruments for all shamisen players. Abbott uses readily available woods and searches for less endangered woods for higher-end shamisen that yield a desirable hardwood pattern. On the lower end, Abbott adjusts to the rising costs by experimenting with the low hardness woods but also new designs.

Abbott attempts to address the high entry price of the Tsugaru shamisen with his Shamibuddy creations. Already experienced with shamisen building, he simplified and streamlined the building process of a shamisen to remove some of the more intricate woodwork. This reduction allowed him to produce these shamisen at a faster rate. The simplification of the tenjin is the most notable sacrifice in the design – notably the loss of the *azuma sawari* (east sawari; sawari refers to the characteristic buzz of the first thick string of the shamisen). To rectify this issue, Abbott created a video guiding the making of an imitation sawari out of scotch tape. The Shamibuddy V3 is sold out within the first week of release. Abbott said he took a few months to make 50 of them. The dou is made from western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), the sao and tenjin out of black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) for the fingerboard. These woods are relatively soft compared to the “traditional” woods

and the recommended woods mentioned earlier. On the other hand, many different producers offer the Shamibuddy lumber at lower prices. CITES and IUCN either do not include these on their lists or, in the latter case, list them as the least concern.

Abbott and Bachido's response to the increase in shamisen material and labor prices accounts for the human-caused environmental changes. His ability to adapt and improvise based on these conditions results in a resilient practice. Writing on table makers response to climate and environmental change, ethnomusicologist Alan Roda writes,

“Ticks, thorns, weather patterns, and other environmental factors influence behaviors that on the surface do not seem relevant to musical performance. However, by following the actors that influence outcomes, we learn that global warming compounded by the lack of refrigeration in butcher shops affects the goat hides that drum makers can access. This in turn forces them to be agile in terms of technique and responsive to the demands of the materials” (Roda; 2015, 321).

Responding to change will be a crucial asset in the future of instrument making.

Abbott builds on the innovations of shamisen makers before him. In California, he adjusted to using more readily available woods and innovated on the shamisen designs to offer entry-level instruments to new players. Both tactics alleviate the strain shamisen manufacturers put on endangered wood species. As manufacturers emerge from the pandemic, they might look to innovations and materials to defray costs and continue their practice without top-down initiatives to sustain or buoy purchasing unsustainable but traditional materials.

## **Conclusion**

I briefly overviewed Japanese intangible cultural property laws and their alignment with UNESCO's ICH. In this context, min'yō is often ignored or tied to matsuri rather than regional songs or dances. Next, I demonstrate that policy impact on the music of the Ainu and Ryūkyūans led to greater legitimacy but did not increase promotion of the practices. Similar initiatives for min'yō stifle the practice or introduce a layer of bureaucracy antithetical to Japanese folk music and dances' communal origins.

However, the Tsugaru region prides itself on its steadfast spirit, which influences the character of Tsugaru Shamisen and its reluctance to seek intangible property designation. Although Tsugaru shamisen is a recently invented tradition, its practitioners continue to innovate on its original melodies while incorporating other musical styles and techniques.

Min'yō practitioners, especially US practitioners, might emphasize more communal and horizontal organizational methods to work collaboratively with communities. In the wake of the pandemic and during the climate crisis, a paradigm shift might leave min'yō practitioners in an even more precarious position, but becoming stewards rather than preservationists might open new possibilities. These groups and their members demonstrate remarkable resilience, continuing to practice, perform, and educate through the pandemic. Shamisen manufacturers like Kyle Abbott adjust to the effects of climate change using new materials to defray costs and compensate for the overharvesting of traditional materials. Further innovation on his part also led to a new shamisen design for easier manufacturing by hand. Both methods increase access

to shamisen in California, which can increase participation with changes to group organization and respond better to the needs of a younger generation. In the following chapter I show case how MTK employs pedagogical techniques in teaching Japanese aesthetics regarding space in order to sustain min'yō music and dance in diaspora.

#### Chapter Four. Min'yō in California: Aesthetics and Space in Traditional Japanese Folk Music and Dance

I drive down a wide suburban street in Lodi, California, passing by neat ranch-style homes in shades of gray, white, and beige, each with a neatly manicured lawn. I pull up to one home – unassuming amongst these others – where Morita Sensei lives. As I approach the front door, I hear the pluck of shamisen cut through the omnipresent white noise of tires traveling over asphalt. Morita Sensei's husband, Eugene, greets me, "Hi, Alec. Come on in; they are already practicing." I pass him and step into the entryway – the thrum of traffic vanishes as the resonant and buzzing timbre of the shamisens and the nasality of the voices become clear. While I slip off my shoes, I notice the collection of Japanese dolls above the shoe rack to my right and ahead of the group sitting at knee-high folding tables: Linda, Samantha, Denise, Yoshiko, Kei, and Moria Sensei. The group paused their playing and greeted me with, "hi, Alec! How are you?" "I am well!" I respond as I pull my shamisen from its case. I bring my music binders and instruments to the table with the others. From my seat, the entire wall to my right is a floor-to-ceiling mirror, and in front of me is Morita Sensei's golden shimmering kimono wrapped in protective plastic and pressed flat to the wall.

While I organize my binders and tune my shamisen, Morita Sensei greets me and informs me we are playing “*Hanagasa Ondo*” (Flower Hat Folk Song). We all tune together and begin once sensei hears a pleasing intonation. With a sharp "ha," she indicates to begin. We launch into an eight-bar shamisen introduction, which establishes a simple duple meter with a syncopated swing feel due to the frequency of

a dotted-eight sixteenth rhythm. At the end of the introduction, Morita Sensei "hops" again to mark the singer's entrance.

Hana no Yamagata	The flowers of Yamagata
momiji no Tendō	The maple leaves of Tendo
yuki o (choi choi) <sup>39</sup>	As for snow, (choi choi)
nagamuru Obanazawa	it's best viewed from Obanazawa
(ha yassho makasho)	(ha yassho makasho).

The shamisen players strive to provide a lively rhythm for the dancers while evoking the lilting sway of leaves in a summer breeze. This evocation aids the singer as they detail the beauty of Yamagata prefecture – its nature, people, and food. Morita Sensei corrects us on the nuance of our playing/singing/shouts and our ability to play together. Softly, she says, “chotto,” and “watch” or “listen while she demonstrates the correct method and she asks us to repeat. She shares the song's origins and dances with everyone, but she primarily speaks to me – the newest non-Japanese group member. We all heed her remarks and express gratitude for sharing her knowledge and expertise in Japanese folk music.

In these group practices, private lessons, and the hours we spend practicing

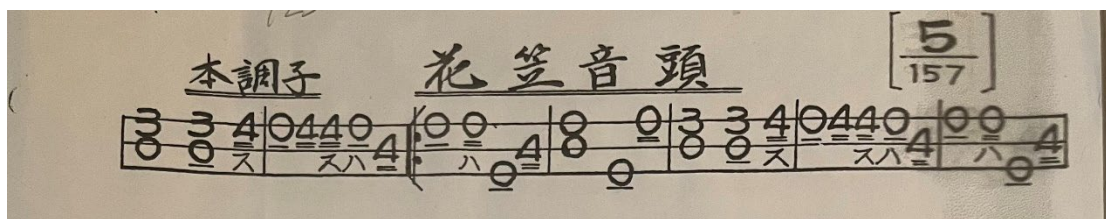


Figure 9: Excerpt of Hanagasa Ondo.

alone, we learn to create these idyllic sounds and movements that conjure images of the idealized Japanese environment – nature, village celebrations, labor, and rituals. We are projecting these spaces through our performance and shaping space for



min'yō. Someone interested in learning Japanese folk music and dance must navigate these spaces to render the distant, ideal geographies and vanishing folk traditions intelligible for their audiences. Min'yō performers in California strive to embody and cultivate a practice of romanticized Japanese space and place.

In Tanoshimi Kai, I am the only person in this group who is not of Japanese ancestry and who is not female. While I try to minimize my experience as a white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual male, I must draw from my experience to capture this embodied practice. Further, I have heard my collaborators discuss the lack of male-identified practitioners. For those involved at all on the periphery of these spaces leaving the work, I employ the experiences of my collaborators and teachers and phrase my sensational experience in the diction they use to describe them to me.

I evoke multiple meanings of the word space – a gap between things and time and a physical location. In the first sense, min'yō and minzoku geino (Japanese folk performing arts, which include dance) strive to embody the places and traditions of a vanishing village/rural/past Japanese way of life. Again, I point to Hobsbawm's invented tradition in that min'yō, as it is practiced today, does not reflect an accurate depiction of the past but an imagined one reshaped to fit the nation-building aims of Meiji, Taishō (1912-25), and early Shōwa (1926-89) era governments. On the other hand, the "inventedness" of a tradition does not render it any less valuable for its practitioners. For such people, this first interpretation of embodied space is that the practitioners shape the space of Japanese folk music and dance by collapsing the distance between America and Japan. This space collapse allows for this second sense

of physical space to enter. While representing the regions and practices of a traditional Japan, the performance and practice of this embodied tradition carve a space for Japanese folk music and dance affinity groups to gather and celebrate despite the over 5,000 miles of Pacific Ocean separating these two lands and the passage of time.

Considering sustainability practices, I emphasize that the pedagogical techniques rely on embodying Japanese folk music and dance. These approaches require the new practitioner to draw on their lived experience as they engage with nature, music, dance, and other people to render the places and practices in the songs. A teacher cultivates and shapes these somatic experiences with Japanese techniques of the body and cultural knowledge of the song's subject. The practitioner – oscillating between these far-flung geographies – grapples with the cross-cultural transmission process as they navigate and create these spaces through the practice and performance of min'yō with the shamisen, voice, and dance.

To proceed, I break space into three sections: theoretical, embodied, and transmission spaces. The first section investigates the nostalgia inherent in the current practice of Japanese folk music and dance while teasing out the concepts of "*Ma*" (gap, interval, space, pause, break) and "*Aidagara*" (betweenness) as integral to shaping the embodied practice of min'yō in California. In transmission spaces, I depict the various places of transmission of shamisen, voice, and dance in private lessons, group practice, alone, and beyond. First, I detail the iemoto system as it applies to min'yō practice in California. This system has a long history in Japanese

performing arts, but in the last century, Japanese folk music preservation societies and local villages appropriated the system to assign legitimacy to their arts. The chapter returns to the transmission spaces and explores how practitioners engage across these learning environments and the various materials and practices to learn Japanese folk aesthetics. The final section, embodied space, examines how practitioners manifest and shape space and place through shamisen, voice, and dance. The players draw from their own spatial and somatic experiences to render these Japanese locations, festivals, and ways of being for each other and their audiences. In doing so, they cultivate a space for those attuned to the sensibilities of *min'yō* to gather. This chapter again engages with the “inventedness” of tradition as practitioners strive to embody aesthetics from romanticized Japanese folk music and dance, which draws from the other Japanese performing arts. In doing so, it also interrogates the boundedness of space within *min'yō* as members work to develop aesthetics involving concepts of space and spatiality across multiple environments.

### **Theories of Space**

I unpack the importance of *ma* in *min'yō* in cultivating space through music, in interrogating this fundamental concept of space in Japanese culture. In his article, "Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time," religious scholar Richard B. Pilgrim explains the various meanings of *Ma* as time, space, and space-time.

The word *ma* basically means an "interval" between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events. Thus it is not only used in compounds to suggest measurement but carries meanings such as gap, opening, space between, time between, and so forth. A room is called

*ma*, for example, as it refers to the space between the walls; a rest in music is also *ma* as the pause between the notes or sounds. By the same token, it can also mean timing, as in the comic recitation art called *rakugo*, where *ma* is quite explicitly a part of the craft and skill. (1986, 256)

As the passage explains, *ma* contains and overlaps categories we consider separate in Western thought. Further, the space between things might be considered empty – something that needs to be filled instead of the space or emptiness that allows for life between walls, music to function, or a good joke to land. Pilgrim continues his detailing of *ma* as something not only between things but also between people.

By extension, *ma* also means "among." In the compound of *ningen* ("human being"), for example, *ma* (read *gen* here) implies that persons (*nin*, *hito*) stand within, among, or in relation to others. As such, the word *ma* clearly begins to take on a relational meaning – a dynamic sense of standing in, with, among, or between. Related to this, it also carries an experiential connotation since to be among persons is to interact in some dynamic way. The Japanese phrase *ma ga warui* ("the *ma* is bad"), which has overtones of being embarrassed, well illustrates this nuance. (Ibid. 256)

*Ma* also constitutes the existence of individuals or human beings concerning each other. The example phrase he provides, "the *ma* is bad," conveys more information about the relationship when elaborated as "there is bad space (*implied* between us)." *Ma* implies that individuals only come into being with each other. The Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro opens *Ethics* with "The primary significance of this attempt to define ethics in terms of the science of the person (*ningen*) is to rid modern philosophy of the erroneous view that ethics is simply concerned with the individual consciousness" (As quoted in Yuasa 1989, 40). This concept is the same

betweenness contained within ma, which Watsuji names aidagara. He locates humanity in a network of relations: a town, a team, and a business firm. As it is situated min'yō in a mythical and nostalgic hometown, its music and dance represent this past betweenness of people.

Min'yō attends to a vanishing folk way of life by continuing the songs and dances. Japanese folk music and dance reference and represent specific social relations in songs such as "Sōran Bushi" (song of Sōran), "Hokkai Bon Uta" (bon melody of Hokkaido), and "Hanagasa Ondo." These three songs are both remnants and fantasy of a past Japanese sociality. They are remnants of past folk songs, but fantasy in that preservation societies likely modified them to remove unseemly elements. The first is a fishermen's song from northern Japan. The second is a coal miner's song from Hokkaido rewritten for the ancestor festival. Finally, the third is another work song elaborated on by the people of Yamagata prefecture. These songs reflect a now nostalgic communality – recognition of fellow workers, veneration of natural beauty, and a communal celebration of shared space. Many of these folk songs appear as a result of participation within a community. As ethnomusicologist Thomas Torino argues, "musical participation and experience are valuable for the process of personal and social integration that make us whole" (2007, 1). MTK pledges commitment to "the education and performance of min'yō, traditional Japanese folk dancing" (1988). Rather than oscillate between a participatory/presentational dichotomy, the min'yō groups of California occupy both spheres by making group music while presenting these Japanese folk songs and dances. Through Tanoshimi Kai

and Matsutoyo Kai's preservation, members participate in a shared musical practice that places them and folk music on the stage. In addition to these work songs, min'yō prioritizes depictions of place, with many songs bearing the names thought to be their place of origin.

Japanese folk music and dance attend to the relationship between a community and space. Songs such as "Iso Bushi," "Hanagasa Ondo" "and "Aizu Bandaisan" depict the spaces of the song title, usually in veneration of these locations and the people who live or visit there. Like urban scholar Edward W. Soja's exploration of Los Angeles, min'yō catches the "glimmers of fundamental spatiality of social life, the adhesive relations between space and society, history and geography... (1986, 223) Together, these songs offer multiple renderings of the spaces from a past Japan. "Iso Bushi" depicts the seaside resort at Oarai near Mito City. The lyrics for "Ponpokonya" portray the views from a bridge in Kumamoto. The final song tells of the bountiful harvests of bamboo and rice from under the mountain in Fukushima prefecture. Each song (even some of the rewritten work songs) tells of the beauty of these spaces. In the next section, I discuss how music and dance aid the lyrics in rendering these places for the performers and audiences. Each song becomes a snapshot – a representation – of these distant places. Min'yō songs and dance present a relationship to place. However, as all these songs depict past social and spatial relationships, these California min'yō groups engage in a nostalgic practice.

Min'yō music and dance evoke cultural theorist Svetlana Boym's reflective nostalgia as it reveres these past communal practices and "temporalizes space"

(2001). Anthropologist Christine Yano writes on the Japanese popular music, Enka (which takes inspiration from min'yō), as it "denies that the past is past and provides a space within the present where the values, interactions, and emotions associated with the past can continue to exist"<sup>40</sup> (2002; 27), after an *okeiko* (training; here, meaning private lesson), Eugene and Morita Sensei spoke to me about the people coming to min'yō performances. The audience watched to see "the way things used to be or to look for something Japanese" (Interview with author 10/4/2022). They lamented that while people come to see the shows, few express interest in joining a group or picking up an instrument. In the music and dance, Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai position themselves as keepers of traditional Japanese folk performing arts. Morita Sensei assesses that audiences come with the expectation of seeing the folk practices of Japan. Perhaps music from an ancestral prefecture or town, or they are looking for an 'authentic' Japanese past. Min'yō eludes this denial of the past being passed in seeking to preserve Japanese folk music and dance as past ways of life. Its practitioners carve an analogous space for the folk practices to continue. Min'yō music and dance engage in a reflective nostalgia, not seeking to recreate the genre but sharing their folk practices. It is a cultural practice that renders nostalgic space and relationality in music while also, through education, crafting its own space.

Min'yō practitioners, such as those in MTK, use Japanese folk music and dance with all its "inventedness" to cultivate space within the Japanese American community. As described in the paragraphs above, practitioners showcase the music and dance of past prefectural life in work and play. These members attend lessons,

gather for rehearsals, and practice alone to cultivate these and project this Japanese understanding of space into their performance. In doing this work, audiences come to these shows to watch, listen, participate, and perhaps join. Min'yō practitioners go beyond preserving Japanese folk music and dance by shaping this space for themselves and others. In rendering the spaces of a past Japan for present-day audiences in California, they make physically and temporally distant spaces and relationalities intelligible. By continuing their mission of education and performance, MTK enriches our cultural understanding of music's relationship to space.

### **Transmission Spaces**

Ma conveys a gap between things or events – a negative space – both spatial and temporal, permeates Japanese culture from everyday speech to the aesthetics of the high arts. In Noh theater, the bridge on the left side of the stage (hashigakari) connects the backstage to the center stage. The performers enter and exit the stage here, sometimes even holding scenes on the bridge. The bridge connects to the back left of the stage and is visible to the audience. Large, medium, and small pine trees planted descending from the stage to the bridge's exit create an illusion of distance for the audience. The illusion adds to the bridge metaphor as a pathway from the spirit world (backstage) to the live, temporal world (main stage).

Regarding ma, the hashigakari connects the heavenly and the human realms. It is both a gap and connection between opposites with the implication of transition or transformation between disjunct realms. As performer-scholar Kawamura writes,



"Any action of conversation occurring on the bridge during a play indicates that they are on the way somewhere (emphasis added 2022, 9). In reflecting on this betweenness of the stage and backstage, I consider the function of transmission sites. What do practitioners do between these spaces as we absorb and embody this cultural knowledge? How do we navigate them and make sense of this embodied cultural knowledge in min'yō? How does this transmit into performance, and what does performance do in the practice of Japanese folk music and dance?

In learning min'yo music and dance, there is a tension between the orality of folk music and the formal instruction system imposed in these spaces. My interest in this section is developing the idea of transmission spaces, where cultural knowledge is passed from teacher to student. I focus on this in investigating how this aesthetic knowledge takes shape in cross-cultural practices such as min'yō in California. The Japanese folk music for shamisen and voice I learn in MTK comes from the repertoire of Matsutoyo Kai in Los Angeles, which, like other min'yō schools in Japan, bases itself on the iemoto system. Writing on oral transmission in folk music, ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman asserts, "Changes in a community's social structure thus influence not only its folk music repertory but also the ways in which this repertory is transmitted. Musical change – indeed, becomes a metaphor for – cultural change. Together, these two types of change animate the oral tradition of folk music" (1988). This system supplements the oral transmission process of folk music with shamisen tablature and sheet music. The improvisational and flexible nature of early Japanese folk music becomes solidified with these interventions. Once I have

detailed the iemoto system, I will look at four transmission sites: the lesson, rehearsal, practice, and performance. I challenge these spaces' boundedness as each overlaps or spills into the other. Indeed, the specific object of learning or transmission does not end as we exit these spaces.

The Iemoto system is associated with timeless Japanese traditions and is an established structure that propagates musical practice. This system extends back to the gagaku and poetry from the Heian Period (765-1185) but developed in many different artistic fields during the Tokugawa Era, such as kabuki, koto, *ikebana* (Japanese flower arrangement), and chadō (Nishiyama 1982a; 14). Like the Tōdō-za, the Meiji government dissolved all public remnants of the feudal system but left private iemoto systems intact (Ibid; 22-24). Local artists founded hozonkai as interest in the folk arts grew and applied the iemoto system to “give their local songs the same aura of prestige adhering to such systematic transmission” (Hughes 2008; 215). Establishing a *ryū*, *ryūha* (both meaning school), or kai also meant an iemoto could “charge large fees to receive certificates representing different levels of proficiency” (ibid.; 215). Ethnomusicologist Jane Alaszewska research on *Chichibu Yatai-bayashi* (festival music ensemble of Chichibu) shows how Takano Harumachi used his appointed role *hojisha* (guardian) to establish an iemoto system and exerted control over the festival practice (2012; 203-4). Despite these flaws, the iemoto system appeals to the Japanese who want “to receive some concrete token of achievement,” but this applies less to the younger generations (Hughes 2008; 176-7, 286). The

iemoto system persists because of its ties to Japanese classical arts and its long-standing presence in Japanese pedagogy.

The iemoto system provides a method of cultivation based on a family structure, which implies a sense of longevity. Ethnomusicologist Gerald Groemer writes

The iemoto system consists of a hierarchical, guild-like structure in which the head takes both responsibility and credit for conveying to disciples the orthodox form of tradition. The pedagogical process within such a system usually consists of a form training that appeals primarily to direct experience and practice. Transmission often involves certain amounts of secrecy, but students who after a period of study have attained the appropriate (and paid the appropriate fees) may take on their own pupils and continue to pass on the art. The head, however, continues to control the tradition by reserving many rights, including the right to bestow “artists’ names” on his students. Such names signify the student is fully competent (1999; 64).

These artists’ names (*geimei*) come from the headmaster’s name, such as Matsutoyo Satō granted Morita Sensei the *geimei*, Matsutoyo Shizusatō. Reaching this stage requires a long effort as “Japanese teachers of all genres of traditional arts stress the need to progress slowly, moving ahead only after mastering each stage” (Hughes 2008; 176). This process holds for the Matsutoyo Kai in California as well.

In traversing these spaces, I also track the sheet music that travels with us (except for performance). In the lesson, I examine the attendance to form, technique, and the unveiling of cultural knowledge. Next, in the rehearsal, I focus on how we train to listen and respond to each other in music and dance while navigating a formal Japanese rehearsal space. The influence of these previous spaces on private practice is a continued disciplining of the body. This section ends with a glimpse into the

performance space – a rarity during the pandemic. Despite their scarcity, the few I witnessed and participated in offered insight into the permeability of space between performers and audience, from the lack of a formal stage to the breaking of the fourth wall. Through these transmission sites, the passing of cultural knowledge continues, and this process enables further cultivation and rendering of Japanese spaces in Min'yō music and dance.

The sheet music or tablature appears in all these transmission spaces – private, group, and during solo practice. The markings I first marked the date I began learning this song. Sensei would play through the piece once while I listened and followed along with the paper. Next, she would have me play along with her once I could play through the song a few times, and she felt confident she would have me play alone while she sang. She would have me follow her again if I could not do it. This practice diverges from what other members have told me about their experience. Samantha explained that Morita Sensei used to let the students play through the paper once, then turn the page over and follow her hands. Morita sensei said she desired to return to this practice after the pandemic. She did not elaborate on this, but I think part of this comes from exceptions made during the pandemic to continue teaching over Zoom. Sensei's goal is to eliminate our reliance on the page to perform the song correctly. The tablature is only a mnemonic device because we have over 200 songs. We continue playing a piece in the lesson until Morita sensei asks us to move on. Voice or melody lessons proceed similarly. However, sheet music uses a hybridized

Western staff notation, usually with the correct note values, but lines are often drawn with waves and how a pitch is approached or extended.

Sensei's okeikos offer a one-on-one opportunity to focus on the techniques of shamisen and uta.<sup>41</sup> We face each other during the lesson with a squat, music-laden table. Sensei primarily uses the oral-imitative method, and the music is only a memory aid. I focus on her hands: how she performs her strikes on the shamisen and frets with her fingers. In a lesson, we begin by playing "homework" pieces together from the last lesson. Then I play or sing while she performs the opposite, or she listens if I play and sing for her. If I play incorrectly, she has me start over. If this continues, she instructs me to pause, listen and watch. We resume playing together slowly so I can instill the proper form for later practice.

Her methods and gentle approach encourage those who identify as slow learners. Matsutoyo Shizusatō Sensei only cares that students make progress, no matter how incremental. Even after checking her older repertoire, she is not mad if another student or I forget something after a long time. Ethnomusicologist Jay Keister writes on okeiko “each site is ‘traditional’ in its own way because of foundational values such as ownership, continuity, loyalty, imitation, and self-development” (2008; 241). As the okeiko is a site for self-cultivation, even the slowest learner progresses by following the proper forms – techniques will follow. Her careful and soft teaching style aims to encourage students to continue min'yō music in America. In these practices, she shows more concern for the particularities of each movement, sound,

and utterance in rendering these representations of Japanese folk music than in the form. The form, instead, is for us to understand through each other or on our own.

In rehearsal for shamisen and voice, we gather under Matsutoyo Shizusatō Sensei's instructions and play as if one shamisen and one voice. As we sit around the group table in Morita Sensei's living room, we are all tuned in to the music we are playing. As we are all encouraged to memorize the music, some of our more well-known songs we no longer need to look at; thus, we can watch and listen to each other and synchronize. At other times, our eyes are fixed on the pages of old songs that resurface to test our memory. We try to recall and evoke the techniques we learn in okeiko and ensure we sound in time with the other shamisen players. We must pay attention to the singers who control the flow and time of the song so we can adequately support them as shamisen players. Despite our different capabilities, we must work to render whatever song we currently play. This process constitutes a different mode than the individualized learning of okeiko. The practitioners learn to apply the different techniques and forms of playing and singing in coordination. While in music, we navigate the different ability levels of our other performers spontaneously, in dance, we choreograph to the level of the least capable individual. In this way, we ensure that even the audience can participate. We practitioners take these lessons and experiences from okeiko and group rehearsal to instill during our private practice sessions.

Practicing alone, at home, or in any private area, we strive to instill the instruction and embodied experiences from lessons and groups. To ensure the most

accurate practice, Morita Sensei recommends using a metronome. In addition, we should cover or conceal the sheet music and listen to Matsuko Sato and Matsutoyo Iemoto's recordings. I pull what I can from lessons if she gives me particular instructions, images, or feelings to connect to the piece. While practicing, I pull up or recall the sensations she asked me to meditate on.

Further, I research the piece or its home region/prefecture to understand better what I am striving to represent. For example, I began learning the song "Goketsu Bushi" at my first voice lesson – one for which I already knew the shamisen part. She instructed me at the lesson's end that I should also research the song and share what I found when I next saw her. This solo practice completes another step in the process of embodying min'yō. In practice, we instill the lessons and corrections from the group and private transmission sites in preparation for performance. The performance reveals the culmination of our cultivation of Japanese folk music and dance and invites others to join in our celebration of these distant spaces.

In the few performances I have had the opportunity to attend or perform in, Morita Sensei always invites the audience on the stage or entreats them to join from their current location. In our last public performance for the Japanese women's immigrant group, Sumire Kai, Morita Sensei and Yoshiko invited the crowd to join in for the folk dances of "Kyushu Tanko Bushi" (Coal Miner's song of Kyushu). For Morita Sensei (and her alias Matsutoyo Shizu Sato), min'yō is inextricably linked to participatory culture. To play Japanese folk music or to dance folk dances means joining in with others. In my first encounter with Tanoshimi Kai in the summer of

2019, she invited the audience to the stage to learn this dance. Through this practice, MTK provides space for community engagement and the potential to stoke interest in learning the music and dances.

### **Embodied Space**

Min'yō practitioners attend to the aesthetic preferences of min'yō by drawing on spiritual strength. When I first started playing shamisen with Morita sensei, she told me I needed to play from kokoro, the heart or the spirit. The power to project or play 'authentic' min'yō would come from this internalized space cultivated through continuous training. The student follows the master instructor and repeats their playing style, attending to proper form and execution of the notes. With continued practice and lessons, the student learns to adapt their teacher's playing to their own while maintaining the song's integrity. As these Japanese folk music practitioners invest in place and space, the practitioner draws on this spirit to render the places and relations depicted in songs into being. Nose Asami quotes the founder of Noh, Zeami Motokiyo:

"The moments of 'no-action' (senutokoro) are the most enjoyable." This is an art which the actor keeps secret. Dancing and singing, movements and the different types of miming are all acts performed by the body. Moments of "no-action" occur in between (hima). When we examine why such moments without action are enjoyable, we find that it is due to the underlying spiritual (kokoro) strength of the actor which unremittingly holds the attention. He does not relax the tension when the dancing or singing come to an end or at intervals between (hima) the dialogue and the different types of miming. [Not abandoning this mind/heart (kokoro) in the various intervals (himajima)] he maintains an unwavering inner strength (naishin). This feeling of inner strength



will faintly reveal itself and bring enjoyment. (Quoted in Pilgrim 1986, 258)

Asami's words hold in *min'yō*. For Morita Sensei, capturing the space and conviviality of rural Japan requires a similar focus and dedication. She says *min'yō* comes from here," pointing to her chest, "kokoro" (personal communication 8/15/2021). Paying attention to the 'betweenness' through 'kokoro' enables the performer to faithfully depict the folk song or dance topic. In doing so, the performer attends to the subject of the song and the space around them – the proper duration, rhythm, and tempo for these songs and dances. In the following paragraphs, I detail the process of representing Japan through the shamisen, the voice, and dance.

I first encountered this a year into studying under Morita Sensei. She spoke to me about kokoro while I learned one of her favorite pieces, "Iso Bushi." The song depicts the resort near Oarai near Mito City and is set during the Meiji Era. It depicts the local coastal pine trees, the crashing waves, and the numerous visitors. Morita Sensei introduced this piece to me in a group practice; I played the piece straight. As we played it more and more, I noticed she would create slight pauses before the attack of two strikes at the end of a line. At this moment, I diverged from my perceived tempo of the piece. After several more attempts, she paused and said the shamisen is the ebb and flow of the tide, and these are the crashes of the waves. At the end of group rehearsal, she told me to imagine myself as the waves to feel their crash – to remember seeing the ocean – and use this to fill my shamisen playing. This idea of practicing drawing on these past experiences and paying attention to the space between states, such as the crash of the waves, is integral to shamisen playing.

Although "Iso Bushi" is only one example, drawing on spiritual strength is vital in rendering these folk songs on the shamisen. In the song "Kinkirakin," Morita Sensei explains that the song depicts an ornate, golden kimono. When playing, we should think about the folds of the silk as someone unfurls the garment.<sup>42</sup> Like "Iso Bushi" above, we needed to play with good ma to capture the shimmering fabric. Morita Sensei enforces nuanced playing, meaning she listened critically to the proper execution of sukui, hajiki, and uchi and attended to space correctly. With these two songs, the style and proper technique are essential.

Without adherence to these aspects, the player will not capture and render the space of min'yō and Japan in their performance. While at first, the player might be copying their instructor exactly; their goal is to play in the specified manner but in their own way. For example, if I played the piece precisely like Morita Sensei, the piece would sound good but not evoke the song's context. If she can draw on her

Figure 10: Excerpt of "Iso Bushi"



kokoro, she plays the piece with her strength while attending to the proper form and technique of the song. Shamisen players help create the correct atmosphere for rendering this min'yō music in drawing on underlying strength. Even community-oriented dances such as bon and ondo style pieces require the same strength of spirit while being less technically challenging.

The bon odori repertoire requires the same spirit and investment as these more technical pieces but to enliven the dancers and festivalgoers. “Hokkai Bon Uta” is a less complicated folk song; the structure consists of an eight-bar shamisen introduction of a couplet of two repeated measures followed by a concluding four following the same harmonic structure. The following 21 measures focus on the vocalist, with the shamisen player repeating the exact figure, accenting the + of the first beat. The lyrics reference a young girl – just above the age of consent before dwelling upon Hokkaido. As shamisen players, we must blend seamlessly with the other elements, especially the singer, and create the space. I interpret this as drawing on the same kokoro but ensuring we pay attention to not only the other ensemble members but also the steps of the dance leaders. In the same sense as listening to the waves or watching the sway of the pines in a storm, this requires us to draw on our experience of participating in any communal activity, especially dance, to help create the environment. Attempting to embody Japanese aesthetics relating to space and abstract concepts, like kokoro as a shamisen player, feels difficult. On the other hand, voice connects more readily to these concepts by being produced by the body.

In my first encounter with “uta,” as Morita Sensei calls it, she talks to me about the stomach as the source of the voice. The two aspects of voice in min’yō performance are the melody the singers perform and the interjections or *kakegoe* (shout of encouragement used to time activity; also called *hayashi-kotoba*, meaning accompanying words) the shamisen player’s shout. To train the correct vocal style for uta, Morita Sensei instructs me to sit at a desk, extend the index and middle finger on

both hands, and press the pads into the desk. This action engages the stomach muscles, so I let out a loud “HAAAAA” while focusing on my belly. I approximate the strained vocal quality characteristic of min’yo singing and let the air flow directly from my throat rather than up into my head. I will maintain the sound and tone quality for as long as possible. This style also ties in with the vocal ornament *kobushi* (vibrato). Repeated practice and training of the voice and its ornamentation impart a sense of when and how much *kobushi* is appropriate for the song. While I am still beginning my vocal training, I understand that developing the diaphragm is also vital for some vibrato techniques. Adding such ornaments is essential for rendering the min’yō performance—the vibrato and its implementation help shape the space for the audience and the other performers.

A min’yō dancer draws from their experience and transposes these movements into performance. Ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn writes about her experience in *Nihon Buyo* in what she calls “sensing and feeling” (2007, 48). Performers synthesize somatic and haptic experiences and dance routines to make the dance believable. After learning the rudimentary steps to Hanagasa Odori, Morita Sensei pauses a rehearsal to have me perform solo. As I raise my flower hat, she stops me. “Your hat is too close. Have you tried to block the sun like that? I reflect on how I have used any object to shield myself from the sun and adjust. “Yes, better.” Try again. I start from the beginning, and she stops me at the same spot. “Remember, you need to look at the audience – you don’t block your face in the field.” Min’yō dance, at its best, transports the dancer and audience to the scene. As many of these scenes represent

places, activities, or social gatherings, they must look natural. While dancing, we must establish a presence to attend to our real and imagined spaces. As in Hanagasa Ondo, while dancing, we need to imagine ourselves in the fields with all the necessary tools and garments and know these sensations. In combination with other aspects of embodied movement, such as how men and women move through these spaces, the dancers of Tanoshimi Kai evoke these Japanese spaces.

Min'yō dance aesthetics emphasize an imagined Japanese folk life, so their choreography draws on lived experience as in the idea of habitus (Mauss 1973; Bourdieu 1990). I follow gender scholar Judith Butler's work in that our daily acts, gestures, and desires map onto the surface of our bodies and inform our performance (2006; 185). While first learning Japanese folk dance, Morita Sensei practiced only the steps with me. I followed the other dancers, all of whom were cis-gendered women. She demonstrated this style and said min'yō dancers shift between the gendered styles, but men tend to stay in the masculine style. In the US, this may result from women being the primer dancers between the 1950s and 1970s after Rev. Iwanaga's death when nihon buyō instructors taught bon odori (Japanese American Cultural and Community Center 1993; 15). After 1970, bon odori instruction was passed to the less experienced dharma schoolteachers, and male participation returned (Ibid; 16). As I progressed, Morita Sensei commented that she no longer needed to correct me as I moved like a man. I took on a wider stance and made larger motions with my body. While she does map gendered movement and gestures onto sexed bodies, she conveys that we have intuitively entrained the nuances of movement of

different genders before learning to dance.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, we draw from the lived experience of our sexes and our genders. Japanese folk dance uses these unconscious gestures and actions of daily life to enliven the performance. However, while we might observe, reflect, and incorporate how our bodies move through space, we lack exposure to Japanese ways of movement imperative for dance.

Min'yō requires these Japanese gestures, gaits, movements, and comportments – embodied aesthetic knowledge – to evoke the dance. Over time, I enraided in the most basic of these gestures, but part of learning and representing Japanese folk music means taking on this embodied knowledge. Dance scholar Barbara Sellers-Young writes that in okeiko process, the unconscious parts of the "student will gain an embodied understanding of Japan and a set of somatic skills associated with enhanced levels of body/mind integration" (2020, 385). Samantha informed me of particular ways of movement to communicate a Japanese style. During a trip to Japan, she attended a bon odori. While dancing, she heard the older Japanese woman say, "Look at her –she holds her hands in such a Japanese way." she said it was because she had been doing Japanese folk dance for almost ten years (interview with author 2/9/2023). My greatest struggle with learning dance has been unlearning how to hold my body, hold the props, move my body with the props, etc. The experienced group members have rehearsed and practiced since at least the early 2000s. Their steps and gestures look natural, and they wield the props as extensions of their bodies. Learning to dance this way requires diligent practice and commitment by following a video, practicing

choreography, and receiving Morita Sensei's critiques. I and the other members of MTK work to engender the aesthetic priorities of Japanese folk music and dance.

## **Conclusion**

Min'yō practitioners orient themselves to the music and dance through Japanese concepts of space. Ma constitutes the negative space between things but is not devoid of energy. Instead, the space of ma is full of potential energy. In this betweenness, our relationship to our environment, to the community, and each other originates.

Japanese folk music practitioners work to project on cultivating these Japanese prefectures, work songs, and celebrations through music and dance. By doing so, they cultivate a shared space in California for min'yō and other Japanese performing arts.

Min'yō draws not only its aesthetic from Japanese classical arts but also many of the pedagogical aspects of the iemoto system. As a hierarchical system, instruction is the master/student relationship based on the oral-imitative method. The headmaster provides scores and sheet music to aid the learning process, but these supplement the guidance provided by a teacher. In private lessons, students receive the most direct guidance by repeating song phrases until a technique or the proper style begins to set. In group rehearsal, shamisen players and singers must work together under the guidance of their instructor to execute these forms so that they sound as if they were one. Alone, students implement the guidance they receive during okeiko, which may include listening to recordings Sensei provides. Following the proper procedure, the student begins to understand Japanese folk music aesthetics.

The performer embodies folk music's spaces by imitating their teacher and incorporating their experiences. In learning this music and dance, practitioners need to immerse themselves in the world and draw on daily gestures and natural aspects of life. This immersion means internalizing the feel of the wind and the rain, listening to the crashing of waves or the rustling of leaves, and their own body's reaction to these phenomena. Combined with their ways of moving through the world, the student also adds specific Japanese techniques for the body. This attention to the body and sound in the transmission process makes the projection of space possible in performance. This chapter concerned itself with the aesthetics of space and place in *min'yō* and dance. Chapter Five reconsiders the history of Japanese Americans and Japanese folk music as one of displacement. In doing so, I showcase the musical resilience of Japanese immigrants in adapting their musical traditions to the US, managing the precarious conditions of anti-Japanese sentiment through incarceration, and incorporating the practices of the post-WWII wave of Japanese immigrants.



## Chapter Five. A History of Resilience in Japanese American Music

Reflecting on Morita Sensei's desire "to leave her culture here," I examine where "here" is in Japanese America. When she says, "I am the only one left," as she looks at the picture of Lodi Min'yō Dōkō Kai from 1989, who from that picture is no longer here? What legacy of resilience do Japanese Americans have for other musical traditions? How did Japan's min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners adapt to the perturbation of modernization and westernization? Drawing on ethnomusicologist Susan Asai, performance scholar Emily Roxworthy, and my conversations with min'yō practitioners, I examine the displacement and resilience of Japanese Americans throughout their history in California. Asai presents Japanese American musicking in California as illustrating their "fluidity and variability" and presents them in an affirmative and empowering light transcending their racialized triangulation" (2024; 18). As the first Japanese immigrants arrived, they adapted their musical traditions to survive in the US. Japanese Americans sustained their cultural practices despite the California and US governments curtailing their rights. Roxworthy contrasts the view of Japanese Americans as passive spectators to their own internment by arguing "that the emphasis on U.S. principles of assimilation and accommodation does not translate to acceptance of these terms; rather, in foregrounding these issues, Japanese American performers revealed the contradictions in American national belonging by putting both faces of racial performativity on stage" (2008; 15). By both faces of racial performativity of national belonging, Roxworthy refers to "the public presentation of which focuses on the myth

of performative citizenship but whose mal d'archive testifies to the performativity of the gaze at work in spectacularizing the racial other" (ibid; 14-5). Even incarcerated, they demonstrate resilience in stewarding a musical ecosystem to support Japanese musical traditions. Japan's min'yō and Tsugrau shamisen practitioners likewise demonstrate resilience in managing the changes brought on by modernization and Westernization, such as transitioning from rural to urban contexts. The Japanese American and Japanese folk musicians experience multiple instances of perturbation, disturbance, and flux through which they manage the continuity of their traditions (Titon, 2020; 237).

In this chapter, I trace writings on early min'yō, the influence of religion, and its transformation to better serve Japanese nationalism. Min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen musicians flock to major cities like Tokyo. I follow this section by situating Issei immigrant musicking in Japanese America and the importance of music as entertainment and social activity. Japanese Americans maintain the identity of these traditions despite incarceration. I continue with the regime shift brought to Japanese American practices of min'yō music with the post-WWII wave of Japanese immigrants. The final section situates MTK within the history of Japanese social music, emphasizing the enjoyment and revelry Morita Sensei wishes to bring through performance. The histories of Tanoshimi Kai and Bachido illustrate how these different ways of knowing and being impact the practitioners of Japanese folk music. I argue that viewing the history of Japanese folk music and dance and Japanese Americans as one of displacement offers substantial insight into how musical

practitioners demonstrate resilience in precarious circumstances. Examining musical history through this lens provides examples for current min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen practitioners and all musical traditions in diaspora for managing change.

### **Origins of Min'yō**

Music as a participatory social activity forms the basis of Japanese folk music. The villagers of Japan developed their *uta* (songs) for their hamlets' various jobs, tasks, professions, celebrations, and rituals.<sup>44</sup> The lyrics could be about anything if they coordinated the workers and provided a sense of camaraderie or motivation.

Ethnomusicologist David Hughes writes that Japanese villagers sang for various parties and celebration songs for obon matsuris, often with instrumental accompaniment. In these spaces, lyrics borrowed from work and popular songs but more often referred to a specific type of celebration, e.g., wedding songs (2008; 77). Because of these commonalities, songs spread to neighboring villages through trade and travel, resulting in numerous variations. While work and party songs sometimes overlap or influence each other, Bon odori music and dance stem from Buddhist ritual music and dance.

Japanese villages perpetuated the Buddhist ritual and dance music. Numerous scholars of Japanese folk music speculate or note the evolution of bon odori dances from the *nembutsu odori* (Buddhist prayer dance) and their centrality in village life (Takeuchi 2014, Hughes 2008, Malm 1959). The itinerant Buddhist monk, Kūya (903-972), adapted the nembutsu to dance and music to make the practice amusing for

children (Moriarty 1976; 7). The Jōdo Shinshū sect was popular with the peasants in rural villages, emphasizing everyday life as the center of practice. The founder of the sect, Shinran (1173-1263), rejected the monastic life and precepts to demonstrate

all that ultimately mattered for entrance into the Pure Land was a complete and single moment of entrusting oneself to the reality that Amida and his Pure Land embodied, and that moment could be accessed by everyone, even the uneducated layperson, even the individual who had violated Buddhist precepts (Watt 2016; 23).

As such, music and dance practices reflected the quotidian village experience.

However, as the gap between the elite and commoners grew, more and more village elite could travel and stay in urban areas. In these cities, they had the time and meant to visit geisha and cultivate more prestigious Japanese Arts: *Sankyoku* (an instrumental trio of koto, shamisen, and kokyū, which the shakuhachi replaced), *Koto* (13-string zither), *Shakuhachi*, *Noh Utai* (The singing parts of Noh), and *Chadō* (the tea ceremony) (Ibid; 53).

Japanese folk and popular music continued in the Tokugawa Era (1603-1867) despite the introduction of the *Shi-nō-kō-shō* caste system (samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants). The new merchant class sponsored male and female geisha and prostitutes to make music and theater, leading to the proliferation of commoners' music (Harich-Schneider 1973; 490). Buddhism fell out of favor as the Tokugawa shogunate encouraged Shintōism and Confucianism (Ibid; 492). Japanese Confucian scholars, such as Dazai Shundai and Shōgi Kōgi, wrote of the vulgar nature of this new popular music as it brought the shamisen and the downfall of gagaku instruments (1976; 274-5 and quoted in Dore 1965; 48). The city elites reviled the kabuki theater,

and new urban popular music emerged, especially those associated with the shamisen. Hughes contributes that the Japanese nobles, courtiers, and urbane samurai followed Neo-Confucianist beliefs on music, which, when practiced and performed correctly, will instill good virtues in the performers and listeners (2008; 21-2). This new music, *harayiuta* (popular song), would lead to the downfall of civil society. Despite attempts to stop such music, it persisted, and eventually, high-caste playwrights “elevated” rural styles by appropriating them for their art.

Min’yō music practitioners adapted to the simultaneous efforts of Japanese folk music scholars and the Meiji government to elevate purely “Japanese” arts. The Japanese government of the Meiji era (1868-1912), inspired by Nationalist efforts in Western countries, focused on modernizing and westernizing Japan and asserting purely Japanese traditions such as min’yō. They first established a national school system with “correct” Western music.<sup>45</sup> During the early Meiji era, writers used the term “*Zokkyoku*” (lay or vulgar composition) to refer to folk music. Its meaning ranged from all music outside of the Imperial court tradition to its narrow modern definition: “The informally transmitted songs of the geishas and their customers.” (ibid; 23) The Japanese government and scholars’ attitudes reflected insecurities about the prevalence of “degenerate” and “common” art forms of the era and feeling technologically and militarily inferior to the West. Scholars and elites support traditional Japanese culture after the Japanese victories of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). Two years after this last war, various institutions and scholars legitimized these regional songs by beginning to collect and

categorize them. Scholars and officials produced many works from the 19th to 20th centuries, such as those of European song collectors.

As more Japanese citizens grew interested in *min'yo*, they crafted *Shin-min'yō* (new *min'yō*), and cities became the locus of practice. Residents of the numerous villages often referred to their as *uta* (songs) as they could refer to such things as *shigoto-uta* (work songs) or *Taue-uta* (rice planting songs). Mainly, urbanites and music councils composed these *shin-min'yō* (Hughes 2008: 104). This new folk song emerges from several factors: population shifts from rural to urban, the shrinking distance between the former and latter, the "peasant" becomes the "farmer," influx to cities tempers regional divides, "loosening of the connection between song and its social context," and the growth of leisure culture" (ibid; 105-8). This loosening is further exacerbated for Japanese Americans as the regions and ancestral villages are across the ocean. Hughes presents a case study of "Esashi Oiwake" to demonstrate the transformation and proliferation of folk songs.

The standardization of "Esashi Oiwake" provides a case study of a musical regime shift from communally managed music to one maintained and preserved by institutions. The song "Esashi Oiwake" was initially known as the "Oiwake Bushi," but its popularity led to its rapid spread. Esashi, a small town on the southwest coast of Hokkaido, was the island region's main harbor in 1717. While no one knows when it arrived, "Oiwake Bushi" comes from the eponymous post-town along the Nakasendou highway in Nagano prefecture (Ibid; 109). Travelers and sailors brought the song to Esashi, where the local geisha would "elevate" the song for the would-be

renaissance men (*Tsujin*) who visited. Three distinct versions of Oiwake appeared: the geisha, "Shinichi Bushi," Zumikishi Bushi," and Hamagoya Bushi" before all three would become known outside of town as "Esashi Oiwake" (Ibid.: 109-10). These performers were trained in shamisen, but the standardized version retains no shamisen part and uses only voice and shakuhachi. The spread of train infrastructure weakened Esashi's economy, leading geishas, prostitutes, and tsujin to relocate to urban centers like Tokyo. These new urbanites found they could make a living playing and teaching the song. The Japanese government and third-party institutions were embarrassed by "Esashi Oiwake's" origin in pleasure quarters and the lack of an "official" version (Hughes 2008: 112-3).<sup>46</sup> In 1909, a dozen of the best singers of the song gathered in Esashi. They formed the *Esashi Oiwake Bushi Kenkyūkai* (Esashi Oiwake Melody Research Society) "to produce a unified, correct version of the song for dissemination and publicity in the interests of local pride and, ultimately, tourism" (1992; 42). This group promoted "Esashi-Oiwake" contests and increasingly formal dress, appeals to regional authenticity, recordings, and standardization of instrumental accompaniment, all aided in the transformation of modernizing min'yō songs (2008; 113-17, 122). The resulting composition is still played today with voice and shakuhachi.

"Esashi Oiwake" is one of the most standardized min'yō pieces, even being called a *koten min'yō* (classical folk song), which is in free meter (1992; 48). A competition piece will open with only the *hon'uta* (main song), but other performances will open with a *maeuta* and *atouta* (foresong and aftersong). The

introduction and outro draw from the same melodic material as the hon'uta, although they are generally less melismatic.

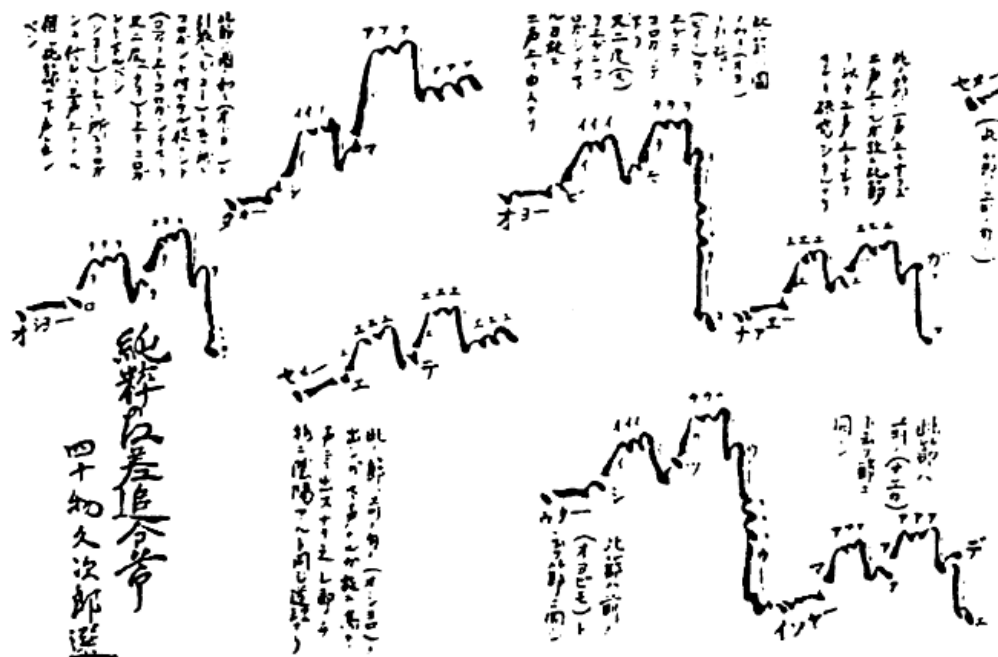


Figure 11: Esashi Oiwake notation (Hughes 1992).

The Esashi Research Society standardized the piece, so the seven verses will be sung in seven breaths. Recordings of the piece may also feature a shakuhachi, which plays heterophonically along with the voice. The first opens on an ascending disjunct motion on the syllables “ka,” “mo,” and “me.” The final syllable begins with a glissando-like ornament before trilling and rising up and back down on the starting pitch before singing the syllable “no.” The rest of the first verse continues on a melisma of “no,” which descends downwards with short downward and rolling ascending trills. The remaining verse begins similarly with an ascending syllabic melody, which quickly turns into a melismatic style. The third and fourth verses are



repeated as the sixth and seventh verses with a new text setting. The accompanying notation from Hughes showcases the level of standardization the song has undergone, with all performers striving to hit the different ornaments the same way. However, few songs received the intense scrutiny used to standardize “Esashi Oiwake,” other min’yō songs likewise spread across the country, with concerned local performers and government officials collaborating to sanitize these songs according to their conflated ideas of Westernization and modernization.

As the Japanese government encouraged and aided the institutionalization of min’yō music, the style adapted and took on its nationalist characteristics. Historian Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of *invented tradition* applies here as the Meiji government sought to repurpose their folk traditions to serve as symbolic representations of Japanese nationalism (1983). They looked to Western governments as they aimed to position themselves as an international power, which meant drawing on European intellectual interest in folklore and nationalism. Folklorist Roger Abraham asserts that

Under bourgeois regimes, the manor house and the rural retreat maintained their hold on the imagination of the new mercantile rich, as did some of the manifestations of peasant behaviors and practices. Now, however, peasants were renamed "folk" and given a different place in the symbolic economy by which the state was constituted. Under aristocratic regimes, peasants were nostalgically depicted as gentle – if sharp-tongued – shepherds or rugged plowmen, and their speeches and songs were used to embody “native wisdom.” Under bourgeois rule they were regarded as embodiments popular sentiment and practice, purveyors of common sense, even carriers local and national character. (1993; 4)

Now that folk music represented the national character of Japan, which had just won the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), the

Meiji government desired to instill a martial spirit as burgeoning socialist, anarchist, and feminist movements spread across the country. By asserting control over folk music, dance, and rituals, The Meiji officials could construct an imagined folk character that could reflect their values of dedication, self-sacrifice, and discipline. Though already present, the Japanese aesthetics of simplicity, irregularity, allusiveness, and ephemera are further emphasized or added to the music. By this dignification, professionals dress formally, have a lower vocal range, and have a serious demeanor.

Min'yō music encountered further disturbance as newer practitioners sought to elevate the genre by incorporating aesthetics from Japanese high-art musics. The min'yō professionals, interrupted by the war period (1930-45), applied the self-cultivation of Zen Buddhism in the process of dignifying the genre. Mirroring the earlier migration of “Esashi Oiwake” performers, min'yō players established themselves in major urban areas, primarily Tokyo, and stressed regional authenticity. Pedagogues, such as Hideo Fujimoto, founded *Iemoto*-like (family foundation) schools (Ryū) to promote min'yō music. Fujimoto, trained in classical genres like nagauta and kouta, viewed min'yō as a scaffold for students to transition to these more serious genres. As such, this was reflected in his instruction and influenced many other professional teachers. This process of elevating Japanese folk music added elements from the more elite arts while still attending to the spatial and regional aspects of min'yō. Japanese philosopher Yuasa, Yasuo locates this in the writing of renowned Noh figure Zeami Motokiyo. He writes that through training

(*okeiko*), the practitioner develops proper bodily form (*katachi*) and realizes the correct technique (*waza*) (Yuasa 1987). In doing so, they cultivate a unity of mind and body or "no mind" – where the master performs without thought.

### Tsugaru Shamisen History

First, I outline a brief history of music in Japan and how Tsugaru shamisen came about to understand the geopolitical history of the style better. Blind players were the primary contributors to Japanese traditional music from the Nara period (710 CE). At this time, they roamed the land playing biwa while chanting sacred or secular narrative songs and were dubbed biwa priests. In the 16th century, they founded a central organization named the *Tōdō-za* (the proper way). The guild gained official recognition from the Tokugawa-era government and, by the late 17th century, transformed from an organization solely transmitting The Tale of the Heike to one existing to benefit its top-ranking members. They successfully passed laws through the government to forbid blind persons from outside their ranks from earning a living through massage or playing the shamisen or koto (which had succeeded the biwa). These blind koto and shamisen players produced much popular music during this era.<sup>47</sup> The poorest mostly ignored these laws as they had no alternatives; they were unlikely to achieve a high rank in the guild and never saw an equal share of their dues. They were barred from most professions and needed to travel to make a living. Outside the upper echelons of the *Tōdō-za*, the poorest were on the same level as other outcast groups and targeted by the provinces for banishment or exile. The Meiji government dissolved the *Tōdō-za* in the mid-19th century and enacted laws targeting

beggars and blind people, regarding them as unsightly remnants of traditional society. The Tsugaru region was no exception to many of these events, and some affected the area surprisingly.

This upheaval led to the Tsugaru shamisen genre, which incorporated numerous styles. Numerous musicians and entertainers made their way to the castle town of Hirosaki, which had a high population of beggars. Anthropological and ethnomusicological sources lack information regarding the itinerant Tsugaru musicians during the Edo period. The only agreed-upon information by scholars is that they were called *Bōsama* (literally meaning honorable monk). They were popular with the lower classes and were ignored or viewed derisively by the upper classes. Japanese novelist Daijō Kazuo proposes that the genre of Tsugaru-Jamisen originates with the Bōsama Nitabo. Ethnomusicologist Gerald Groemer cautions his readers to accept Daijō's theory as we know nothing else of Nitabo's generation of Bōsama (1999: 37). Nitabo had several students who became incredibly popular in the region and continued to teach and tour. Bōsama began playing at song festivals, which were initially hosted by farmers with large houses but soon by the musicians themselves. The Bōsama tried to outperform one another with their unique improvisations on traditional tunes. Traveling in these performance troupes became a much-preferred life to wandering as a lone musician. The advent of recording and radio in the early 20th century established Tsugaru-jamisen performers who dabbled in various genres to support themselves and their families.

As the Japanese government no longer relegated blind people to employment

as musicians or masseuses, new participants entered the style. min'yō research groups also formed in the early 20th century, studying local songs to promote their traditional music. Groemer credits these early research groups with adding respectability to Tsugaru songs, but "the efforts of most groups were more propagandistic or commercial than scholarly." By the pre-war era, most media forms were looking to support government policy, and "min'yō provided a convenient means for advancing the cause of national unity, blood, and soil (Groemer 1999: 50-51). They started hosting competitions for folk music but began purifying them to remove dialect, modernize, and repackage. The local populace did not judge these competitions — instead, a panel of experts would choose the sanitized versions of folk songs. As late as 2001, ethnomusicologist Henry Johnson observed that Japan continued promoted Tsugaru shamisen "as an ethnic music within Japan; a music that is seen as peripheral, both in terms of its geographic origins and the subculture of the Tsugaru district" (2006: 83). He adds that "this Japanization or standardization of Tsugaru songs provides an interesting insight into the use of music on the one hand as a type of other that is internal to Japan and, in contrast, an example of pressure to familiarize the music, demanding that the Tsugaru dialect be replaced to allow greater comprehensibility that may, in turn, provide more income in terms of popularity and therefore commercial viability" (2006: 91). Johnson's statements can split into two dialectical forces that helped cement Tsugaru shamisen as a national genre with their dominance at min'yō competitions and the establishment of now-famous performers.

Like min'yō music, Tsugaru shamisen adapted to the changing musical

ecosystem centered on the opinions of genre leaders. This formative era of the 1950s through the 1970s informs much of present-day Tsugaru shamisen revival discourse and venerates Takahashi Chikuzan, Shirakawa Gumpachirou, and Kida Rinshoei. Notions of what is "authentically" Tsugaru arise at this time with the charge of "'out of date' [coming] to mean that Tsugaru-jamisen is ageless, expressing the very soul of the tough, honest, and bullheaded (in particular, the men) the ideology of Tsugaru presents as real; 'provincial' becomes the admirable quality of solid rootedness in the Tsugaru soil, perfectly embodying the spirit of local uniqueness" (Groemer 1999: 70). Takahashi is often contrasted as the most conservative of the three, promoting his former occupation as a Bōsama and being educated by a Bōsama. He makes a clear distinction between his pieces and the ones he studied. Whereas Shirakawa freely improvised on traditional tunes and wrote many new pieces. Kida collaborated with Enka singers, established the first Tsugaru shamisen school in Tokyo, and promoted his tataki style.<sup>48</sup>

Tsugaru shamisen waned in the 1980s but found new life because of its practitioners' openness to collaboration and hybridity. Kida and Shirakawa's collaborations opened space for Takahashi to surge in popularity, and in 1973 held monthly contests in Shibuya. By 1980, when he became a household name, the revival boom was over. Contests continued to appear across the country, notably in Hirosaki. Citing interviews with players, ethnomusicologist Gerald McGoldrick writes, "if anyone had somehow gotten the idea to try and play during this period, it would have been difficult to go about getting an instrument and finding a teacher"

(2017: 196). The genre continued to grow into the new millennium when it again experienced a revival with the now-famous duo the Yoshida Brothers as its face. In this most current revival, which is the subject of McGoldrick's dissertation, interest in the style has crossed the Pacific Ocean and influenced American musicians to pick up the style, but with the added complexity of being far removed from the cultural context and the reinvention of the genre. As the popularity of radio expanded, these professionals produced new and "polished" old folk songs on the same scale as popular music (Waseda 2000: 220). The burgeoning Japanese recording industry targeted these new songs for Japanese American audiences.

### **Establishing and Maintaining Japanese Music in California**

The first Japanese immigrants immediately employed musical entertainment despite their desperate situation. These Issei were primarily laborers hoping to earn money and return to Japan. However, the sparse wages forced the *dekasegi* (person who works away from home; possibly colloquial) to consider settling instead (Asai 2016; 323). Few of these Issei had musical skills and relied on traveling musicians and female hostesses for musical entertainment and instruction. The primarily male population appreciated these female itinerant performers and restaurant hostesses for their presence rather than skill (Waseda 2000; 60).

Further attempts to make America more hospitable for the Japanese included establishing businesses in urban and rural areas, adapting to American customs, cultivating Japanese performing arts, and attempting to have Japanese legally

recognized as honorary whites.<sup>49</sup> The new Issei communities learned, formed clubs, paid for touring artists, and commissioned visits from teachers in such popular instruments and styles as the shamisen, biwa, shakuhachi, koto, kabuki, *shinpa-geki* (new-school drama), and *yokyoku* (singing in noh drama). Susan Asai writes, “The arts were integral to the Issei’s transculturated *zaibei dōhō* (Japanese in America) identity as a source for aesthetic enjoyment, as a political tool, as a symbol of cultural pride, and as a coping mechanism to transcend discrimination and despondency” (2024; 22). The Japanese performing arts benefited from these multiple articulations of identity. Despite the Immigration Act of 1924 (AKA Johnson-Reed Act), which banned immigration from Asia, it was still possible for professional musicians and performers to gain entry to the US as non-laborers. This exception was not always practiced; some were still turned away or imprisoned (Waseda 2000; 66). Japanese performing arts centered around major Californian cities - at first San Francisco and later Los Angeles, with sparse mention of Sacramento. Thus, most performers and teachers made their way to larger cities.

Issei women adapted to the circumstances of settler life and took on the role of performing arts teachers and entertainers for the predominately male population. The earliest natoris were a *gidayū* teacher, Takemoto Baigyoku, and a Japanese classical dance teacher, Hanayagi Yuko, in San Francisco by 1894.<sup>50</sup> Waseda notes that these women likely came as laborers or their wives, not as teachers (2000; 53). Another performer/teacher, Kineya Yasoyo (Mm. Ishikawa), came as a wandering performer and geisha but started teaching *Nagauta* and Japanese dance in San Francisco after



1895 (*Zaibei Nihonjinshi* 1940: 697; *Beikoku Nikkeijin Hyakunenshi* 1961: 145). She returned to Japan and gained a natori license from the Kineya nagauta school in the early 1920s. She established her teaching in 1931 in Los Angeles, and her student, Kineya Yasokiyo, became “the first natori abroad” in 1940 after her recommendation to the iemoto (*Beikoku Nikkeijin Hyakunenshi* 1961: 145). The classical dance teacher, Fujima Reiju, brought Japanese classical dance to southern California in 1910 (*Zaibei Nihonjinshi*, 1940; 708 as cited in Waseda 2000). The women teachers provided an essential source of Japanese entertainment and culture for urban Issei. Later, teachers arrived in the US to ensure the proper instruction of Japanese performing arts.

Japanese performing arts teachers traveled to ensure the Japanese immigrants received proper instruction to prevent the corruption of their arts. The classical dance teacher Fujima Shizue came to California in 1924 after receiving a request for instruction. However, in a 1924 interview with the *Rafu Shimpo*, she came to “show the Japanese indigenous dance, and correct the Japanese dance that is being erroneously transmitted.” Waseda writes that the Japanese in Japan “deplored the lack of formal or ‘correct’ Japanese arts in the US” and looked down on the Issei as poor farmers, *nodo* (serfs) (2000; 81-2). However, in 1917, the Los Angeles-based kabuki group Teikoku Ichiza invited the former actor to perform, after which he stayed and formed his group, Kinokuniya Kabuki Ichiza. The gidayū player, Nozawa Kiccho, who had a reputation in the Osaka Bunraku theater scene, also arrived in 1917. She formed an amateur group, Kiccho-kai, and three years later, already had sixteen

narrators and four shamisen players, including herself (Rafu Shimpo 8/17, 9/4, 9/5/1920). Kiccho returned to Japan in 1923 while her students held concerts multiple times a year, supporting local groups and visiting gidayū professionals (Murase 1985; 54). Urban Japanese Americans received “correct” instruction from these traveling professionals and sought similar instruction for their children.

Established in California, the Issei bolstered Japanese musical traditions by involving their Nisei children. However, the Nisei involvement in Japanese performing arts reflected their Issei parents’ desires to demonstrate their social status and daughters’ marriageability. Fifteen of Kiyomura Kiyoko’s dance disciples organized an all-girl kabuki, which greatly pleased the Issei for demonstrating kabuki, classical dance, and Japanese language (Waseda, 2000; 85). By 1940, three of her students would return from Japan as licensed natori, along with the students of two other LA teachers. Less is known about their participation in koto music, and only through Zaibei Nihonjinshi do we know that by 1940, four out of the seven koto teachers in LA were already Nisei (1940: 708, cited in Waseda 2000; 87). The girls and boys would appear in *engei-kai* (hybrid community talent show and potluck), but like the above dance and kabuki, this was more for their parents than for themselves. On the other hand, those in rural settings did not have access to these cultural resources and depended on a shared cultural memory of folk music, the radio, or community events.

Northern California Japanese American agricultural communities and towns had limited access to musical entertainment. Ethnomusicologist Susan Asai writes,

“in the rural areas of California, Japanese formed residential enclaves often out of necessity in hostile locales,” in which they “played a role in preserving Japanese traditions and customs, including the performing arts.” (2016; 320). While Southern California's rural communities preserved Japanese performing arts, I could find little to no details about music in northern California outside of Sacramento. These outlying communities settled around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and ascended south to north from Walnut Grove, Courtland, Clarksburg, Sacramento, Loomis, Penryn, Newcastle, and Auburn. Historian Kevin Wildie notes that some of these smaller towns “offered few opportunities for social life” and that the primary method of travel was by ferry or steamboat (2013; 20). Osuke Takizawa, a Delta farmer who settled in Sacramento, said, “if you wanted to go to town, you had to travel 40 miles to Sacramento on a river boat” (Interview in Sarasohn 1983; 102). Musically, if the laborers had a radio, they could tune into KFWM and KRWO out of Oakland (Asai, 2016; 320). Once in Sacramento, Japanese American rural workers had access to various entertainment.

Sacramento (also known as “*Ofu*”)<sup>51</sup> Japantown served as a hub for the many laborers in the delta area lots of musical diversions as well as a safe haven from the racist vitriol of Californians. Wildie writes that “by 1910, the city had become the top distributing point for agricultural laborers in California and stood as the fourth most Japanese populated city in California” (2013; 27). He further cites that whites refused to occupy houses near Japantown, so while the initial boarding house owners paid high rental prices, the neighboring houses became dropped in value leading more

Japanese to the area (Ibid; 32). Chikaji Teramoto recalls the nightlife of 1920s Japanese Alley, the center of Japantown, “in the evening, twelve or one o’clock, you could walk down Japanese Town Alley and hear the shamisen and some ladies and men singing” (interview by Cole 1971; 175-6). Minako Waseda’s records show that Yōnosuke organized a kabuki troupe in 1906 (2000; 518). Japanese Americans could buy music from the Aoki Music Store on Fourth Street, which sold the latest Japanese music; Michiko Takahashi recalls, “The owner would tell me that if I danced in front of the store to obon music they would give me a record” (Interview by Wildie 2013; 48). Sacramento’s location along the river delta made it a central location for Japanese American farmers and, consequently, a performing arts hub. The local Buddhist churches would likely have hosted their own obon celebrations outside the city.

#### History of Japanese American Obon and Communal Celebration

Min’yō music adapts to Japanese American culture in becoming central to obon odori. Obon would have figured into Buddhist religious activities from the arrival of the first missionaries in 1898, but Japanese American obon took on a new significance in 1930. Japanese Rev. Yoshio Iwanaga met Rev. Tansai Terakawa of the Stockton Buddhist Temple at a Pan-Pacific Young Buddhist Men’s Association conference in Hawai’i. Rev. Terakawa was so impressed by the former’s work teaching *Doyo Buyo* (children’s songs and dances) and min’yō that he invited him to teach Nisei girls back in Stockton, CA (Japanese American Cultural and Community Center 1993; 12). His choreography was so popular that he traveled from temple to

temple, teaching his work with the first recorded bon odori at the San Francisco Buddhist Temple in 1931. He selected folk songs from all over Japan with religious lyrics that were in tune with the “spiritual meaning Bon Odori” (ibid; 13, 15). Reverend Masao Kodani cites this meaning as “acknowledging our ongoing relationship with those who have died, remembering them in gratitude, and the ongoing attempt to reach the state of egoless dancing – to just dance” (1999; 7). Obon in Sacramento became a communal Japanese American event rather than a strictly Buddhist celebration. Takahashi recalls, “I wasn’t Buddhist, but I had Japanese clothes, so my sister and I would dress up. It would start just after dinnertime, and then we would go and take our clothes to the *kaikan* (gymnasium). There were a lot of ladies there to help us get dressed in the *yukata*. We would go out there on the street in front of the church and dance to all the music until about ten or eleven o’clock” (Interview by Wildie 2018; 47). Obon, thus, became an even more significant expression of Japanese American identity through the Jōdo Shinshū practice. This new ritual celebration coincided with an ondo boom in the Japanese recording industry.

Japan’s ondo boom in the 30s also brought a new wave of excitement for the social dance of Japanese festivals in America. In the 1930s, Japanese Americans purchased popular folk dances and new songs from the young Japanese recording industry by importing vinyl records or hearing them on the radio (Waseda 2000; 50, 118). Ondo music and events were one of the few things that united the Issei and Nisei generations musically. Even after the genre’s proliferation in Japan, the

Japanese Americans never tired of the music and dance. Record stores in Los Angeles advertise not only their recent imports but also the rarity and vastness of their stock. Japanese record companies noticed the appeal of ondo music to Japanese Americans and commissioned two America specific ondos: “Rafu Ondo,” and “Amerika Ondo.” Only a draft of the lyrics to “Rafu Ondo,” published in the *Rafu Shimpo*, remains as a surviving artifact (*Rafu Shimpo* 4/13/1935). Ethnomusicologist Wynn Kiyama cites that many scores and lyric sheets were likely “destroyed by a fire in the Iwanaga home in the 1960s” (2016; 10). With them went several other lyrics and sheet music for California regional ondos such as “Sacramento Ondo,” “San Francisco Ondo,” and “Stockton Ondo.”

Ondo Odoreya, Amerika ondo	Dance the ondo, America
ondo	
Okuni jiman no yukata kake	With the yukata to boast our
country	
Ondo odoreba	When we dance the ondo.
Jūsan shū no	In the sky above the thirteen
	states.
Sora mo nihon no kaze ga fuku.	The wind of Japan blows.

As this chapter previously mentions, bon odori music and dance originate from Buddhist music, dance, and folk practices. The *bushi* (melody; air; tune) and *ondo* (taking the lead note or verse) style of folk songs served as musical accompaniment for the dances, which at first were only accompanied by taiko before practitioners added takebue, gongs, and shamisen. Popular bushi include “*Kyushu Tanko Bushi*” (coal miner’s song of Kyushu), “*Yagi Bushi*” (song of yagi; one of the post stations on the Nikkō Reiheishi Kaidō road), and “*Hanagasa Ondo*” (flower hat song) is a representative ondo. Regional folk songs entered America as immigrants

from the different provinces brought them along. Many of these work songs already shifted from pure work songs to ritual songs performed at matsuri and as bon odori, such as “Kyushu Tanko Bushi.” However, these new min’yō songs competed with the new *gunka* (war songs). Japanese American cultural centers proudly promoted this music until Japan joined the Axis powers in 1937. After this declaration, Issei leaders distanced themselves from the Japanese consulate and began distributing American paraphernalia to emphasize their allegiance to the US.

#### Japanese Musical Space in Incarceration

The initial incarceration of Japanese Americans began soon after Pearly Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941, with the West Coast Japanese Americans forced relocation to temporary holding centers. War Relocation Authority (WRA) incarcerated 120,000 Japanese Americans in permanent camps by November 1942 (Waseda 2000; 127). The US government declared all citizens of Japanese ancestry as “enemy aliens” in Executive Order 9066. Issei were already barred from American citizenship, while Nisei were effectively stripped of theirs. The US government placed many camps in desert-like or adjacent locations. They were places of intense heat and cold. Despite the isolated nature of the camps, they were comparable to the large towns of several “host” states. On paper, these camps had the necessary infrastructure for a functioning town: Hospitals, schools, churches, libraries, a fire station, a police station, and residential buildings. Outside the town proper, they had agricultural areas, a reservoir, an airport, a cemetery, and a sewage treatment plant. However, the towns were fenced in by barbed wire and surrounded by guard towers. The buildings were all tarred-paper

barracks. Internees could run everything except “guarding the perimeter and top-level decisions” (Waseda 2000; 130).

Japanese Americans oversaw the education and recreational classes established by the Recreation Departments under the Jurisdiction of the WRA. These departments were largely unregulated (Manzanar and Tule Lake are the exceptions) as long as they did not promote Shintoism or Japanese language schools. They could play traditional Japanese games, establish Japanese libraries, and other craft hobbies. These departments established recreation halls in each block and, in some camps, even amphitheatres. Waseda shows the enthusiasm with which the WRA promoted recreational activities in a *Manzanar Free Press* article titled “Necessity of Recreation” (2000; 135). Ironically, Manzanar WRA officials forbade the playing of Japanese “patriotic music” and would not support “paid teachers or special rooms or quarters” (ibid; 138). The censorship extended to the *Manzanar Free Press*, which was forced to submit translations of all Japanese language articles for approval, meaning entertainment events were barely mentioned. (ibid; 139).

One of the founders of MTK, Toshiye Kawamura, recalls her incarceration experience at Tule Lake. She grew up in Marysville, a city in Yuba County, California, where she started learning Japanese classical dance at age five from a woman who drove from Sacramento. Not long after, she and her family were incarcerated at Tule Lake Camp. She remembers being able to continue Nihon Buyo in the camp and started shamisen lessons, which she despised. Post-incarceration, she lived with her grandparents in Sacramento, where she continued Nihon Buyo but also



started modern dance (Interview conducted by author 3/19/2021). Despite entertainment events being omitted from news reports, performing arts flourished during the camp periods despite their bleak origin and settings.

Japanese Americans demonstrate resilience in incarceration by continuing their musical practices by any means necessary. Waseda argues that despite the US government's attempt to stamp out Japanese cultural activities, the camps provided a safe place for them to continue (2000, 141). Incarceration helped revive earlier genres popular with the Issei, such as Naniwa bushi, gidayū, kabuki, and shinpa drama. While not spread evenly across camps, the teachers, performers, and amateurs of these performing arts would display what they practice in public concerts. However, the resurgence of these arts, dire circumstances, and new free time led to frequent *engei-kai* across the camps. As Japanese media was limited in the camps, staged dramas were elevated over the other arts. The amateurs and hobbyists raised their commitment to put on a crowd-pleasing show. Resultantly, these shows required many people to stage to match the audience's and performers' enthusiasm.

To support these performing arts practices, Japanese Americans showed incredible ingenuity in crafting the necessary instruments and accessories for these traditions. At Poston, Ikuta school koto teacher Nakajima Chihoko had 40 students (*Poston Chronicle* 4/6/1943). In an interview with Waseda, Nisei koto teacher Wakita Kayoko shared some of the unrecorded musical happenings. She recalls her mother coordinated with an outside friend to retrieve her koto from a Christian church where it had been stored for safekeeping. Those without kotos figured out how to make

them out of bed springs for the thirteen strings. To substitute the pick, they would be shaping toothbrushes or woodchips, and if they were lucky, they found cow bones or horns. Chihoko recalls that those who brought these instruments used them to find solace but gradually joined together (qtd in Waseda; 156). Music and other performing arts helped reinforce a sense of community and Japanese American identity while providing a sense of solace.

Japanese Americans continued their practice of Bon Odori within the camps, which meant that ondo dances continued to be practiced. Dance students would instruct those wanting to learn, and in their absence, any internee who knew the dances could volunteer to teach others. Ondos expanded beyond obon and other significant matsuris to American holidays or even without a special occasion. While the dances from before the war remained popular (notably “Amerika Ondo” and “Rafu Ondo”), Lesser-known *furusato*, or “hometown,” ondos such as “Kagoshima Ondo” and “Fukushima Ondo” surfaced (*Tulean Dispatch* 7/9/1943 as cited in Waseda; 158). Unfortunately, no records of “Amerika Ondo” or “Rafu Ondo” survive. These dances attracted thousands of participants across the respective camps. Given that the musical activity of the camps provided internees respite and comfort in dark times, these tunes were an even greater source of comfort.

Similarly, engei-kai proved popular in incarceration, attracting large crowds and participants and bringing out rare musical delights. Internees held engei-kai more frequently than before the war, sometimes daily, to keep morale lifted (Waseda 2000; 159). While Recreation departments were responsible for event organization, the

individual camp blocks were the first to coordinate engei-kai. As time in the camp passed, internees planned more elaborate engei-kai by touring neighboring blocks and exchanging talent with nearby camps (ibid. 160-1). As stated above, the staged dramas were the main attraction, but local talent would perform between the acts, with the main draw being the Nisei girls performing Japanese classical dance (ibid; 161). Camp newsletters show that amateurs would present rarely performed genres such as *Dodoitsu* (a secular song from the late 18th century), *Oiwake* (a free rhythm and melismatic style of Japanese folk song), and Shin-buyo (Ibid; 163). The Japanese American staging of engei-kai flourished during wartime incarceration. However, post-World War II, the US Government's fragmentation of Japanese American communities halted the once-frequent event. Once America reopened its borders to Japanese immigration, min'yō professionals traveled to teach and perform in California.

Japanese performing arts proliferated through the camps in conjunction with Western music, but some internees later felt shame toward Japanese music. Sansei (third generation), ex-internee, and nagauta teacher, Lillian Nakano, in an interview with Waseda, divulged that it was okay to perform Japanese music inside the camps, but outside doing so would arouse “public suspicion, and often aggressive reactions against the Japanese” (2000; 140). She further shared that despite being at camps Jerome and Heart Mountain, which permitted Japanese performing arts, she stopped practicing dance and nagauta. Nakano explained, “You want to avoid being Japanese” (Waseda 2000; 189). Historian Paul R. Spickard conducted a similar interview with

Amy Iwasaki Mass, explaining the avoidance of Japanese culture among Nisei. Mass said, “[T]here was the unspoken assumption that something was wrong with us because we were Japanese. Along with this was the hope that if we were more like white Americans, less obviously Japanese in our habit, manners, and customs, we would be more acceptable to other Americans” (Spickard 1996: 131). In her documentary film, *Hidden Legacy*, koto player Shirley Muramoto conducted numerous interviews unveiling that because of the size of the camps and other factors, many internees were unaware Japanese performing arts were practiced if they participated in Western music and vice versa (Muramoto et al. 2014). Many Japanese Americans left camp not knowing that other Japanese Americans practiced Western music and vice versa for Japanese performing arts.

The horrifying period of incarceration ended with Japanese Americans emerging from a paradoxical era which sequestered them because of their Japanese ancestry but provided the perfect area to perpetuate these practices. The loyalty questionnaire of spring 1943 marked the beginning of the camps’ closures. The WRA could no longer financially maintain the camps and the Japanese internees were needed to fill the labor shortage (Kodaira 1980; 177). Those deemed loyal “were encouraged to either volunteer for the draft or resettle out of the camp” (Spickard 1996; 120). All other camps closed by December 1945, but Tule Lake remained open until March 1946. The US government pressured some into applying for return to Japan by the ultra-nationalists, and others were too afraid, sick, or old to leave - they were forced out regardless (Waseda 2000; 197). Japanese Americans were reluctant

to return because of the atrocious actions of the US government and populace in uprooting their lives. Wildie writes, “Like all Japanese Americans returning on the West Coast, Japanese Americans confronted a vigilant racial intolerance that hope to prevent their returns to their old neighborhoods (2013; 73).

### Min’yō and Japanese American’s Post-Incarceration

The US government unceremoniously released the Japanese at the end of WWII. Many Japanese Americans had nowhere to return as their farmland and homes were forfeited.<sup>52</sup> The WRA released Japanese Americans from incarceration, encouraging them to settle away from the West Coast, as they were concerned white Americans might attack large Japanese American communities (Waseda 2000; 202). While the Japanese did settle outside of the West Coast, forming communities in places like Chicago, Illinois, and Cleveland, Ohio, by the 1950s, Los Angeles and San Francisco returned to prewar Japanese American populations (ibid; 209). They arrived to find Little Tokyo, LA, already occupied by African American migrants, what they now called Bronzeville. (Takekuni 1978: 176). The Japanese Americans were able to repurchase some buildings and shops in the area, which became a commercial and cultural center, but families were forced to spread out over the greater Los Angeles area (Waseda 2000; 204-5).

Japanese Americans slowly reestablished their musical ecosystems outside of incarceration camps. As former internees resettled, they continued to practice and stage Japanese performing arts - although mainly by word of mouth because of fear and tension (Waseda 2000: 209-210).<sup>53</sup> Communities organized several such shows

and engei-kai, like the Naniwa-bushi group from Gila River, to console each other and encourage everyone as they rebuilt their lives (ibid: 204-6). Studios and groups reopened, such as the Yōkyoku schools (Kanze-kai, Houshō-kai, and Kita-kai) and the all-girl kabuki group, all more skilled than before due to the musicality of incarceration life (ibid: 206-7). In the same year, 1946, Bandō Misa and Hanayagi Tokuyae opened nihon buyo studios, and shakuhachi player Yamaguchi Nyohou and gidayū performer Takemoto Chiyokoma, formed Chikuyū-kai and Chiyokoma-kai (ibid: 208-9).

By the late 1940s and early '50s, Japanese Americans resumed public obon and ondo along with the repealing of anti-Japanese laws. 1949 brought the revival of Nisei week to celebrate the organizer's commissioned "Nisei ondo" (Waseda 2000: 211). The lyrics were written by contest winner Namiki Isao and composed by Hattori Ryouichi of "Tokyo Boogie Woogie" fame. (ibid.; 211, 213). Waseda notes that the organizers invited white Americans to learn about Japanese culture (ibid.; 211). Four hundred dancers in kimono presented this new ondo to an audience of around 20,000 (ibid.; 214). These public celebrations accompanied several legal victories: the Japanese American Claims Act of 1948, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, and the repeal of the Alien Land Acts of 1913 (214-5).

As the US occupied Japan, it also opened itself for touring Japanese artists. Japanese actress and classical dancer Tanaka Kinuyo was one of the earliest among these artists. She toured southern and northern California, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Chicago (Rafu Shimpo 11/19/49). Her official statement for the tour was to "console

fellow Japanese in America for their hardship during the war, and also to thank them for their support for Japan's recovery after the war" (Nankashuu Nihonjinshi 1957: 629). However, for Kinuyo and other artists, it also allowed Japanese artists "direct contact with American film and music making" (Waseda 2000; 219).

Amongst touring Japanese performers and artists, a new Japanese American generational group immigrated - the Shin-issei (new first generation). These performers and teachers accompanied spouses, came alone to escape Japan, or dreamed of performing abroad (Waseda 2000; 230-1). As noted above, the change to US laws allowed immigration and naturalization, which allowed many to extend a brief teaching request into a permanent stay. The Shin-isseis' presence shifted the focus of Nisei week from prewar Japanese immigrants and their descendants to include all *nikkei* as well as incorporate visiting Japanese nationals. (Waseda 2000; 277)

The styles and instruments the new immigrants taught: *nagauta*, *gidayūu*, *koto*, *hayashi* (musical accompaniment to *noh* and *kabuki*), classical dance, *gagaku*, *Tsugaru-shamisen*, *min'yō*, *shakuhachi*, and *fue* (general word for flute) (Waseda 2000: 230). These licensed teachers were the first to offer official lessons for *gidayūuu*, *min'yō*, *hayashi*, and *gagaku* and revitalized dwindling music styles like *nagauta*, *biwa*, and *shakuhachi*. The Shin-issei *natori* were not only able to bring master artists over but also produce more American *natori*. (Waseda 2000: 233). Alas, after the excitement of new professionals passed, the genres that the Nisei (now the *Sansei* and *Yonsei*) were already tired of before WWII further declined.

Satō Matsuhiro visited San Francisco in 1962, held an informal concert, and later sent recordings of his *iemoto*, Satō Matsuko. (*Rafu Shimpo* 1/1/66). On the first day of 1963, these new min'yō fans opened the Japan min'yō Club in San Francisco. The group leader, Mr. Kodaira, transcribed songs from tapes using a notation system he had invented. The club proved so popular that it opened branches in neighboring Bay Area cities. The Japan min'yō association organized a tour of min'yō professionals so popular that the crowds swarmed their planes and shows (Waseda 2000: 222-4). Japanese Americans clamored for min'yō so much that Satō Matsuko sent two representatives to teach these clubs, eventually leading to Tanoshimi Kai's creation.

### **Tanoshimi Kai History**

The women of Tanoshimi Kai's continue the embodied practice of min'yō in Northern California with the last remaining licensed instructor of Matsutoyo Kai. Their success began with Matsuko Satō, who traveled across Japan in her father's min'yō troupe and created her playing style. Matsutoyo Satō came to the US on behalf of Iemoto for the benefit of the Japan min'yō Club of San Francisco. Initially, she was to stay one year, but she remained in the US due to trouble with her fiancée in Japan and pleas from her students. She expanded her teaching to the rest of the San Francisco Bay Area before encompassing parts of San Joaquin and Sacramento counties.

Morita sensei met her in Lodi before Matsutoyo moved her operations to Los Angeles three years later. Despite the distance, Matsutoyo operated through her



licensed instructors in Northern California while she focused on growing min'yō in Southern California. min'yō implies no gender association, but for two women to be high-ranking figures in the traditional music world is still significant. In contrast, most music educators in Japanese American music have been women out of necessity. Regardless of the adversities and challenges both women face in founding a musical style and immigrating to the US.

Sensei's bond with these other two women, also first-generation immigrants, furthered her min'yō career. "It was hard when I came here, and I was lonely. I wanted to return, but my mother-in-law was kind to me. She told me that people who spoke Japanese had just arrived at the Buddhist church, and I should go. I did, made friends, and then found min'yō there" (Morita 2022). She joined Lodi min'yō Doko Kai in 1974, where she first encountered Matsutoyo Satō. Speaking about first learning from her, sensei said she was not her favorite instructor in the kai because she "thought [Matsutoyo] was so strict, but I respected her and everything she had to teach." (Morita 2020). She recalls practicing so much to improve on shamisen and uta until Matsutoyo approved her for the Natori licensing exam. "We could not afford the licensing fee," my mother-in-law came and said 'Shi-chan, this is too important to pass up.'" sensei dropped her voice, "she gave us \$10,000... she was a very, very nice lady." Here Eugene Morita adds, "they were very close because they both came from Japan." Sensei nods in agreement. She passed the exam and received her stage name. Receiving the natori license meant she was a certified master and could teach her students on behalf of Matsutoyo Kai. At this time, she acquired the hospital position

and was determined to repay Masano. She would not accept full reimbursement saying she did it for Sensei and Matsutoyo. She continued practicing shamisen and uta until she adopted her children and set them aside to focus on her family and dance. Even though Matsutoyo was disappointed, she understood and respected sensei's dance practice. On this detail, Yoshiko comments, "Matsutoyo is known for her discriminating taste and loves Sensei's style." She continued paying dues to Matsutoyo kai all this time and would come to support their performances when asked.

The practice of Japanese folk music and dance in the Sacramento and San Joaquin instilled a sense of cultural identity. Morita Sensei joined *Genchi Min'yō Kai* (meaning the place or commitment depending on the kanji used) in 1975, receiving instruction from Ikeda sensei and Muranaga sensei. Matsuda Sensei visited Genchi Min'yō annually after touring Japan to present the latest trends in folk dance from the various prefectures. Approximately 35 years ago, Eugene bought Morita Sensei a set of Matsuda Sensei's Japanese folk dance tapes to supplement her family's tapes off the New Year's dance competitions. In addition, Morita Sensei expanded her knowledge of Japanese dance as her sister-in-law sent min'yō cassette tapes from Japan, which also contained visual representations of the accompanying dances (Eugene and Morita Sensei Interview August 2022).

With no min'yō dance groups around, sensei and her friends, Toshiye Kawamura and Toyoko Ueda, founded their own. The kai was founded as a non-profit in 1988 to "commit[ment] to the education and performance of min'yō traditional Japanese folk dancing." As they started, Kawamura recalls, "Morita-san



Figure 12: Early Photos of Tanoshimi Kai. Morita Sensei is the middle figure in the top photo. Used with permission from the MTK archives.

would order tapes from Japan and study. Once she learned the new dances, she taught them to us." Sensei detailed her process to me: she searched a catalog for tapes that were the latest style or from towns and prefectures she wanted to feature. At first, she watched the tape several times to get the rudimentary motions – determine the body parts that moved on different counts. Once these basic motions were down, she followed by shaping the movements, such as ensuring a forward step only taps with the ball of the foot and the weight stays on the stationary foot. Morita Sensei made notes of these movements and finally entrained every subtle gesture from the on-screen dancers. As sensei improved and her video collection grew, she would choose parts of the dances she liked from different years to create her dance style.

Kawamura-san said, "[sensei] strives for excellence. Every January 1<sup>st</sup>, she would start training us so hard for a competition. She was earnest about winning" (Interview with author 3/19/2021). However, she adds that this was when Sacramento had many min'yō groups – now, there are only two. The Tanoshimi Kai archives contain their performances, money received, and newspaper articles. These articles show they crossed cultural barriers in their mission by performing outside the Japanese American community at high schools, colleges, community centers, other cultural festivals, museums, mall openings, county fairs, and the California State Fair. While Morita sensei studied the dances and music of min'yō, Toshiye Kawamura used her institutional knowledge on behalf of the group.

Kawamura's role was integral for the kai and its continuation today as she brought years of dance experience and her expertise in higher education. I first

connected with Toshiye Kawamura in August 2020 through her niece, Karen Adachi, who headed the Sacramento Buddhist Church's Cultural Bazaar. After some coordination, we set up a phone call with Kawamura. I was ignorant at this time of her connection to Tanoshimi Kai. I only learned after mentioning I had joined a group in Lodi, California, to which she responded, "The only group I know out there was Shizue's group, but I don't know if she does it anymore." "That's my group, and she still leads us all." In 1973, Sacramento State University hired her as a secretary in the music department. She and others say she learned how to write grants and acquired the skills to organize Tanoshimi Kai's documents and non-profit status. With the group established, the trio set forth on touring and educating Northern California about Japanese min'yō while still serving the Japanese American community.

As sensei and her friends founded their kai, she suspended shamisen and uta to raise her daughters and focus on dance. I first learned she halted her practice where and how I learned many things - after a private lesson. As I lowered the bridge of my shamisen, sensei nonchalantly said, "It took me a long time to relearn shamisen, you know? I stopped playing for... 20 years." Examining the touring schedule in group archives confirms that Tanoshimi Kai averaged ten events per year and notably slowed down as the millennium approached. Matsutoyo, while supportive of sensei's dance practice, wanted her to choose between Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai. She proposed a compromise that she would differentiate her between the Kais by performing as Shizue Morita for dance and Matsutoyo Shizu Satō for shamisen and uta. The stage name (*natori*) carries the same surname as the iemoto, a sign of

dedication to them. Ultimately, Matsutoyo relented to Sensei's condition.

In 2004, Matsutoyo implored Morita Sensei to return to shamisen and uta to revitalize Matsutoyo Kai in Northern California. While no one in the kai mentions the decline of min'yō practice, Kawamura and Waseda note the decline of Japanese performing arts post-1990s (2000; 327). At the time, Hideo Nakajima was still active in the San Francisco Bay Area on behalf of Fujimoto *Ryūha* (school of traditional art), so sensei was not the last remaining min'yō music instructor in Northern California. However, she recalls the shamisen feeling foreign in her hands, saying, “I could barely press my fingers into the shamisen” (Interview with Nagato and Morita Sensei 2021). She dedicated herself to reacquiring her skill over the next few years, reflected in the Tanoshimi archives with reduced performances for three years. In 2010, sensei earned the title of master instructor (*Shihan*) in Matsutoyo Kai after further examination by a third party. As such, she gained the confidence to teach new members shamisen and Uta after receiving this prestigious title.

Tanoshimi Kai and Matsutoyo Kai's histories offer insight into the iemoto system and master-apprentice relationship outside Japan. Practitioners still face the obligation inherent to the iemoto system in the master-apprentice relationship. Still, these women provide and care for their immediate families in a changing Japanese America while attending to the preservation and practice of Japanese folk performing arts. The group demonstrates the resilience of female Japanese performing arts practitioners who simultaneously reinforce the prevalence of women as cultural bearers while challenging the hierarchical structures through their actions and

dedication to min'yō.

### **Conclusion**

In min'yō music and dance and Tsugaru shamisen, students and teachers contend not only with the difficulty of cross-cultural transmission but also the history of their respective styles and their attachment to specific Japanese places and concepts. From 1850 onward, Japanese folk music transformed from music for work and play for the villagers to an established and respected tradition promoting an authentic glimpse at a past pastoral Japan. Likewise, Tsugaru shamisen practitioners popularized a style from the remote Tsugaru peninsula, which is now more popular than min'yō. The former type strived to preserve and continue practicing traditional folk music, while the latter preached for innovation and the creation of new pieces. Japanese epistemologies inform the two genres and what is to be embodied by the practitioner. However, as both genres arrive in America, they contend with the slight divergence in Japanese American ways of being and knowing and the disparate American ones. The following chapter will further investigate how the members of Min'yō Tanoshimi Kai transmit Japanese folk music and dance to participants in America.

## Chapter Six. Conclusion

I walk down the winding side streets of Harajuku, Tokyo. The cold January air has most people I pass by wrapped in oversized, puffy jackets and sweaters. As I leave the safety of the alleys, the crowds return. A long line snakes into the alley as more and more customers queue for novelty rolled ice cream. Beyond the ice cream, people rush past in two separate traffic streams. They all pass by the various fashion boutiques, cosmetic stores, and eateries, looking to escape the cold. My destination lies across the surging shoppers, tucked away in another side street. I approach the large, gated building and review the instructions to enter the specialty kimono shop. Before traveling to Japan, the MTK members implored me to search for a formal kimono. Morita Sensei wants to take a group picture with everyone in formal attire. Linda suggests, “You should get a kimono in Japan! You will find one in your size there, or at least you will have an easier time than here” (personal communication December 2022).

I approach the door and press the button indicated on the adjacent panel. A voice comes through the panel, “Hello? Who is this?” “This is Alexander Nunes. I’m here for my appointment.” She provides detailed instructions on how to reach the elevator and the buttons to push. Once I reach the floor, her assistant will retrieve me. I proceed through the door and wind through the narrow halls to the elevator. As I arrive on my floor, I look around for her assistant when he appears farther down the hall. “Alexander?” he asks. “Yeah, I’m here for the appointment.” “Oh good! Follow me this way.” He leads me through a series of twisting halls until he stops at a dark



brown door with a brass knob. He knocks and enters the room, ushering me to follow. “This is Alexander.” “It is nice to meet you,” I say in Japanese. She returns the greeting and says, “Let’s proceed. I’ll start some tea while my assistant gets your measurements.” She leaves the small room, passing tables and boxes filled with fabric into the adjacent kitchen, where I can see her start the tea preparation.

Meanwhile, her assistant continues with my measurements and asks, “what brings you to Tokyo?” “I never had an opportunity to go before, and Japan just reopened. I thought this is the best time to go.” We continue discussing different parts of the city and what I plan to do until he asks, “why do you want a kimono?” “Oh, I’m a member of a min’yō group in California, and they asked me to look for a formal kimono while I’m in Japan.”

As I answer, the shop owner returns with the tea and water. “Did you hear that her assistant asks?” “He says he is a part of a min’yō group.” She looks up curiously. “I did not know they practice min’yō in California.” “It’s rare here in Japan. People do not play it much anymore, she laments.” “We will do our best to find a good kimono in your size.” She hands me the green tea she has finished whisking and examines the measurements her assistant recorded. As I sip the green tea, she opens a narrow closet and shuffles garment bags around before pulling out a long beige bag. She brings it before me, and together with her assistant, they unwrap the bag, revealing A gray kimono and a blue overcoat. She went about fitting me in the different parts of the kimono, explaining how the sleeves should hang, how the inner clothing should be tied, and how to tie the obi. “You’re larger than Japanese people.

This is the best-fitting used kimono we have.” As she talks, I feel the different parts of the kimono rest on my body – the belt holds everything so tightly. Well, the kimono fits, and I must squeeze it to wear it.

Min’yō players and dancers navigate the confluences of space, cultural identity, and cultural and environmental sustainability in California. This fitting recounts my spur-of-the-moment trip to Japan in January 2023. Japan reopened in October 2022 for tourists to enter the country, and roundtrip flights were under \$500. I recount this uncomfortability in fitting into the kimono as a reminder that Japanese culture was not made for me. I can fit into the kimono, play the shamisen, and speak Japanese, but there will always be these moments of “squeezing.” During these moments, I encountered centuries of cultural development that led to the customs of Japanese folk music and dance practice. A practice reimagined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to support the growing nationalist aims and Westernization efforts of the Meiji Era government. As the growing circuit of folk music professionals adapted the style to fit their agenda, Japanese Americans developed their communities in cities and agricultural regions. They bore the anti-Asian sentiment by continuing to labor and circumvent policies that limited their agency to the best of their ability. In these communities, bon odori was a near-universal practice. Bon odori continued through incarceration, and after the war, a new wave of Japanese immigrants brought a reinvented min’yō. This space is the min’yō I try to squeeze into. Cultivating Japanese folk music and dance in California through the pandemic and environmental crisis reflects diasporic performing arts' adaptability and resilience.

Cultural sustainability for min'yō requires a reexamination of the systems that make up the practice in such a way that heritage performers have agency over their own ancestry. Japanese folk music groups in California are trialing new methods to involve younger members and influence them beyond the austere hierarchy of the iemoto system. For MTK, Morita Sensei wishes the group had no leader after she stepped down. She desires everyone to work together and share the responsibility of the group rather than burdening one person. She relinquished some control of the group, allowing the younger members to conduct rehearsals without her. They taught the newer members the steps and basic techniques of several dances. While it is too early to tell, such changes might entice newer members into the group, allowing them to provide input. Cultural sustainability for Japanese folk music and dance may require refiguring, allowing for more community input and engaging in a dialogue between expert and amateur practitioners.

Unfortunately, some efforts to increase the visibility of these musical traditions through commodification and commercialization can backfire, as Bachido discovered. The group aided the musical production of LAIKA studios 2013 original animated film *Kubo & the Two Strings*, which featured the shamisen as a central plot element. Newspapers, journals, magazines, and critics noted the lack of Japanese, Japanese American, or Asian Americans in the main cast. The studio allegedly hired Kevin Kmetz, both of Japanese descent and decorated Tsugaru shamisen player, to assuage further allegations of cultural appropriation. At the time, these professional players hoped the film would inspire a new wave of students to generate more work

and interest in Japanese folk music. Critics respond to the history of anti-Asian policies and sentiment in North America and ensure Asian actors' representation beyond tokenized characters or typecast roles. While many Tsugaru shamisen practitioners in California are of mixed heritage or participate in Japanese American cultural events as part of their practice, they must also engage with California's Orientalist past.

Japanese folk music groups work to include practitioners beyond the diaspora by connecting Japanese and Japanese American cultural practices rather than emphasizing racial identity as a sustainability practice. However, the media and entertainment industry's emphasis on Japanese racial identity intends to further their inclusion in the media and entertainment environment, which historically ostracized all Asian Americans. While I am skeptical of the later approach, which still essentializes or tokenizes Japanese performers, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed anti-Asian sentiment lingering beneath the American veneer of civility. Emily Roxworthy's characterizes American depictions of Japanese Americans post-internment cast them as "expressionless and inhuman, as epitomized in the stereotype of the automaton like 'model-minority'" (2008 2). The continued alienization of Japanese Americans, and all Asian Americans, highlights the need for both approaches with the exception that their inclusion in media moves away from stereotypes still casting them, and their performing arts, as enigmatic and esoteric. Beyond the need for intercultural collaborative efforts in the sustainability of min'yō

and Tsugaru shamisen, practitioners should also consider the environmental aspects of cultural sustainability.

Cultural and environmental sustainability needs should be considered together, as aesthetics of culture often impede environmental efforts. Shamisen makers insist on endangered hardwoods for the instrument's aesthetic, while rising prices discourage prospective students. Some makers recycle older shamisen for play rather than investigate new designs and nontraditional woods to cut costs. Abbot engages in all three practices while contacting shamisen makers in Japan. In his experimentations, he created a simplified shamisen, the Shamibuddy, which he sells for half the price of an entry-level full-size Tsugaru shamisen. The project started as a way for him to produce more shamisen to meet demand for new students. In this project, he used readily available wood rather than searching for specialty or exotic lumber commonly used in shamisen construction. Hosting a workshop, in addition to his book, might enable people to enter the Japanese folk music world while also addressing cultural and environmental sustainability aspects.

Japanese American history in the US provides rich examples of musical resilience for current min'yō and Tsugaru Shamisen practitioners. The Issei formed enclaves in cities and farming communities in rural areas, incorporating their arts and customs. California governments issued legal rulings such as the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, which prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning agricultural property or entering any lease agreement beyond a three-year term. The 1920 additions closed a loophole that allowed Nisei children to own the land. As

Japanese Americans continued to encroach on white space, California and the US government released further rulings limiting the ability of Japanese Americans to occupy space. Their increasing US hostility toward Japanese Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century culminated with Executive Order 9066, which incarcerated them in February 1942.

The space of the incarceration camps ironically energized the practice of Japanese performing arts traditions rather than solely conditioning young Japanese Americans to adopt American forms. Incarcerated Japanese Americans encountered and participated in the production of American popular music as a form of Americanization. Simultaneously, other Japanese Americans performed many traditional performing arts while incarcerated.

In the post-World War II landscape, Iemoto Matsutoyo Sato established her school soon after arrival in California. This resonated with Japanese Americans looking for a connection to Japanese heritage as well as the popularity of folk music in Japanese American obon and matsuri. Morita Sensei, herself a Shin-issei, joined multiple min'yō groups to learn as much as she could about Japanese folk practices. With her friends, she formed MTK, to educate California audiences about the regional dances of Japan. These performances incorporate elements of strategic self-essentialism to expose performers and viewers to cultural dress and objects they might otherwise not encounter. Morita Sensei recognizes a need to alter the dances to keep spectators entertained but also grounds her choreography in an appeal to traditional dance.

Min'yō practitioners learn to move and adopt Japanese habits and customs and risk interpolation as “being more Japanese” by following these practices. In this way, the claims of Nihonjinron about the uniqueness of the Japanese people are disabused by (often meant in the sense of exceptionality) these devotees who decouple the Japanese race from Japanese culture. Min'yō musicians and dancers develop their performance skills in Japanese arts alongside other performing artists from Japan and North America.

Min'yō practitioners in California appeal to a nostalgia for an imagined Japanese, which emphasizes the home village. MTK and Matsutoyo Kai align with a revival of Japanese folk performing arts drawing on a romanticized past. Both groups acknowledge this Japanese past as passed savoring in teaching how things were rather than proposing a return to the mythical home (Boym, 51). As I discussed with members of MTK, their practice of Japanese folk music and dance helps Japanese Americans connect with their heritage while also educating non-Japanese audiences on the history and regionality of Japan. They do root their performances in a nostalgia for a Japanese past, but it rather operates as a salve for a painful present. This sentiment holds true in an isolating present as people struggle in unfamiliar environments, ripped from a childhood community or any familiarity to survive in the late-stage capitalist United States.

Min'yō practitioners cultivate a spatial relationship with the Japanese rural past, drawing on aesthetics such as *ma* (interval; space) and philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō's notion of *aidagara* (betweenness) (As quoted in Yuasa 1989, 40).

Performers utilize these conceptions of space for musical effects and establish a connection to the audience and to the space of the village. This is situated in a historical and romanticized view of Japanese folk music and dance, which necessitates the interplay of individuals to create a community. We can see this aesthetic play out within the different spaces of min'yō cultivation: lesson space, practice space, and performance space as the players and dancers interact with each other, their teacher, and the audience.

Min'yō practice in California showcases its resilience in transforming from its folk music origins to its reinvention in a classical style. The Meiji government started transforming Japanese folk music and dance, but the regional preservation societies, such as the Esashi Oiwake Research Society, carried it out. As these groups codified the songs and introduced notation systems, pedagogues like Hideo Fujimoto implemented the iemoto system to min'yō pedagogy. These elements are brought to California practitioners as the Shin-issei immigrants arrive with this style. California Japanese Americans practiced the min'yō songs used in bon odori music, which, until the 1930s, prioritized the songs of ancestral prefectures. Rev. Iwanaga implemented folk songs from across Japan. These folk songs clashed with the arrival of the formalized min'yō style. As Matsutoyo Sato spread her practice across California, new practitioners were introduced to invented Japanese folk music, which repurposed songs and lyrics to portray the farmer or peasantry as reflecting the tenets of loyalty and duty. These songs came to represent a Japanese folk past that did not exist but for which there is no other referent outside of the songs. Min'yō practitioners sustain



their musical tradition despite multifarious entities placing different pressures and values placed upon them.

Demonstrating resilience for min'yō and Tsugaru shamisen means “squeezing” into uncomfortable places, attire, or situations. Consider the iemoto in California, which emphasizes a slow ritual pedagogical process that forces new members to balance work and family with this demanding hobby. The cost of the system also prohibits membership, which Morita Sensei speaks about in every lesson. In a lesson during August 2023, she said, “I would charge no money if I could, but I need to pay for the kai and myself.” She tries to keep the cost as low as possible to entice students to join. However, the time commitment and lack of available teachers keep students from joining. Though the pedagogy of the iemoto system lent legitimacy to min'yō in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adjusting the stipulations and requirements might lead to min'yō continuation. Better yet, the headmaster might relinquish control of songs and music, so it is not the property of an organization but any group or club that practices min'yō. Similarly, UNESCO and government interventions in traditional Japanese music freeze the music at a set time, so it is no longer a living tradition. Japanese folk music can still be tied to an invented tradition, but it should incorporate the changing needs of its participants.

As Tsugaru shamisen practitioners more likely come from white or mixed-Japanese backgrounds, their demonstration of their resilient “squeezing” presents as taking on the Japanese and Japanese American culture and traditions. These initial encounters involve learning different aesthetic priorities in listening to and feeling

music. We feel pressure to “be more Japanese” and quickly gain competency over these elements. Performing for an informed audience requires greater attention to detail and execution. Additionally, the more practitioners engage in Japanese spaces the more they expose themselves to unfamiliar aspects and potential misunderstandings. Over time, as we start to further enmesh ourselves in these clothes and musical spaces, the fabric may stretch and feel more spacious, but it can still snag or catch in unexpected ways.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> literal translation of the German “*volksleid*” or folk song

<sup>2</sup> The *azuma sawari* is a contraption built into the neck of the shamisen which is adjusted by a screw on the back of the neck. When set correctly, the screw raises wood or bone to brush against the vibrating string producing the buzzing tone.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese musicians had already been incorporating shamisen into Western popular music styles (Peluse, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ethnomusicologist Jay Keister researched this movement in the U.S. and his work receives more detail in the literature review section (2004).

<sup>5</sup> A portmanteau of “bushido” and “bachi.” The former, meaning “way of the warrior,” is the code of conduct for samurai, while the latter is the fan-like plectrum for the shamisen.

<sup>6</sup> *Kamashi* here refers to repetitive phrase of strike, *hajiki* (pluck off), *sukui* (upward strike) of descending notes.

<sup>7</sup> May also be referred to as *atarigane* or *chanchiki*.

<sup>8</sup> A small drum with a short and wide body. Animal skin is stretched across the top and bottom of the body and both faces are bound together with rope.

<sup>9</sup> Other definitions sometimes include more distant counties such as Santa Cruz, San Benito, and/or San Joaquin.

<sup>10</sup> According to the 1900 U.S. Census, 23,916 of 24,326 Japanese immigrants while only 410 were female (Lee, 2018; 3).

<sup>11</sup> A similar arrangement was reached for Chinese immigrants who were able to falsify paperwork to bring other immigrants over known as “paper sons/paper daughters” (Lee, 2004; 15).

<sup>12</sup> I attempted to preserve the original formatting of the text while quoting within this paragraph.

<sup>13</sup> The Tule Lake camp detained persons from Western Washington, Oregon, and Northern California. It was later the only camp converted to a maximum-security segregation center, occupied by the army under martial law. Questions 27 and 28 on the loyalty test prompted the conversion. The former asked if the respondent would serve in United States armed forces while the later asked if they would swear “unqualified allegiance” to the United States, defend it, and disavow all obedience to the Japanese emperor or any foreign institution. Angry and anxious a number of inmates answered “no” “no” or refused to participate. As Tule Lake had the highest number of “no’s” it was chosen as the “disloyal” camp. The founder of Sacramento *Min’yo Kou Dou Kai* and a collaborator was incarcerated with her family at this

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camp.

<sup>14</sup> As of this writing Japan has at least one entry every year from 2008 to 2020, with the exception of 2015, 2017, and 2019. The UNESCO website holds a full list of Japan's Intangible Cultural Heritage (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/japan-JP?info=elements-on-the-lists>).

<sup>15</sup> Bachido hosts a global map on their community page (<https://community.bachido.com/u/user-map?period=location>) for users to mark their location.

<sup>16</sup> For those who have attended obon or other matusuris, there is typically a portion where the festival-goers join a dance troupe in the Ondo-style dances.

<sup>17</sup> His breakdown of subculture is based on the work of Sociologist Georg Simmel. Choice being our ability to choose despite growing up given something. Affinity is a strong attraction to something that confounds formulations of membership. Belonging reflects what the group and individual do in expressive culture, but at its full extent, can suggest what outsiders do as well.

<sup>18</sup> The double burden, or second shift, typically refers to the unpaid domestic labor performed in addition to a paid job. I complicate this by adding an additional labor intensive role of cultural teacher that women also hold in addition to domestic labor and their career.

<sup>19</sup> Slobin's superculture – built on Gramsci's hegemony – is an overarching structure that could be present anywhere within a system through industry and the state's institutionalized values and rules. His subculture highlights the nebulous nature of such “a group” and how it situates itself in a superculture. Individuals maintain these subcultures through choice, affinity, and belonging.

<sup>20</sup> Chris and Pedro prefer I use their first names.

<sup>21</sup> “Kita no Hibiki” is Nitta Hiroshi's original composition with two shamisen parts.

<sup>22</sup> Kmetz is recorded as the first foreigner to win the Daijou Kazuo award at the Kanagi Tsugaru shamisen tournament and the Judge's Choice Award at the Hirosaki Tsugaru shamisen tournament. In both tournaments he placed 2<sup>nd</sup> and “runner-up” respectively. Nitta Masahiro learned from his father, Nitta Hiroshi, who learned from Gunpachiro II.

<sup>23</sup> Music educator Sean Manes writes on the pedagogical process of Japanese American shamisen teacher, Mary Yamaura, who “bridges the gap” for her American students who did not grow up in Japan. This bridging means conceptualizing Japanese aesthetics like ma, the lack of music education in the US, adjusting instructions and expectations to not “drive [American] students away” (2009; 47).

<sup>24</sup> Reminder to the reader that Tanoshimi Kai's mission statement establishes them as a non-profit organization committed to the education and performance of min'yō,

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traditional Japanese folk dancing.

<sup>25</sup> The props and costumes are a mishmash of East Asian items rather than solely Japanese. For example, the “kimono” appears to draw from traditional Chinese, Korean, and Japanese women’s dress.

<sup>26</sup> Zoom is video conferencing platform that released in 2011, but became the defacto video conferencing app during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

<sup>27</sup> Compared to the availability of Western instruments – especially the guitar – a neonate practitioner cannot simply travel to their nearest musical instrument store to purchase a student model shamisen.

<sup>28</sup> Vertical here means a group organized in a hierarchical manner with a single leader making decisions for the group. This opposed to a horizontal structure would not have a defacto leader but would require input from all present members on group activities and initiatives.

<sup>29</sup> See Alaszewska for more detail on the confusing framework that led to the practice of Chichibu Yatai-bayashi being monopolized by Takano Harumichi.

<sup>30</sup> Hideo Fujimoto who founded his own Iemoto-like (family foundation) schools (Ryū) to promote min’yō music. Fujimoto, trained in classical genres like nagauta and kouta, viewed min’yō as a scaffold for students to transition to these more serious genres. As such, this was reflected in his instruction and influenced many other professional teachers. This process of elevating Japanese folk music added elements from the more elite arts while still attending to the spatial and regional aspects of min’yō.

<sup>31</sup> Helen Rees showcases China’s rapid transition to valuing of intangible cultural heritage in the early 2000s. “First, a substantial element of nationalism and competitiveness is at work: things started to take off with the initiation of the UNESCO ‘Masterpieces’ proclamations in 2001, when traditional arts suddenly joined sports achievements as a potent means of garnering international recognition. Second, the rise of the market economy plays a part. China’s 2002 report to the World Intellectual Property Organization on folklore protection and legislation notes that economic development in some regions is based on locally distinctive culture, creating new cultural industries. Third, a clear link exists between the rhetoric of China’s nascent environmental and intangible cultural heritage movements. Fourth, and more nebulously, as the effects of globalization, breakneck economic development, and individual physical mobility hit China, there seems for some to be a sense of cultural dislocation as historic neighbourhoods are bulldozed to make way for skyscrapers, families disperse, and local traditions previously taken for granted disappear.” (2012; 50-51).

<sup>32</sup> Rees offers a similar experience regarding the *qin*. “I bought mine in 1988 for 500 RMB, while just over 20 years later high-quality new instruments retail for 30,000

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RMB or more” (2012; 48).

<sup>33</sup> The difference is synthetic vs natural skin.

<sup>34</sup> The rest of Abbott’s post adds that even more woods can be used to make shamisen such as hard maple (*Acer saccharum*), purpleheart (*Peltogyne*), and oak (*Quercus*; most species can be used however the California Black Oak is softer at 1,090 hardness).

<sup>35</sup> Abbott notes that bloodwood is becoming harder to source so African padauk can be substituted.

<sup>36</sup> This wood hardness rating comes from the Janka scale which measures the amount of force required to embed a 0.444-inch steel ball halfway into the wood. Thus, an oak hardness would read 1,200 lbf.

<sup>37</sup> The other listed woods – maple (hard), purpleheart, African padauk, and bloodwood scale at 1,450, 2,520, 1,970, and 2,900 respectively (The Wood Database).

<sup>38</sup> CITES lists in appendices I, II, and III the different levels and types of protection from over-exploitation. Appendix I lists the most endangered species of animals and plants by restricting them from commercial trade. Appendix II lists species that may become threatened with extinction without trade oversight. Appendix III lists species requested by a participant for inclusion and requires the “cooperation of other countries to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation.” Whereas the IUCN created their list in 1964 detailing the global conservation status of animal, fungi, and plant species. It categorizes the species across nine categories: not evaluated, data deficient, least concern, near threatened, vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered, extinct in the wild, and extinct.

<sup>39</sup> These parentheticals are sung by the shamisen players to punctuate phrases. I confirmed these are non-lexical as my collaborators didn’t translate them and other song texts leave them in the romanized Japanese.

<sup>40</sup> Yano also includes that both *min’yō* and *enka* employ the *furusato* (hometown) as a source of power and comfort for audiences. However, *min’yō* maintains a higher status in Japan as it affirms its link to “the folk” in its ties to amateurism and regionalism (Ibid., 18)

<sup>41</sup> In my experience, the private instruction of dance was rare. First, as the pandemic restricted any meeting for instruction. Second, in Morita sensei’s age she feels less inclined to start at the beginning of each dance she knows. She shows greater interest in the nuance of technique than in the basic form of the dance at her age.

<sup>42</sup> Supposedly, the song originated in the Edo-period. Its lyrics mock the chief retainer of the Kumamoto clan, Heitazaemon Hori, the official who banned expensive silk clothing.

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<sup>43</sup> Japanese theater scholar Maki Isaka critically analyzes the role of *onnagata* (men who specialize in female performance in Kabuki theater) in *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering*. Her monograph investigates the mapping of femininity on to these male actors the ideal women. This spills outside of the theatre where these male actors come to represent the feminine ideal. Her analysis focuses on the uncommon and less-storied female *onnagata* who imitate men imitating women. As she writes, “the highest compliment for female *onnagata* was favorable comparison to their male counterparts, it was impossible to tell that she was not a male” (2016, 19).

<sup>44</sup> The word “min’yō” appears once in a dynastic history from 901 from the Chinese characters “min” (people) and “yō” (song). After this earliest appearance, the word does not appear again until the Meiji Era (1868 - 1912). Prior terms included *hinaburi*, *hinauta*, *inaka-uta*, *kuniburi*, *kunibushi* (all roughly mean ‘country song/style’), and *fuzoku-uta* (from Chinese meaning rural custom song). Hughes brings English readers into the contentious scholarship of min’yō etymology and the many schemas, taxonomies, and classifications of the genre and its varied styles (2008). For my purposes, Westernization/romanticization (although Hughes establishes bucolic views of the rural appear earlier than some scholars admit) occurs as the Japanese stop referring to folk songs as *riyo* (rural song) and *zokuyo* (popular/common song). The prefixes “ri” and “zoku” are contrasted at this time with “ga” of *gagaku* (Japanese Imperial court music), meaning elegant or refined. It is not until the 1970s that the word “min’yō” refers to almost all Japanese folk songs (2008).

<sup>45</sup> This importation and adoption of European and American music was not limited to art music but also folk songs which kept their melodies but were given new Japanese lyrics. These new lyrics supposedly reflected Japanese values of the Meiji era.

<sup>46</sup> Even worse, according to Hughes, the cultural chauvinist climate encouraged men “not to waste their time in dissipation with the women of the quarters; nor should they be subjected to the songs of these women, songs of helpless love and emotional wallowing, hardly conducive to the spirit of soldierly dedication and self-sacrifice” (113).

<sup>47</sup> See “the father of modern koto,” Kengyo Yatsunami.

<sup>48</sup> His school was modeled on the traditional *iemoto* system and *tataki* meaning percussive, and it is opposed to Takahashi’s lighter, plucked “*hiki*” style

<sup>49</sup> *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 260 U.S. 178 (1922).

<sup>50</sup> *Gidayu* is another narrative *shamisen* genre related to *bunraku* puppet theater.

<sup>51</sup> Japanese Americans pronounced Sacramento as “*Sakura-mento*” which led to clever word play by using an alternate pronunciation of the kanji for *sakura* (cherry blossom) as “*Ō*” with the Chinese character for capital as “*fu*” (Maeda 200; 95).

<sup>52</sup> Many like my grandmother, daughter of Italian immigrants, was distraught by the disappearance of her Japanese farm neighbors, the *Watanabes* and *Moritas*.

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Throughout her life she has continued searching for their young children, her early friends.

<sup>53</sup> *Rafu Shimpo* reveals organizers requested no one bring gifts, performers refusing gifts, and insisting on low audience numbers.



## Glossary of Japanese Terms

<i>Atouta:</i>	After song.
<i>Dou:</i>	The shamisen's body; referring to the resonating box of the instrument.
<i>Dodoitsu:</i>	A secular Japanese song form the late 18 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>Engei-kai:</i>	A hybrid community talent show and potluck.
<i>Furosato:</i>	Old town.
<i>Gidayū:</i>	Chanted narration for Japanese puppet theater named for Takemoto Gidayū (1651 – 1714). This also refers to the shamisen and its musical accompaniment.
<i>Hajiki:</i>	A shamisen technique where the player plucks the indicated string using one of the fingers, which depresses that string.
<i>Hozonkai:</i>	A preservation society.
<i>Hon'uta:</i>	Main song.
<i>Iemoto:</i>	Family foundation/system; also refers to the head of the foundation.
<i>Issei:</i>	First generation Japanese Americans.
<i>Itomaki:</i>	The tuning pegs of the shamisen.
<i>Kakegoe</i> –	A shout of encouragement used to time activity; also called <i>hayashi-kotoba</i> , meaning accompanying words.
<i>Kinkirakin:</i>	A min'yō song but the title refers to textiles with gold and silver threads.
<i>Kobushi:</i>	A style of vibrato in min'yo music.
<i>Kokoro:</i>	Heart or spirit.
<i>Kai:</i>	Club; society; association.
<i>Ma:</i>	Interval; space; gap.
<i>Maeuta:</i>	Foresong.
<i>Matsuris:</i>	Festivals.
<i>Minzoku geinō:</i>	Japanese folk performing arts.
<i>Natori:</i>	Accredited master.
<i>Nihonjinron:</i>	Theories of the Japanese people.

<i>Nikkei:</i>	People of Japanese descent outside of Japan. The Japanese diaspora
<i>Nisei:</i>	Second-generation Japanese Americans.
<i>Oiwake:</i>	A free rhythm and melismatic style of Japanese folk song.
<i>Okeiko:</i>	Training.
<i>Obon:</i>	Japanese ancestor festival held in the summer.
<i>Sansei:</i>	Third generation of Japanese Americans.
<i>Sao:</i>	The neck of the shamisen
<i>Shakuhachi:</i>	Japanese end-blown flute made from bamboo.
<i>Shihan:</i>	Japanese honorific title of “master.”
<i>Shin-Issei:</i>	New first generation of Japanese Americans. Refers mainly to Japanese immigrants who arrived immediately after WWII.
<i>Shinpa-geki:</i>	Japanese new-school drama
<i>Sukui:</i>	A shamisen technique in which the player uses the plectrum to strike the string up and away from the face of the instrument.
<i>Tanoshimi:</i>	Enjoyment; pleasure; amusement; delight; joy; fun.
<i>Tenjin:</i>	The peg box and head piece of the shamisen.
<i>Tōdō-za:</i>	Meaning the “proper way,” this was a guild of blind musicians operating from the 16 <sup>th</sup> to the late 19 <sup>th</sup> century.
<i>Uchikomu:</i>	Shortened to “uchi,” it means “to hammer,” the player sounds the string by rapidly and forcefully “hammering” the specified finger into the indicated position on the fingerboard.
<i>Yokyoku:</i>	Singing in noh drama.
<i>Yukata:</i>	A Japanese unlined cotton summer robe.
<i>Zaibei dōhō:</i>	The Japanese in America.

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