

Dances of Memory, Dances of Oblivion: The Politics of Performance in Contemporary Okinawa 記憶の踊り、忘却の踊り—現代沖縄においてパフォーマンスの政治学

Christopher T. Nelson

The Burden of the Past

In Okinawa, as perhaps anywhere else, the past exists uneasily alongside the present. It can pass unnoticed, occasionally rising for a moment of recognition, slipping away again under the weight of the routine tasks of daily life. And like the unexploded bombs that still lie close to the surface of the Okinawan landscape, it can erupt into the present, casting its shadow over a future not yet experienced. Memories, wrenching and traumatic, can tear the fabric of the everyday, plunging those who experience them into despair and even madness. They haunt the present with their melancholy demands for repression, making their presence known in the prohibitions that they have engendered.¹

For decades, Okinawans have tried to come to grips with a past that reaches so insistently into the present—memories of the battlefield, repressive colonial policies, and the disinterested neglect of the American-led reconstruction.² It is, of course, a history that took shape on cane plantations and military parade grounds, in police barracks, classrooms and amid throngs of demonstrators. However, the relationships that emerged out of this experience were also enmeshed in metaphors and practices of closeness, sexual and familial.³ They have been enacted, criticized and challenged at kitchen tables and household altars, in farmhouse bedrooms, neighborhood bars and backstreet brothels. These intimate moments of daily life have been constantly

subject to appropriation by soldiers and bureaucrats, entrepreneurs and ethnographers. The ideal of a respectful and affectionate subordination to parental authority was cultivated through a myriad of institutions and discourses during the Japanese colonial era; filial affect was then bound to a fascist Imperial ideology and its demands for loyalty to the Emperor and absolute sacrifice.⁴ The Japanese Army laid claim to the valorized bonds of maternal love as soldiers encouraged mothers to murder their children and commit suicide rather than surrender to invading American soldiers.⁵ Under the American Occupation, the division of domestic labor within farming families was reified and commodified, providing servants, gardeners, and cooks for military households as well as sex workers for the bars and brothels of newly-constructed base towns.⁶



Photo 1: A Street in Koza

The collective struggle of Okinawan survivors, secondary witnesses and activists to critically reexamine the past unearths complex and overdetermined traces inscribed in memory and in graphic representation. Those traces are not simply-if such a thing could ever be simple-of deprivation and exploitation, of terror and loss. The Okinawan past-the history that extends beyond the Japanese colonial era to the Kingdom of Ryūkyū-is also a reservoir of possibility. Once stigmatized as backward and oppressive, it has become a powerful archive of romantic imagery and practices for Japanese nativist artists, scholars and politicians as well as for Okinawans themselves. Traditional Okinawan villages are represented as sites where the Japanese people (for these discourses often appropriate Okinawans as something like living traces of the ancestral Japanese) could truly dwell, places of organic totality lost to life in the modern world. Work was meaningful, relationships were close and continuing. Life could be lived from birth to death in the same site; men and women, spirits and deities living and laboring in harmony. Agrarian rituals, songs of thanksgiving, the ruses of traders, the sexual autonomy of the *moashibi*,⁷ invocations of ancestral spirits and local deities await nothing more than recovery in the practices of the present.

Beautiful women and handsome men in homespun kimono; villages of small wooden houses with thatch or tile roofs and walled courtyards; songs of romantic obsession, the promise of sexual intimacy, separation and melancholy. The production and circulation of these images of the rural Okinawan past as signs are characterized by the powerful and unsettling ambiguity of trauma and possibility. Recollections conjure intertwined and contradictory feelings of hope and loss, pleasure and horror, origin and apocalypse. It seems that however carefully the narrative is crafted to emphasize one aspect, its counterpart remains just at the edge of perception. I do not mean to suggest that this

is a natural property of the sign; rather it is the outcome of the interwoven practices of progressive historiography, native ethnology, popular folksongs, Imperial apologia, storytelling, conversations with the dead, political debate and more.



Photo 2: Neighborhood Store, Naha

As the American military occupation continues, young artists and performers turn to these images, working to reappropriate the affect with which they were once charged. For dancers such as members of the *Sonda Seinenkai*-the youth group that I will discuss in the pages to follow-they are saturated with possibilities that may be realized in the present. While their performances do not deal explicitly with images of tragedy and oppression, they are shadowed by this past in the most intimate ways. Every day, the dancers feel it in the ache of their tired limbs, their joints bent and twisted by labor long before the ravages of age take them, their skin burned and dried by long hours in the sun. They feel the shame of occupation in the long detours that American bases impose on their travel to work, in the way a word like "houseboy" rolls off their grandfather's tongue, in the money from base leases that fills their pockets after trickling down through grandparents, uncles

and parents. They know it in the longing for a lover who is away searching for work in Osaka or Kawasaki or spending the evening pouring drinks for a businessman in a neighborhood bar. They feel it in the desire for a new car, a comfortable house, a private room that they will never own. They see it in the faces of their mixed-blood siblings, in the tears that streak their grandmother's cheeks as she kneels in prayer at the family tomb. They hear it in the laughter of drunken Marines and affluent Japanese tourists. They taste it in the *awamori*-the Okinawan rice liquor-that they drink through long afternoons and evenings of boredom, frustrated by the lack of work. Feeling this, they turn to other images of the past as they search for ways to make and remake themselves. Working in the most intimate spaces of everyday life-their homes, their neighborhood streets-they struggle to transform the world.



Photo 3: New Shopping Center in Urasoe

Performing, Remembering, Becoming

I spent every evening during the summer of 1998 at the Sonda Community Center in Okinawa City, about a mile or so south of the point where the Koza Riot began. As I had done the summer before, I joined dozens of men and women in the pounded clay courtyard as they prepared to dance *eisā*. I joined them as a visitor, a student and a friend, struggling to learn something of the way that Okinawans came to grips with a past that weighed so heavily on the present. In fields and parking lots across central Okinawa, thousands of young Okinawan men and women practice *eisā* throughout the summer, preparing for three nights of dancing during *obon*-the festival of the dead.



Photo 4: Sonda Community Center

In recent years, many scholars have worked to understand the politics of remembrance in Okinawa.⁸ However, little attention has been paid to *eisā*, the most widespread modality of public memorative practice in the islands. As my friends often told me, *eisā* was necessary so that they could respond to the demands and desires of their ancestral spirits, to the hundreds of thousands who were killed during

the war. *Eisā* is danced to escort the spirits of the dead from their tombs back to their homes and to entertain them during *obon*. To narrate and embody the history of impoverished Okinawan courtiers sent down from the capital. To express and sustain the pride and honor of these neighborhoods, the power and the artistry of the dancers. To create and share *karī*, the gift of happiness and belonging produced in performance, necessary for life.

Okinawa City was still a base town, its crowded neighborhoods of concrete buildings clustered along the fence of Kadena Air Base like a coral reef. And yet, the numbers of Marines and airmen in the streets have been reduced by new regulations imposed by their commands and others have been encouraged to stay on base by the escalation in anti-base demonstrations. In recent years, the once-thriving base economy has collapsed as a result of the loss of dollars spent by servicemen on R&R during or after combat in Korea or Vietnam, the long slide of the dollar against the yen, as well as the construction of on-base communities that claim the GI dollars once spent in Okinawa City. Row after row of buildings thrown up in the frenzy of a Vietnam era boom are now falling to ruin, the bar district is quiet, prostitution has virtually disappeared-Filipina and Russian women are now working in the bars that remain. Most Japanese tourists avoid Okinawa City, preferring the resort hotels of Onna and the southern islands, the shopping malls and nightclubs in Mihama. The bases remain, dominating the Okinawan landscape, a staging area for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a beachhead held against dreams of developing central Okinawa in other ways.⁹



Photo 5: Koza's Sonda Street

After the Pacific War, this area of uninhabited wooded hillocks and swampy lowlands was settled by impoverished former Ryūkyūan courtiers who had lived in Nishizato, a farming village several miles to the west. Their homes had been destroyed in the Battle of Okinawa, their land confiscated in the construction of Kadena Air Base.¹⁰ They were joined by displaced or unemployed farmers from all over central and northern Okinawa, workers from Kyūshū and Amami Ōshima, as well as laborers

from other outlying islands. While they worked in the American bases that now dominated the island or in the cities that were quickly constructed around them, they built this crowded neighborhood of narrow streets and small wooden or concrete houses. At its center stood the community center, surrounded by a group of massive family tombs.

In many ways, the community center echoes the space of the tomb. Before the war, dancers and musicians from Nishizato gathered on summer evenings in the courtyards of the crypts that lay on the edge of their hamlet. Night after night, they danced and sang before the spirits of their ancestors, practicing for the day that would bring *eisā* again to the streets of their villages and the courtyards of their homes. Pleasurable and demanding, away from the fields where they labored each day, from the discipline of the home, from the regulation of the state, resisting the pressure and the lure of labor migration to the mainland or the South Pacific. In the company of their friends and the spirits of their ancestors, farmers and laborers became dancers and musicians.

Those tombs and villages are gone. The material presence of the ancestors, so painstakingly ordered and attended by their families, was fragmented and dispersed—destroyed along with many of the lives of those who memorated them. For those who survived, relationships with ancestral spirits were too precious to lose, obligations to the dead too great to ignore. Rebuilding the tombs and recollecting the ancestors was one of the first priorities of Okinawan households in the postwar reconstruction. However, tombs and household altars are not the only places in which the spatial fields of the ancestors were reinstalled. The community center itself has been a site of repeated daily labor to situate and recall the dead. It is a space that is filled with the creative activity of dancers who struggle to express their desire to understand—and to change—the world around them.

Virtually every inch of available wall space is covered with the graphic traces of Sonda's past. Banners commemorating their victories in competitions. Row after row of framed photographs showing generations of dancers. Certificates noting the youth group's performances in decades of annual *eisā* competition in Okinawa City and their appearances throughout Japan. Letters of appreciation from prominent Japanese politicians, performers and admiring fans. Images that organize powerful constellations of gender, work and creativity.

The oldest picture, a framed black and white group photograph above the door shows a group of men, lean and sunburned, staring gravely at the camera. They are dressed in short, working kimono and wearing farmers' woven conical hats. One or two men hold *sanshin*—the Okinawan shamisen—and several drums are lined up in the foreground. These are the first dancers to come together to dance *eisā* after the war. In the early 1950s, Kohama Shuei, a well-known musician as well as a member of one of the leading families in the area, gathered the young men of the neighborhood together in the Quonset hut that served as their community center. Together they worked to master not only the steps and the songs of the *eisā*, but the style that marked the performances during the festival of the dead in the streets of Nishizato, their lost village. In central Okinawa, only young men of noble ancestry had been allowed to participate in *eisā*, and then only with the groups from their natal communities. Until Shuei decided to resume the dance after the war, it was inconceivable that outsiders would be allowed to join. Over the objections of many of his neighbors, Shuei broke with tradition. He not only allowed but encouraged all the young men to dance. If the disparate group that had come together in his neighborhood were to survive the aftermath of the war, he was sure that they would need *eisā*.



Photo 6: Kohama Shuei

Faded color photographs show that women have joined the group by the late 1950s or early 1960s. The decision to eliminate gender as well as class restrictions seems to be both principled and pragmatic. Kohama said that he and his friends were grateful for the contribution of women to the life of the community, their work and their sacrifice. At the same time, they thought that the addition of women would add to the complexity of the dance and would certainly appeal to the audiences at public performances.

The clothing of the dancers also changed. When they were all *déclassé* nobles, they proudly wore the modest kimono of the farming village where their families were born. When participation in the *seinenkai* was opened to everyone, noble or commoner, native or

outsider, men began to wear the garb of a stylized Okinawan samurai, women the equally stylized kimono of rural farmers. Kohama Shuei told me that he and his friends were inspired to select costumes that would help the young men and women of the neighborhood to create a dramatic impression on the audience and judges at performances. One cannot help but notice the powerful representations of gender and class in these images, in contrast to the conditions of Okinawan daily life. To imagine the attraction that representations of strong, handsome Ryūkyūan warriors had for a cook at a base club or a servant in an American household; to think of the possibilities that a graceful, laughing rural dancer presented to a maid at a cheap hotel or a prostitute in a crowded club. What seems to be a gendered assignment of class also speaks to the history of the community: men's martial attire evokes the remembered world of the Ryūkyūan Court; women's simple yet elegant kimono references the rural villages where *déclassé* nobles labored to build new lives.

At the same time, these costumes were not simple representations of the Okinawan past; rather they were selected from the most popular plays and dances of the Okinawan theater-the *Uchinā Shibai*. It was in Okinawan popular theater-a genre also suppressed by the Japanese colonial authorities-that performers could move effortlessly from a tragedy depicting court intrigues and martial prowess to a romanticized peasant dance. Thus, costumes not only referred to favorite images and idealized qualities of the past; they also suggested the protean expressiveness of theatrical performance. However, in transforming themselves, dancers also opened themselves to the judgment of the audience gathered for performances: an appropriated image could only be maintained if the dancers demonstrated that they were deserving of it.

The images displayed in the community center are important elements in mediating the

transmission of the varying versions of the seinenkai's past. They provide visual linkages between the interior space of the building and other people, places and events distributed over space and time. Traces of other moments, graphic reminders that figure practices of recollection, for the storytelling that is as much a part of *eisā* as the dance.

Outside, the members of the seinenkai prepared for rehearsal-just as they did every evening during the three months preceding obon. Most of the dancers came to practice directly from work. From the dress of the members of the youth group, it was clear that Sonda was a working class neighborhood. A majority of the young men were in *sagyōfuku*. Baggy, calf-length trousers in vivid pastel colors, white t-shirts, towels knotted around their heads. High school boys still in school uniforms: black trousers and white shirts. The remaining young men were dressed in current hip-hop fashion: shiny sweats, baggy denim shorts or pants, large, blocky sneakers, oversized jerseys: Fubu, Mecca, the Japanese National soccer team.

Young women in fashionably tight blouses with wide collars and flared pants. A few in matching knee-length skirts and vests, the uniforms of local banks and offices. None of the high school girls still wore their school uniforms. Younger girls in wide-leg jeans, clunky, thick-soled sneakers or sandals, undersized military T-shirts. Style means attention to detail: the right jewelry, wristwatch, hairstyle, colored contacts.

The *jikata*-sanshin musicians- sat at the front, tuning their instruments and warming up their voices. Dancers removed their cellular phones, pagers, watches, lighters, cigarette packs and wallets, leaving them on windowsills and along the steps. Everyone filed down onto the watered clay surface of the courtyard. The lead *jikata* laughed, shouting to the new dancers: "Unless you decide that you're going to try to

do this better than everyone else, your dancing won't ever amount to anything!"



Photo 7: Jikata

Dancers came to the community center to play, but it is a form of play that has its costs. The dancers have shrugged off many of the more conventional chances for recreation that contemporary Japanese society offers, even in Okinawa. They have-if only for the moment-refused the distractions of mass culture, of television, bars, games, parks and films. Although they may dance side by side with the young men or women-neighbors, coworkers or classmates-who they might otherwise date, they have deferred the opportunity to do so.¹¹ At the same time, they have refused certain kinds of work: more profitable employment in the dense urban areas of Naha or Urasoe, mainland Japan or America; labor in the remaining bars or brothels, nightclubs and snacks of nearby Nakanomachi. They cannot meet the demands of employers for overtime, for different hours, for selfless devotion to their jobs. For the most part, they have also turned their backs on university education and intellectual labor. The dancers have also sacrificed one of the most treasured goals of a worker-sleep. The toll taken on laboring bodies is inescapable, but sleep offers a daily refuge

from work, a chance to recover one's strength, to heal. Perhaps even the opportunity to dream. Instead they commit themselves to hours of arduous and demanding activity that, until the recent popularization of Okinawan performing arts, marked them as hooligans and lowlives.

Standing in the courtyard, the drummers—all men—adjusted the carriage of their instruments and dancers shifted their bodily hexis to that of the dance. The male dancers lowered their hips, turned their knees out and sank into a wide stance. Head up, shoulders back, hands on hips, a look of quiet confidence on their faces. Women stood, feet together, legs and back straight, hands at their hips, faintly smiling. The men's position is hard; the women more relaxed.¹² Older members moved through the formation, physically correcting the dancers.

To the front, the jikata counted out the beat and drove into *Nandaki Bushi-The Ballad of the Southern Grove*—the first song of the eleven pieces that make up their *eisā*. With the simultaneous sound of fifty drums being struck, the dance began. The song is sung in unison, the lyrics in Okinawan. For twenty minutes or more, the songs continue and the dancers dance. Women work to make the stately grace of the dance seem effortless. Along with the male dancers, their performance draws heavily on Okinawan folk and classical genres, creating the figure that organizes the *eisā*, elegant and controlled. The drummers dance a counterpoint to this. Leaping and turning, beating out a rhythm that is sometimes straight, sometimes syncopated, they struggle to maintain Sonda's reputation of speed and physicality. Dancers whose bodies are already exhausted and injured from long hours of harsh, physical labor. Dancers for whom this evening's exertions are a respite before another day of work. Sweat from the dancers splashes the ground—some people say that if you scratch away the clay, it's salt all the way down to the roofs of the tombs at the bottom of the hill.

A 2010 performance of Sonda Seinenkai:[here](#).



Photo 8: Dancing at the Community Center

Their performance conjures the account of a journey, assembled and sung from narratives of the past. A complex secondary genre, *eisā* is a cycle of narratives that recount the diaspora of the Ryūkyūan nobility that began in the 19th Century, their impoverishment and exile to the mountainous northern forests, their struggle to return to the capital once more. Each of the songs narrates the experiences of a particular time and place where the former nobles lived along their journey. Some are songs that were composed during the period that they represent; others are later representations of that time and place. With their own particular chronotopes, their own narrative organization of space and time, the songs are bound together by the formal structure and the performative production of the dance. All are woven together, harmonized in performance by the powerful rhythm of the drums that opens the dance. *Eisā*'s heartbeat, say the dancers. These songs also fitted together by the similar stylistics of the dance: stepping and spinning, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. The understated, graceful movement of the women that demonstrates the influence of Okinawan

traditional dance. The way that *shimedaiko*-the small, hand-held drums-are extended at arms length by the men, then swung in dramatic underhand arcs.

The initial songs are elegiac narratives of the past, narrating what could be called Ryukyuan mythic time-a powerful fusion of time and space. Even the titles of the songs-*Nandaki Bushi*, *Chunjun Nagari* and *Kudaka*¹⁴ rejecting dutiful labor and the submission to authority in favor of creative performances, drinking and romantic celebrations. Dancers create narratives of uncommodified sexuality and personal choice in the time that they might otherwise spend in bars and clubs. Who is to say which is more real or more fulfilling? At the same time, the moments recreated in the performance suggest that their determination has a cost. Autonomy has its bounds, and desire cannot always be fulfilled. A powerful tension emerges in the performance-the tension between hope and loss.



Photo 9: Women Dancing Eisaa

Like the voices heard in these songs, the dancers face the consequences of their dance-fatigue, disappointment, sacrifice of opportunities for material advancement. Still, they throw themselves into the moment.

Determined to master the most forceful strikes, the most furious arcs of the drums, the most spectacular spins. Dreaming that they will equal the forms of the past, adding something new, something of their own creation. Hence the lead *jikata*'s comment, "Unless you decide that you're going to try to do this better than everyone else, your dancing will never amount to anything!" Close to exhaustion, their voices hoarse, uniforms dripping with sweat, they conclude the dance with an exultant burst of energy.

Eisā speaks in many voices. Of course, it calls out to the audience present-friends and family, ancestral spirits, tourists. It speaks to others as well, absent parents, companions and lovers, drawing on the captured speech of singers represented by *jikata* of long ago. It would also be possible to think of another level of address: the singer speaks to herself in her words and her actions, repeating again and again these narratives of what she can do, of who she is. Through this repetition, the singers bring the world of *eisā*, the world of the work into themselves, into their everyday lives.

Dancers are determined to transform themselves from the young men and women who began learning the *eisā* together into those who are fully capable of the dance. To become those who are able to produce *karī*. Describing it as a gift of happiness and belonging, my friends have told me that *karī* is essential to life. As performers, it is their responsibility to create *karī* and "attach" it to their relatives, their friends and neighbors. *Karī* strengthens and renews the bond between the living, the ancestral spirits, and those yet to be born. In *eisā*, the dancers draw upon their aesthetic, productive powers to recollect and recreate the very relationships that make life worth living, in which the living and the dead can join each other in happiness. *Chura nashun*, people say-to make beautiful. In the moment of the dance, filled with the complex patterns described by their bodies in movement, their voices raised in

song, the rhythm measured out by their drums, they create place and a time of beauty.

Can this beauty obscure as it creates? As Paul Ricoeur has written, there are consequences to representations of the past if they put history at the risk of forgetting.¹⁵ Is this true of the time and space filled by *eisā*? Certainly, the cycle of songs eschews any direct reference to the abjection, the horror of the eras that they depict—although *minyō* that take up these themes certainly exist. Nonetheless, as I have suggested, any reference to the past always carries the charged ambiguity of a beauty underwritten by the memory of pain and loss, a joy tempered by sadness and despair. The beauty of the performances begun by Kohama Shuei and his friends was driven by the need to renew life in a shattered world. The dancers who still gather to learn and to perform the *eisā* know this well. How can it be completely forgotten in the dance?

They demonstrate that they have the courage to put aside memories of horror and abjection, to allow these inescapable fears and anxieties to slip into a kind of oblivion during the performance. In the courtyard of the community center, in the space soaked with the sweat of generations of dancers, they create something of beauty in the shadow of the horrors of the past. This is why today's dancers no longer need to be of noble ancestry. They have learned to do the things in practice that were once the exclusive provenance of those of noble birth. Hour after hour, night after night, they have developed the skill and artistry to dance the *eisā*, to create *karī*, to rebuild what has been broken, to make a place for the living and the dead in the world that they have been given.

Dancing in the Street

It was the night of September 4, 1998—*ūkui*, the third and final night of *obon*. We had already been dancing through the narrow streets and alleys of Sonda for several hours. Women in

indigo kimono, men in the attire of Ryūkyūan warriors—dressed to convey the images of generations of dancers lining the walls of the community center. For the last three nights, we had covered what seemed to be every road, every path in the neighborhood. We had entertained the spirits of the dead who had returned to their homes and accepted the hospitality and the gifts of the households and businesses that we visited. I was exhausted. My left hand was stiff from carrying my drum and the heavy calluses lining my fingers had begun to tear away. My right shoulder ached from an old injury. Too much drinking, too little sleep. It was much the same with everyone else. Around me, dancers and drummers—particularly the veteran performers—favored damaged knees and shoulders, struggled with increasingly painful back injuries. The everyday world of labor exacts a price from those who struggle to escape its regulation; or perhaps I should say that those who do so are painfully reminded of the price already paid by all who labor.

Although everyone was clearly exhausted, enthusiasm crackled through the formation. It was nearly time for *ôrasê*—a fight between neighboring *seinenkai*. Older members often spoke of the violent clashes with other groups that marked the *eisā* of earlier years. Rocks and bottles were thrown from the audience; groups might even attack one another with heavy bamboo staffs or lash out with fists. Now the battle was waged with *sanshin* and drums, with dancing bodies and raised voices.

Sonda Seinenkai street performance on the final day of Obon, August 2011 [here](#)

Soon, the long column of our dancers emerged into the brightly lit arc of a dingy bar district just south of Sonda. Passing their open doors of a tiny club, I felt a sour blast of dank air from the air-conditioned interior. I was breathing hard, my chest pounding with fatigue, feeling what I feared was my last surge of adrenaline. Far back in the formation, I could hear a muted

call and response from the dancers. One of the men was shouting out something, lost in the pounding of the drums; the women, their voices keen in response. *Give us some sake!* Ahead of us, our banner bobbed up and down as the standard bearer danced to the rhythm of the drums.



Photo 10: Sonda Seinenkai Dancing During Obon

Thousands of spectators of all ages thronged the streets. They parted before us as we advanced, pressing up against the walls and storefronts. The spectators laughed and waved, children darting through our formation as we advanced. People come together in these streets-people that would be unlikely to associate under other circumstances. Not just locals, but Okinawans and mainland Japanese from across a broad spectrum of classes, American soldiers from the bases. Tourists, scholars, performers, broadcasters. Older members gently remind spectators to keep back and moved aside those who ignored their warnings.

The sanshin continued to repeat the same droning figure and we followed the standard bearer deeper and deeper into the bar district. Then, on a signal from the jikata, the standard

was lifted high, and everything stopped. People rushed at us from all sides. Elderly bar owners hurried their hostesses into the street, carrying trays full of glasses of iced oolong tea or *awamori* to us. Reporters from local radio stations moved in to question cooperative looking dancers. Cameramen moved up and down the ranks. Tourists asked to join the dancers in photos. Local merchants signaled to older members, formally handing them envelopes bearing offerings or asking for dancers to enter their clubs for brief performances. The offerings were accepted; the requests were politely declined. Now was not the time for distractions-*ōrāsē* was only moments away.

The crowd before us literally seethed. For the past decade or so, *eisā* has been growing in popularity and tourists throng to performances throughout Okinawa. This is also true of performances in the mainland; however, an *eisā* festival in the Okinawan community in Osaka has been riven by controversy. Local activists encouraged young men and women to dance in order to develop their pride in being Okinawan. They also hoped that the dance would be a source of pride to older members of the community who have suffered from Japanese prejudice throughout their lives-stigmatized as dirty, primitive, menial laborers. In many ways, their *eisā* was an enormous success: thousands of people come each year to watch the performances. However, the presence of so many aggressive spectators discourages the older members of the community from attending. After enduring years of discrimination, they were unwilling to publicly participate in performances that identified them as Okinawans before a Japanese audience, regardless of any putatively positive valuation. At the same time, the insistent clamoring of tourists to join the dance has created other problems. For activists such as Kinjo Kaoru, the festival has become yet another occasion for Japanese tourists to demonstrate the colonizer's thoughtless

appropriation of the most intimate practices of the colonized, the insolent consumer's unconstrained desire. As he bitterly reflected, any Japanese who honestly respected Okinawan culture should simply stay away.¹⁶

Sonda has been subjected to the same flood of visitors. Mainland tourists come to Sonda throughout the summer, but their numbers swell during the days of Obon and the festival that follows. The members of the seinenkai anticipate these visits and are prepared to deal with their nearly overwhelming numbers. During performances, volunteers direct traffic and control tourist presence, keeping them out of the way of the dancers and insisting that they not interfere with local residents. While never quite extended the warm embrace of belonging that they might hope for, tourists are treated as guests, with kindness and respect. The dancers allow them to beat on the drums after practice, seat them at tables in the kôminkan, offer them food and drink, entertain their questions, include them in conversations, even teach them to dance. Moments such as this are opportunities for the dancers to demonstrate their confidence and their pride in their dance.

Iha Masakazu, the charismatic young leader of the seinenkai, told me that members of the youth group dance for many reasons: to be with their friends, to carry on a family tradition, to show respect for their ancestors. Still, he said that the most important reason is to be seen.¹⁷ Most of the members spend their working hours in garages, buses, technical schools, grocery stores, hotel lobbies, restaurant kitchens and shop counters. They long to be seen as something else, and in the images of the past and present members of the seinenkai that line the kôminkan, they have an object for their longing. Jacques Ranciere has written:

All my work on workers' emancipation has shown me that the most prominent of the claims put forward by the workers and the poor

was precisely the claim to visibility, a will to enter the political realm of appearance, the affirmation of a capacity for appearance.¹⁸

When these young men and women perform in the streets of Sonda, on the field surrounded by thousands of spectators at the Zentô Eisâ Matsuri, before a busload of mainland high school students, they know that they will not only be seen, but they will be seen as powerful, dynamic dancers of the Sonda Eisâ. Time and time again members have told me of the pride, the pleasure and the sense of duty that they feel when they are seen in this way, seen by their friends and family, their ancestral spirits, Japanese tourists and American spectators.



Photo 11: Sonda Seinenkai Television Interview

This confidence is reflected in the equal treatment that they accord to their visitors. Young tourists and aging schoolteachers, native ethnologists and professional performing artists, well-known athletes and television personalities all seem to be given the same consideration. However, this does not seem to be an attempt to flatten social distinction. The courtesies extended to guests in Sonda acknowledge the importance of these visitors. As Iha himself wrote in a collection of essays

about eisā: "we dance the eisā holding in our hearts the idea that each one of our viewers is our judge. What's more, we are committed to show them a performance that will live up to the expectations that they have for the Sonda eisā.¹⁹ Without diminishing themselves, dancers acknowledge that their guests possess the skill and knowledge to make valid aesthetic judgements. This is an important element in the construction of the work: it enables the dancers to appropriate their audience in the same way that Kinjō feared that spectators in Taishō-ku would appropriate the performance.

The youth group from neighboring Kubota approached us from the end of the street, pushing through the crowd like an icebreaker. As they moved closer, the sounds of their performance filled the silence that we had created. Finally, they halted when they were no more than ten yards to our front. A space opened between us, and the standard bearers of both groups stepped into the opening, lifting and shaking the huge flags as the crowd roared. Without waiting for Kubota to be completely prepared, our jikata played the opening notes of *Chunjun Nagari*. *Ôrâsê* had begun. We all struck our drums in unison-the sound was tremendous. Kubota had also begun, their version of *Chunju Nagari* echoing seconds behind our own. For a moment, I worried about the distraction of their competing melody, feared being drawn away from our rhythm. But there was no time for that kind of concern-the dance demanded my whole attention. Every moment had to demonstrate pride, poise, perfection.

The crowd was joining us too-long wailing whistles, shouted responses. I glimpsed an elderly man dancing in a doorway, the eisā of decades ago. The responses of the women behind me, sharp and strong. The dancers next to me, behind and in front of me, matching me in every move, perfectly synchronized. How can I describe their expressions-rapturous? I could no longer hear Kubota at all, I couldn't see

anything beyond the front of our formation. There was no time, no space for anything but the dance. The repetitions of the figures of the dance came effortlessly. I felt as if I was hitting the drum harder than I ever had before, stepping higher, swinging the drum in powerful arcs. We danced through the cycle of songs, then repeated it again.

We all began to push forward. Our columns collapsed until we were all standing shoulder-to-shoulder, beating the drums furiously. Behind us, the men and women dancers moved forward as well, adding their voices and their clapping to the dance. I'd lost all track of Kubota. Their standard bearer and ours circled each other, bobbing and leaping in the space between groups. The tempo increased, the sanshin booming and percussive. We pressed forward, hammering away as if we could physically drive them back with the intensity of our drumming. I was blinded with sweat, my arms ached with the effort. I was beginning to worry that I couldn't go on any further when I noticed Iha whistling and waving us forward as he danced with the standard. Dancers from both groups set their drums on the ground and leaped into the space between the formations. More and more dancers joined-two first year members rushed past me, one on the other's shoulders.

The jikata shifted to a different version of the standard *Tooshindoi-The Chinese Treasure Ship Has Come*-moving from the driving, percussive rhythms of eisā to a folk style that showcased their speed and agility. And as quickly as the tempo and the style of the performance changed, the feeling of conflict slipped away. Everyone from Kubota and Sonda came together, men and women, laughing and dancing. Everyone was shouting *Kachâshî!* *Kachâshî!* Tourists were being pulled from the crowd into the street. The dancers offered them their drums, demonstrated gestures, drew them into the dance. Many of the tourists hesitated, laughing nervously; others rushed to

join in, waving their arms in imitation of *kachâshî*, the ecstatic dance that ends every performance. Taking up the *bachi* and the drums that dancers handed to them, they tried to strike up a rhythm of their own.

One of the former leaders of the *seinenkai* told me that he loved *ôrâsê*, the chance to put Sonda's skill and artistry on the line in front of an audience, to confront a rival group and show them exactly what they could do. However, he said that the violence that once went along with *ôrâsê* ruined the moment. Everyone in Sonda was proud of being tough, he said, but a lot of other people in Okinawa were tough too. However, there wasn't anyone else who could dance like Sonda. Violence detracted from the performance, diminished their accomplishments. What's more, it made enemies in the neighboring communities that should have been brought together by the dance. In the current performance of *eisâ*, dancers like Iha have found a way to bring neighbors together while still demonstrating the beauty of their dance.

Once, after a long and demanding practice, I asked several of the older dancers why they still performed. Zukeran Masahide—one of the most active older members and a colorful *jikata*—answered without hesitation: "We still have to put the world back together." This is what the dancers work together to create. In the streets where Okinawans have labored for decades, running bars and shops that cater to American G.I.s and Japanese tourists. In the streets lined with faltering businesses, with Naha-based banks and mainland convenience stores, where young men and women from the neighborhood are waitresses and clerks, parking lot attendants and idlers. In the streets that are the lines of communication for the American bases, where Japanese and American strategic decisions are executed, along which troops and supplies are moved. In the streets where Okinawans once rioted against American oppression, burning vehicles, beating their

occupants, storming the gates of the base.

In these streets, the spectators and performers come together, linked in the production of *karî*. As I have suggested, this is not simply the distribution of good fortune but the creation of a network of relationships that includes the performers, the diverse group of Okinawans and mainland Japanese, the spirits of the dead. In this place, once built by the labor of their ancestors, a moment is created for them once again. Through the beauty of the performance, the stylish self-presentation of the dancers, the pain and sacrifice, the artistry and expressiveness of the dance, ancestral spirits are gathered from their homes and entertained once more. They are given the gift of the *eisâ* before leaving again to return to their tombs, to the other world, to the places where they are believed to dwell until they return again. Memories of every other performance, every other *obon* are drawn into the constellation—the ancestral spirits are shown that the dance that they worked so hard to create is still vibrant. *Eisâ* is not just repeated without change from year to year, it is transformed to honor the legacy of the past and to meet the demands of the present. This is why the peaceful resolution of the *ôrâsê* is so important: in the place where there has been war, suffering and death, a struggle can be resolved peacefully, a victory can be won without loss, a conflict can end in friendship.

This is why the presence of outsiders is so critical to the creation of the work. It cannot be that the painful burden of the past is easier to bear in Okinawa City than it is in Osaka. *Eisâ* is danced in fields where battles once raged and where other ways of life were destroyed, in streets that bear the material signs of colonial subjugation, poverty and military occupation, prostitution and menial labor. Before spectators whose class and ethnicity has long dominated the lives of the dancers. And yet, they have found a tremendous resource in other memories, in other formulations of the

past. They are able to draw on all of their performances of *eisā*, on year after year, mile after mile danced in the courtyard of the *kōminkan* and the streets of Okinawa City; at festivals in Naha and throughout Okinawa; at Expo '70 in Osaka, in schoolyards, stadiums and television studios across Japan.

All of these memories are brought into a manifold relationship in the present, conjoined to the work that is created by the musicians and dancers. For the duration of the dance, in the moment marked out by the rhythm and artistry of *eisā*-a hierarchy of relationships is performed as other memories, other histories fade into a moment of oblivion. Building on Ranciere's observations, the performers make themselves visible, appear before their audience as dancers beautiful and strong, confident and kind. The audience is also constituted in the performance, given an opportunity to be a part of the festival, to join in the dance before them. To be treated as discerning and capable guests, to receive the gift of good fortune. And finally, the spirits of the dead are brought together with them, honored for what they have done, assured that their legacy remains important, given the promise of performances yet to come.

Inevitably, the moment ends. As the duration of the dance comes to a close, the memories that had been kept at bay fill the space and the time that had been cleared for the performance. The uneasy accommodation that performers maintain between the worker, the samurai and the dancer cannot be maintained; the same can be said for the tension between the enthralled spectator, the uneasy visitor to the run-down streets of Koza, the tourist returned from the battlefield, the metropolitan traveler who suddenly realizes that Tokyo is very far away.

As the crowd begins to disperse, we fall into formation once again, laughing and exhausted. Dancing through the darkened streets, we make our way back to the community center.

Families return to their homes, tourists to their hotels, the spirits of the dead to wherever it is that they dwell-their tombs, the other world, the island paradise known as *nirai kanai*.

What extends beyond the moment? New images have been produced, old images have been reinvigorated, old practices reappropriated. Representations of the performance circulate in tourist campaigns and commercial advertising, in banal television series and experimental film. A massive banner depicting a powerful dancer in Sonda's attire was hung as a backdrop at an anti-base rally in Naha. Both the dancers and their audience carry the memories of the performance into their everyday lives; the dancers also bear the physical transformation of their experiences. After years of dancing with the *seinenkai*, two older men have become members of a popular Okinawan musical group that works to fuse traditional and contemporary forms. A young woman has formed a well-known vocal duo. Several members told me that they quit their jobs in local clubs, or distanced themselves from local gangs. Others have built on their experiences to become local politicians-both progressive and conservative-and some have been selected to become municipal bureaucrats. In every case, they have told me that their experience of *eisā* played a critical role in their decision. I have also heard of stories of dancers who quit jobs in the mainland and moved back to Okinawa so that they-or their children-could dance; others refused promotions or transfers so that they could remain active in the group. More common, however, are stories of the traces left in memory: the sense that one is more than who she appears to be in the working world, that alternatives exist to a daily life that is relentlessly commodified and stripped of meaning. The memories of *eisā* are often brought up against daily experience, informing the way that the world is perceived and understood. It is in this space, open to contradiction and question, that other

possibilities exist, that new choices are made legible, that the possibilities of transformative action are explored.

At the same time, I do not want to take away from the importance of the moment itself. It seems that practices are too often considered only to expose their reference to other situations, their relationship to other times and places. *Eisā* involves more than acts of resistance to social pressure, a rejection of stigmatized categories of class and gender, a displacement of concerns that cannot be addressed in any other way. *Eisā* should also be understood as subject itself, created and recreated in the coordinated activity of the dancers, their audiences, and the ancestral spirits. Steeped in the forms of the past, yet driven by creative action in the present. An expression of individual and collective artistry, an archive of historical representations, and a source of strength and renewal. A determination to define themselves-as men and women, as artists, as Okinawans-on their own terms.

I learned a great deal in my years working with the Sonda Seinenkai; and yet, there are so many things that I will never know or fully understand. However, I do understand the courage that allows one to appropriate rather than fear the judgment and expectations of others, to put aside the repressiveness of everyday life, the restrictions of gender and class, the constant pressures of labor, fatigue and boredom. I understand the courage to act and to create-I have seen it in the streets of Koza.

Christopher T. Nelson is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a specialist in the anthropology of contemporary Japan. His work on Okinawa can be found in his book [Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa](#) (Duke Press) and in the

collection [Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present](#), edited by Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon (Duke Press), both published by Duke University Press.

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Notes

¹ Here I am thinking of Judith Butler's recent work on melancholy and the constitutive role that the internalization of loss has in the construction of the self. While I find Butler's argument about the repression of the originary experience of homosexual desire compelling, I would like to broaden this category of melancholy objects to include other forms of internalized historical experience. See Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identifications" in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, 132-150.

² Dominick LaCapra has argued that therapeutic strategies to decastrate oneself from a lost object and to articulate conceptual and affective bonds once again with the world at hand are both necessary and inadequate. Loss must also be addressed collectively, not simply at the level of individual experience. Moreover, actual, historical loss must be acknowledged and attended. The failure to do so can lead to the conversion of the historical experience of loss into a structuring sense of absence, an ahistorical originary account that authorizes repetitions of violence and ideologies of subjugation. In this failure, subjects may find themselves in an impasse of endless melancholy and impossible mourning,

trapped in naturalized, repetitive cycles that seem to be beyond their understanding and control. Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence and Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999).

³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 7.

⁴ Tomiyama Ichirō, *Senjo no Kioku* (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyōronsha, 1995).

⁵ Norma Field, *In the Realm of the Dying Emperor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 33-103.

⁶ Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa* (London: Routledge, 1999) 53-59; Sandra Pollack Sturdevant and Brenda Stolfus. *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and U. S. Military in Asia* (New York: The New Press, 1993), 240-299.

⁷ A popular if somewhat illicit outdoor party involving unmarried men or women from rural communities. While it was most common before World War II, the image of the moashibi is often evoked in contemporary popular culture in Okinawa.

⁸ Molasky; Field; Gerald Figal, "Waging Peace in Okinawa" *Critical Asian Studies* 33 (March 2001).

⁹ The Okinawan bases do continue to generate revenue in the form of payments made to landowners who either voluntarily lease their land to the Japanese government or are compelled to do so. This land is then provided for use by American military forces.

¹⁰ Like the hansen jinushi who testified at the prefectural hearing, many of the residents of Sonda continue to own land within the US bases; however, like most Okinawan landowners, very few are active in oppositional organizations such as the hansen jinushi.

¹¹ Young men and women spend a great deal of time together, but rehearsals are controlled and there is little free time. Occasionally relationships emerge, and a number of couples that I know have married. Many others date people from work or school with no connection to the seinenkai. Surprisingly, there seem to be few relationships with the admiring mainland visitors who attend rehearsals and performances.

¹² Although women have danced in the seinenkai for decades, they have never become drummers or sanshin musicians. While local women professed to be content with this, several complained that it was difficult for women to socialize at the community center once they stop performing.

¹³ *The Ballad of the Southern Grove, The Chunjun River Flows, and Kudaka Island*, respectively.

¹⁴ Okuno, 93-134.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 456.

¹⁶ Kinjō Kaoru, cited in Nomura Kōya, *Muishiki no Shokuminchishugi: Nihonjin no Beigun Kichi to Okinawajin* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobo, 2005) Note 128, page 175-177.

¹⁷ For an interesting discussion of the desire to be seen among Japanese youth, see Ikuya Sato, *Kamikaze Biker: Parody and Anomy in Affluent Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Jacques Ranciere and Peter Hallward, "Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview," *Angelaki*, 8, no.2 (2003), 202.

¹⁹ Iha Masakazu, "Kandō o Hada de Shiru," in *Eisā 360°: Rekishi to Genzai*. 306.