“Keeping Pure Hearts”: Identity, Reminiscence, and Resistance in Okinawan Popular Music

Sandi K. Harvey*

Department of Anthropology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Since the early 1990s, Okinawans have creating music, which mixes traditional min yo’ (folk songs) and shima uta (Island songs) with jazz, reggae, folk, and other Western musical elements. The mixing of traditional and Western musical elements is referred to as “hybridization” or champuru. Okinawan popular music, also known as Uchinaa Pop, is unique in that it uses Okinawan indigenous language and traditional instrument, sanshin. It will also be necessary to analyze the lyrical content, in which certain themes are embedded with Okinawa’s cultural values and worldview.

I will analyze Okinawan popular music as a symbolic construct to define such concepts as identity, reminiscence, and resistance as it is locally situated within the context of the historical and political framework. These concepts are not mutually exclusive; rather they are interconnected in meaning and purpose when it comes to interpreting and explaining Uchinaa Pop. This is a preliminary study, in which I will be conducting fieldwork in Okinawa, Japan in the summer of 2007.

Introduction

Why is the study of popular music important to anthropology? The question should be how can anthropological approach contribute to the understanding and explanation of popular culture, or popular music? By locating important components found within popular music, we can provide a basis for cross cultural comparisons.

Uchinaa Pop can be recognized by the following characteristics: the use of Okinawan language; use of traditional instrument, sanshin, and Okinawan culture, which is embedded in the style, performance, and lyrical content. Especially focusing on the lyrical content of nine songs, we can recognize dominant personality traits, which are maintained through every day lives of the people.

Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The lyrical meaning is closely associated with Okinawan culture. It combines both folk songs (min’yo) and island songs (shima uta) with modern and contemporary musical elements. It is also displayed in their traditional performing arts, such as Eisaa, which a popular dance performed usually during the Obon festival, which celebrates deceased ancestors. Another aspect of lyrical meaning is associated with their closeness to nature. Common themes found in the lyrics are about the land, ocean and waves, wind, flowers, and sea breeze. Other songs include every day experiences of work and about love. Cultural values, which include behavior and mannerisms is also a theme found in Uchinaa Pop. Utilizing nine songs to showcase such apparent attitudes and behaviors, which can be expressed through the arts, however, it can become dangerous to over generalize a society’s personality traits, for that reason, careful analysis is in order. For this reason, I hope to provide a variety of song and lyrical content that will provide a general framework for discussion.

Conclusions

Craig A. Lockard argues that in comparing popular music in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, he finds that popular music is one of the outcomes of political oppression and resistance. Popular music can also be a way to examine popular culture (Lockard 1996: 152-154). Uchinaa Pop serves a multiple and overlapping purposes. It reaffirms identity, place, and it gives Okinawans a voice when addressing their concerns over Japan and U.S. decisions to construct military bases. The context in which Uchinaa Pop stems from may be political by nature. However, Merriam argues that popular music is also symbolic as it is a “means of understanding
people’s behavior.” Music reflects how people are responding to their historical and current experience, in which Merriam states, “music can be a valuable tool in the analysis of culture and society” (Merriam 1964: 13).

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