

Performing and Articulating Island-ness through
Uta/Sanshin

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Performing and Articulating Island-ness through *Uta/Sanshin*

Interview with Wesley Iwao Ueunten*

Interviewed by Ayano Ginoza**

Wesley Iwao Ueunten is a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, where he teaches classes in Asian American history, Japanese American identity and culture, Okinawan American heritage culture, and critical race theory and methodology. He received his PhD in ethnic studies at the University of California, Berkeley. His main research area is Japanese American studies with an emphasis on the Okinawan diaspora in the U.S. Following the framework of ethnic studies, his pedagogy and research are intertwined with his work in the Japanese and Okinawan American community in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has been an officer and board member of several Okinawan and Japanese American organizations as well as a performer and teacher of traditional Okinawan music.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Wesley Ueunten at his home in Northern California near Berkeley in August 2019. He was born and raised in Hawai'i. My first encounter with Wesley was in San Francisco in 2007 during the International Women's Network Against Militarism meeting. He was invited to the public event by the Women for Genuine Security, which organized the meeting. Since then, I have worked with him on various occasions, on workshops, publications, interpretations, meetings, etc. As with many who know Wesley, he has been very gracious and generous with his time, mentorship, honesty, as well as grounded and thoughtful yet critical scholarship on the Okinawan diaspora.

When I inquired about this interview for the inaugural issue, Wesley instantly accepted and welcomed me to his home. It was my first visit to his place, but Wesley's familiar Okinawan intonation filled the house with comfort. Yet, I was still a little nervous about the interview, trying to figure out what would be the right question to begin with while looking at my list of the prepared questions. Wesley sensed it and said, "Ask me anything, Ayano," passing me a basket of chips. This is how it unfolded.

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WU: Wesley Iwao Ueunten

AG: Ayano Ginoza

AG: I understand you play Okinawan music with the sanshin [a three-stringed Okinawan musical instrument] on various occasions in the United States. May I ask you how and when you started playing the sanshin?

WU: I started playing the sanshin when I went to Okinawa as a *kenpi ryugakusei* [an Okinawa Prefecture-sponsored study abroad student] in 1984. I always wanted to play the sanshin. I grew up on Kaua‘i, and there was an Okinawan community, but no one my age played the sanshin at all in the 1980s. Yet, I grew up hearing sanshin music records and cassette tapes as well as the Okinawan radio station that my grandmother listened to.

AG: You are referring to a radio station in Hawai‘i where they played Okinawan music?

WU: Yes, from Honolulu. So that sound was always in me. My mother also told me that when she was pregnant with me, she learned Okinawa *buyo* [traditional dance] and so she was dancing to Okinawan music. So I heard the sound of sanshin from even before I was born. That is probably why I had always wanted to learn the sanshin. But I could only begin learning it when I went to Okinawa in my 20s, as a *ryugakusei* [study abroad student].

AG: It seems like the sound of the sanshin had been already instilled in you even before you were born. I believe the sanshin has played an instrumental role in many aspects of your life ranging from your genealogy, activism, and pedagogy. Could you first speak about the relationship between the sanshin and your sense of Okinawan-ness?

WU: When I was young, my mother always said that we were Okinawan and that even though we were Japanese, we were a different kind of Japanese. That always interested me. My mother always talked about how Okinawa had a good culture, and Okinawan people were good people. She also talked about how Okinawans were looked down upon by Japanese in the Japanese community in Hawai‘i. I had all those stories kept in my mind when I first studied ethnic studies as an undergrad.

AG: Was it after or before you returned from *kenpi ryugaku*?

WU: It was actually before I went to Okinawa. So part of it was a personal interest in my own roots, but another part was because of my exposure to ethnic studies and the idea that you can be proud of your own culture. It was a very different paradigm from when my parents grew up. They were ashamed of being Japanese, and then on top of that, they were

ashamed of being Okinawan. But when I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, we had been influenced by the movements of the 60s, such as the African American, Native American, Chicano, and then the Asian American movements. These movements have a long history. They did not only start in the '50s, '60s, '70s but are the result of hundreds of years of struggle. By the time I was growing up, they bore fruit, right? For example, there was the Black Power movement and people were saying, "Black is beautiful." In Hawai'i, too, you had the Hawaiian renaissance, which influenced the Okinawan renaissance in the 1980s. I was part of that Okinawan renaissance movement as I wanted to learn my Okinawan heritage. So when I went to Okinawa, I learned the *sanshin*. But there's also my own complicated individual story. I wanted to learn everything Okinawan because as I said, my mother instilled in me a strong Okinawan identity. This strong identity was also reinforced by my exposure to ethnic studies.

AG: That is so fascinating. You have experienced such stimulation throughout the course of your life.

WU: Yeah, but increasingly in the '70s and '80s, when I started learning ethnic studies. When I was a teenager in the '70s, my *Issei* [first-generation Japanese American] grandmother came to live with us, and my mother was taking care of her. My grandmother was Issei from Ahagon near Itoman [a city in the south of Okinawa Island]. And she would do *kachāshi* [a festive Okinawan dance], moving her hands in *konerite* [a turning of the hands gracefully at the wrists]. You know, when we played Okinawan music, she would go like that [moving hands above head], and I would try to copy her because for me that was my Okinawan culture. And so my mother said, "If you really want to learn Okinawan dance, you should go see Mr. Yamasato because he teaches Okinawan dance." I told my mother, "Okinawan dance? That's for girls!" She said: "But Okinawan dance has a lot of karate motions in it." That got me interested. So I drove once a week across Kaua'i to the town of Kapa'a to learn Okinawan dance from Mr. Yamasato. He taught me an old pre-war style of Okinawan dance. However, when I moved to Honolulu as a student, I stopped Okinawan dance, but I loved the sound of the *sanshin*. So that is why I really wanted to learn the *sanshin* when I went to Okinawa.

AG: When you went to Okinawa Island, did your understanding of the *sanshin* or Okinawan music change in any way?

WU: Of course, all around. Everything. The only thing I knew was the sound. The first understanding that I had to gain was that, in Okinawa, when you say "*sanshin*," singing is first. When I first began *sanshin* lessons, the *sensei* [teacher] said, "It doesn't make sense if you don't sing. It's *uta sanshin* [singing *sanshin*]." But we, *Nisei* [second generation] and *Sansei* [third generation] Japanese Americans, whose parents or grandparents came to the U.S. in the pre-war period, don't like to sing and are very self-conscious. It's not

part of our upbringing. So I couldn't sing in the beginning. But the sensei made it clear that I had to sing or it would not make any sense for me to learn the sanshin.

AG: Do you think this seemingly common characteristic of self-consciousness among the Nisei and Sansei could be attributed to their historically constructed social position in the U.S.?

WU: Being self-conscious of who you are has a lot to do with being a racial minority in the U.S. We American-born Nisei and Sansei are so self-conscious of people looking at us that we don't want to stand out. However, Issei would sing a lot, right? But because we are born into racial oppression, many Nisei and Sansei just don't want to sing. I felt that way too, like I'm going to stick out. So I didn't—I couldn't sing. But with the sanshin, singing comes before the instrument; the instrument is only an accompaniment. And that was the first thing that I had to understand. I eventually learned how to sing, but it took a while. Now I like to sing, but it was having to think in a very different way. What I also learned through the sanshin was the diversity of Okinawan culture because with Okinawan sanshin, you have *koten*, which is derived from the court music, and you have *minyo*, which is derived from the commoner culture. They mix a lot, but they're distinct branches of Okinawan culture. And in *minyo*, there are Yanbaru, Chubu, Nanbu, Yaeyama, Miyako, Amami Oshima, and other regional styles, and so there is much diversity.

AG: Each island has its own distinct rhythms. It was not only a process of learning to sing and finding your voice, or maybe even your Okinawanness or island-ness, but also learning about the diversity of the islands and island-ness. In Okinawa the word for island, *shima*, also means a community. May I ask how you learned to speak *Shimakutuba* [the Ryukyu-Okinawan languages], a crucial component for engaging in the *shima*?

WU: I began to learn it when I went to Ryudai [the University of the Ryukyus] as a *ryugakusei*. I really wanted to learn *Uchināguchi*, my heritage, because I had no knowledge of *Uchināguchi*. I only knew words like *yana warabā* and what else. . . only words like *yana waraba* and *gachimayā* and then maybe only three or four other words at the most. I would write down everything people would say in Okinawan and read books like Basil Hall Chamberlain's Ryukyuan grammar book from the late 1800s. Anything I could find on the Okinawan language—I did a self-study. But when I was in Okinawa, no one wanted to speak Okinawan, and they thought I was strange that I wanted to learn the Okinawan language and sanshin.

AG: That was also a time when many Okinawans were trying to overcome their “second class citizen” status by speaking “standard Japanese.” Despite the social environment at the time, you sought to learn *Uchināguchi*. Have the rhythms or lyrics in sanshin music conveyed a sense of Okinawanness, a sense of *Uchinānchu* heritage to you?

WU: Yes, I do think it does. Having been playing the sanshin for a long time, I now know that there is a distinct rhythm in Okinawan sanshin music. As in, “tan, ta-tan, ta-tan, ta-tan, ta-tan,” not “tan, tan, tan, tan, tan, tan, tan, tan, tan, tan.” There is a sort of swing. There’s also a pause after the first note when music starts. For example, with *kachāshi* music there’s the “taaaaaan taa, tan-tan, taan, taa, tan-tan.” That buildup of tension at the beginning of many songs seems uniquely Okinawan. For instance, you notice when you ask Okinawans the time, the timing of the response is different. Yeah, it’s like, “*Nan ji?* [What time is it?]Jyu ji. [Ten o’clock]” See? There is no such pause between a question and answer in Japanese. It’s a different rhythm in everyday conversation. I think it carries over to music.

AG: I think you are right about the pause. I remember my professor at Ryudai once said that Okinawans have a rhythm of life that is in accord with the rhythm of the ocean. I didn’t thoroughly comprehend it then, but it makes sense now. Like when a wave slowly reaches the sandy beach, it makes a sound, and then there is a moment of silence as the wave sinks into the sand before it withdraws. When I was away from the island to study in the U.S., I occasionally took out my sanshin to hear the sounds that the strings made. But it didn’t feel the same in the middle of the wheat fields in Washington State. The sounds had no ocean to sink into. I wonder what you might think about when you play sanshin?

WU: It depends on the situation. Depends, because, frankly . . . yesterday I was talking to Sandaa Sensei,¹⁾ who called from Hawai‘i, and we talked for the first time in a long while. I told him:

[spoken in a Hawaiian Pidgin accent] Eh, you know, I really not that good. I mean, I try my best, but my sanshin education stopped when I came here for grad school, and then I became an academic. You really no can be one good sanshin musician and be one academic at the same time. I kind of do both, but I not one expert at sanshin. I only play what I like play.

There is *jikata*—that is, when you play for the dancers. I cannot play *jikata* because one has to be really good to be able to do so. I don’t have the time and the skill to get that good. So when I do play the sanshin, sometimes I’m thinking, “Oh no, I hope I don’t mess up.” When one performs Okinawan music, the expectation is that the performer *is* authentically Okinawan, but we Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei are not—we weren’t born and raised in Okinawa and so we are kind of performing *as* “Okinawans.” So we have an imposter syndrome. That’s one thing that I am thinking a lot about, issues of authenticity. However, with some other songs that are dear to my heart, like *Tinsagu nu Hana*, I think about my grandmother, and you know, our baby [looking at his partner].

AG: I think we are touching upon a complex aspect of diasporic *Uchinānchu*. Do you identify yourself as an *Uchinānchu*? Is Okinawa like a homeland to you or a source of

some kind of roots for you?

WU: Of course, Okinawa is my roots, but then it's complicated because I was born and raised in Hawai'i, and I live in California, so a lot of things go on in my head, my mind, and my heart.

AG: Speaking of California and Hawai'i in relation to Okinawa, one of the things they have in common is a large presence of U.S. military bases. I have read somewhere in the local Okinawan newspaper that you were protesting in Berkeley, California, against the U.S. bases on Okinawa Island by playing the sanshin?

WU: Yeah, all the time. At Berkeley, in front of the Japanese consulate, and at different places. Before a hearing [for a resolution supporting Okinawan protests against the Henoko base construction at a Berkeley City Council meeting], I played *kachāshi* music, and my Okinawan friend got people to dance in front of the Berkeley City Hall. In front of the consulate last year, I played *kachāshi* music for people to dance to and also played *Tinsagu nu Hana* and other songs.

AG: Common images of protest may include signs, banners, sit-ins, marching, and the chanting of demands. What was your intention for playing Okinawan music with the sanshin during the protest?

WU: I don't really like doing that, but we need to get attention. I feel like an imposter, but then you've got to do what you've got to do sometimes, right? I also feel really uncomfortable because a lot of the sanshin performers are very conservative or very apolitical, in Hawai'i especially. It drains my energy to deal with that. I'm reluctant but we have to bring in culture. Culture has always been political in Okinawa too. The other thing is, if we don't put an Okinawan flavor in our protests, Okinawans are not going to follow. If you don't put Okinawa into it, whose voice is it? Who's doing the protesting? It gives an Okinawan feel to it. Otherwise it would just be people protesting against Henoko in front of the consulate, and in the group there's only going to be about two or three Okinawans. I feel uncomfortable thinking, "Why do I have to be the representative?" but we have to represent Okinawa because it is a big responsibility. We also played in front of the courthouse; you know the Dugong versus Rumsfeld case?

AG: Yes, in the Ninth Circuit.

WU: So, that was fun. Some people had a banner. The other people there were from the Center for Biological Diversity along with a few Okinawans from Okinawa and the U.S. They were happy and felt more comfortable because there was Okinawan music. Okinawan music makes Okinawans feel more comfortable. Otherwise, it becomes a protest

where it's all *Yamatunchu* [Japanese] people doing it; it's all white people doing it. It is important for us to bring Okinawan music into the protest, especially because a lot of the Okinawan musicians are either apolitical or conservative. "Activism" is a bad word in the Okinawan community in Hawai'i, or even in Okinawa. I've been told by Hawai'i [Okinawan] musicians, "*Anata activist datta*," [You were an activist!?] as if they were saying "*Anata kichigaika*" ["I didn't know you were mentally ill!"]. Even now in the [Okinawan] diaspora in Hawai'i activists are associated with being white or *Yamatunchu*. It gets lonely out there to be one of the few sanshin persons in the Bay Area. But I feel like I have to do it, like a relief pitcher until someone steps in to take over.

Everyone calls me "*sensei*," but I feel that we play *together*. I teach the songs that I know, but a lot of times the older *Uchinanchu* who take the class know certain songs better than I do because they grew up singing them. I don't feel exactly comfortable to be called *sensei*, so [I'd rather say that I am a sanshin] *nakama* [comrade].

AG: Are there non-Okinawan people in the group, and have you taught sanshin to non-Okinawans?

WU: Yes, [in fact they are] mainly non-Okinawans. They are largely Japanese women who live in the Berkeley area, who tend to be more politically progressive, so when we have those protests for Okinawa, they all come out. They are not out to become master sanshin players, but they are more about community building. When the Okinawan community needs Okinawan music they all come out and perform. I've been criticized before by Okinawans: "*Nan de Yamatunchu ni sanshin wo oshieru ka?* [Why do you teach sanshin to Japanese?]" "*Nan de yokuatsusha ni sanshin wo oshieru ka?* [Why do you teach sanshin to the oppressors?]" It hurts to be told those things, and I try to say that when we have Okinawa community events, they are the ones who come out and perform.

AG: Would you say that through playing the sanshin you can network with Okinawans and non-Okinawans alike, and to raise awareness about issues that Okinawans face daily? I wonder also if playing the sanshin creates pedagogical moments even in an oppositional space.

WU: That's what I feel all the time. My students [at San Francisco State University] love it because it's unusual to see a live music performance, especially by the professor. I always tell a story about the songs and often call my musician friend to join me in my Japanese American history class. He is a jazz saxophonist and teaches Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. I'll call him in to my class or I'll go to his class, and we play the saxophone and sanshin together. We've been working on this idea of art and agency because music is a form of agency, right? You are creating something even if you're playing traditional songs; you're voicing and have agency. So we see art such as music, dance, writing, and spoken word as a form of agency. To be honest I still get ner-

vous in front of people singing sanshin, and feel like an imposter. You have to really exercise your agency even if you are nervous or you feel inadequate because no one else is going to do it for you.

AG: It sounds like performing the sanshin enables *Uchinānchu* agency or what may be called *Uchinānchu* “voices” from islands and the continents. Is it a common practice in the Bay Area to mix instruments from different parts of the world?

WU: Well, in Okinawa they do it all the time, but not here in the Bay Area. We just started it because it was fun to play with other musicians and try to match. The audience also likes it. I see music as a way to build community and to break down the distance between people. That’s island thinking because if you live on an island, you’re always hoping to meet someone from another island across the ocean. The reason why we do music is to make connections with the people. [In the past in Okinawa] you could hear in the distance [the sound] “tan.” In Okinawa, from the days of the Ryukyuan Kingdom, there is something called *ke-jyo* sanshin. It is an old, really good sanshin, which makes a sound—a *sukitooru oto* [a clear sound]—that travels far. In the Yaeyama Islands, you can hear people singing *tubaramā* from far away. The idea is that the sound of music and singing should go as far as it can, so that someone way over there can hear. That’s how you bring people together. That way of thinking and feeling is important.

AG: It seems that creating such temporal space to feel and think might be also a form of engaging with the audience’s agency. Would you also elaborate on your earlier remarks of exercising agency?

WU: As for agency, I tell my students you can look at history as “things happening.” This is usually the mainstream way of looking at history. Then you can take one more step and look at history as [terrible] things happening *to* good people like us. But at some point, I tell them that maybe we can look at history as *we do* things, too. That’s what I mean by agency. Everyone has agency to change history, to make history, or to put a mark in history. One way to do it is through art and being willing to make mistakes and being willing to fail. Otherwise, if you keep waiting until you get good, or you wait for someone else to do it, that’s problematic. So you have to exercise your own agency. It could be music, writing a poem or an article, because if you don’t exercise your own agency, someone else is going to do it for you. At some point, *Uchinānchu toshite* [as *Uchinānchu*], we have to exercise our own agency.

AG: Your earlier metaphor of the *sukitooru* sound that permeates islands across the vast ocean can be seen as an aspect of island-ness. Would you consider that a sense of island-ness is expressed in a uniquely *Uchinānchu* way through the rhythm or the lyrics of sanshin music?

WU: I don't know if it is explicit, but it's there. It's a feeling. Time and space are conceived of differently by island people. For example, this is not from Okinawa Island, but from Yaeyama Island. It is a *tubaramā* [speaks in *Shimakutuba: umuti kayuraba shinri ya ichiri, awan muduraba, mutu nu shinri*]. *Umuti kayuraba*—if I feel for someone—if I really have feelings of affection for a person. *Shinri* [a thousand miles] is like one mile. But if I go all the way there and don't meet that person, all of a sudden the distance is one thousand miles again. So there is a different concept of distance. Perhaps for people from the continent, a mile is a mile, a thousand miles is a thousand miles. I shouldn't speak for continent people, but island people have a different way of looking at distance and barriers between people. In the song *Chijuya*, which is also known as *Hamachi Dori*, there is a verse that goes, *Tukeeya Hijyamitin, tiru chichi ya hituchi, aman nagamiyura, kiyu nu sura ya*, which means that even if we're separated by the ocean, there's only one moon shining in the sky. I wonder if you are looking at the same moon. I see a lot of commonalities with other island people. Epeli Hau'ofa talks about "our ocean of islands," not islands as isolated but all tied together by the ocean. That comes out in Okinawan music. We're tied together, but there are a lot of things that keep us apart that are human made, such as concepts of space and time. But not the ocean. The oceans are actually what brings us and keeps us together.

AG: It sounds like you are saying sanshin melodies travel over the oceans and through the islands to the homes.

WU: Yes, metaphorically. The Buddhist say we live in the ocean of samsara, the ocean of existence, or the wheel of life and a cycle—we die, get reborn, and then we're reborn in this ocean. Then, why not try to call out to other people in the ocean? That's how we can get out of the ocean of suffering. The ocean is both a real ocean and a metaphorical ocean. In a similar manner, the sanshin brings people together. In the old days in Okinawa people would learn Okinawan music from different teachers and in different styles, *afusoryu*, *nomuraryu*, and so on. But when they had *matsuri* [festivals], they only had a few sanshin players, so they would get together and try to figure out a way to play with each other. That used to happen in Hawai'i, too, because people learned different ways of playing, had different songs and styles, and yet they would somehow play together. But nowadays, we don't even try to play with other people, which is not island thinking but insular thinking. Playing together won't be neat. It's going to be messy at times, but the beauty is in trying to work together at least for the moment.

AG: All of this helps me to contemplate on the difficult question of what are islands and island-ness. Are there any goals you envision through playing sanshin?

WU: A lot. One is teaching about Okinawa. I'm able to talk and teach about Okinawa a lot better through the sanshin because it reaches people's feelings, their emotional parts,

whereas just teaching with words and PowerPoint is limited. The other is preserving a lineage. But not in the sense of lineage as a family tree with the first son or no sons, which is very limiting. First of all, it's patriarchal, and it leaves out women and other people. My definition of lineage is *chimu nu*: people's good feelings and intentions for their descendants and ancestors, and for other people. In this sense, lineage is not only vertical but also horizontal. A non-linear lineage. Growing up in Hawai'i, we learn about aloha. Aloha is not just a word, but it comes out in everyday practice. Okinawans have very similar feelings. For example, we say "*ai, chimugurisan* [my heart hurts]" when we see someone suffering. The Hawai'i I know is like that. "[In a Hawaiian Pidgin accent] Ahh, you poor thing. Come in my house. I going feed you." You feel empathy for people. The Hawaiian aloha. People commodify it and say aloha spirit, Aloha Airlines, etc. The aloha feeling is still there in Hawai'i, which is very similar to *chimugurisan*, a feeling for other people.

AG: Another example might be the Okinawan word, *kanasan* [endearing].

WU: *Kanasan*. That comes out in the music, at least the music the way I learned it. It's not only in the words and sound of the music but also in the way people teach. A lot of times you meet people who are not trained in Okinawan music, but when they sing, you can feel the *chimu* come out. That's what I'm trying to obtain, that part of Okinawan music, but I still haven't reached it yet. I want to be able to convey that lineage of Okinawa, the *chimu* part. That's what I want.

I would like to thank Wesley's partner, their beautiful newborn daughter, and the guests who were present at the time of the interview, for sharing with me the time and space for this intriguing interview that highlights the relationship between learning to perform utal sanshin (singing Ryukyuan songs with the accompaniment of a three-stringed sanshin), and the articulation of island-ness through it.

This is an edited transcript of the two-hour interview and conversation.

Note

- 1) Sandaa Sensei refers to Grant Murata, a well-known yonsei Okinawan sanshin sensei in Hawai'i under whom Wesley has studied.