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# Songs from the Edge of Japan: *Music-making in Yaeyama and Okinawa*



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M A T T G I L L A N

SONGS FROM THE EDGE OF JAPAN:  
MUSIC-MAKING IN YAEYAMA AND OKINAWA

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# Songs from the Edge of Japan: Music-making in Yaeyama and Okinawa

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*Shikai tu nīfaiyū.*

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# A Note on the Romanisation of Japanese, Yaeyaman and Okinawan Words

Romanisation of standard Japanese words follows the modified Hepburn system, with long vowels represented by a macron. The romanisation of Yaeyaman and Okinawan words presents specific problems, and it is often difficult to choose a single correct romanisation for many terms due to the large regional variations in pronunciation. Yaeyaman dialects are considerably different from the Shuri pronunciation usually used when romanising Okinawan terms (e.g. Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyūsho 1963), and dialect varies considerably even within Yaeyama. Yaeyaman dialects contain the same five vowel sounds as standard Japanese (*a, i, u, e, o*), although there are some slight differences such as the Yaeyaman *u*, which is pronounced with the lips in a more relaxed position than its Japanese counterpart. Many Yaeyaman dialects also contain vowel sounds not found in standard Japanese. In particular, a vowel sound somewhere between Japanese *i* and *u* is common, and is romanised as *ī*. Yaeyaman dialects distinguish between long and short vowels in a way similar to standard Japanese, and are represented, as in the modified Hepburn system, using a macron. Several Yaeyaman consonant sounds, notably *f/h* and *w*, vary according to village and island. Thus the Japanese *hana* (flower) becomes *hana*, *fana* and *pana* depending on the local Yaeyaman dialect. When notating song texts I have transcribed the lyrics as heard, noting the village from where the pronunciation is taken.

Titles of songs or dance pieces are capitalised and italicised, and Japanese terms not in general English use are italicised. Terms that are used more than once, and those that have a Japanese character equivalent, are listed in the glossary of Japanese terms (Appendix 1). Place names appear in their standard Japanese reading. Dialect versions of place names are shown in the glossary of place names (Appendix 2). Personal names are given in standard Japanese order, surname first. The Japanese character writings for names are shown in the glossary of Japanese names (Appendix 3). People in Yaeyama are often referred to by their personal name, and I have followed this convention on occasion, especially when several people with the same family name appear in the text. Thus, I refer to Ōhama Anpan as Anpan, as he is commonly known in Yaeyama.

Many Yaeyaman and Okinawan bands use romanised forms of their band names on CDs and other material, in which case I have followed this usage, including the use of capitalisation. Hence, I use BEGIN for the Yaeyaman band as it appears on album covers, rather than a transliteration of the Japanese form (Bigin). Similarly, I use Nēnēs rather than Nēnēzu for the Okinawan mainland group of that name. Where possible confusion may arise, I have given alternative forms on the first appearance of the name in the text.

All translations are by the author, unless otherwise stated. I have opted for a literal rather than a poetic translation in order to try to show the original structure of the song texts. The common use of synonyms in Yaeyaman verse, especially the use of couplets of identical meaning, has been especially difficult to translate, and on occasion I have resorted to repeating the same translation for two adjacent lines of text. As far as possible I have translated directly from dialect rather than from Japanese translations of the dialect song texts.

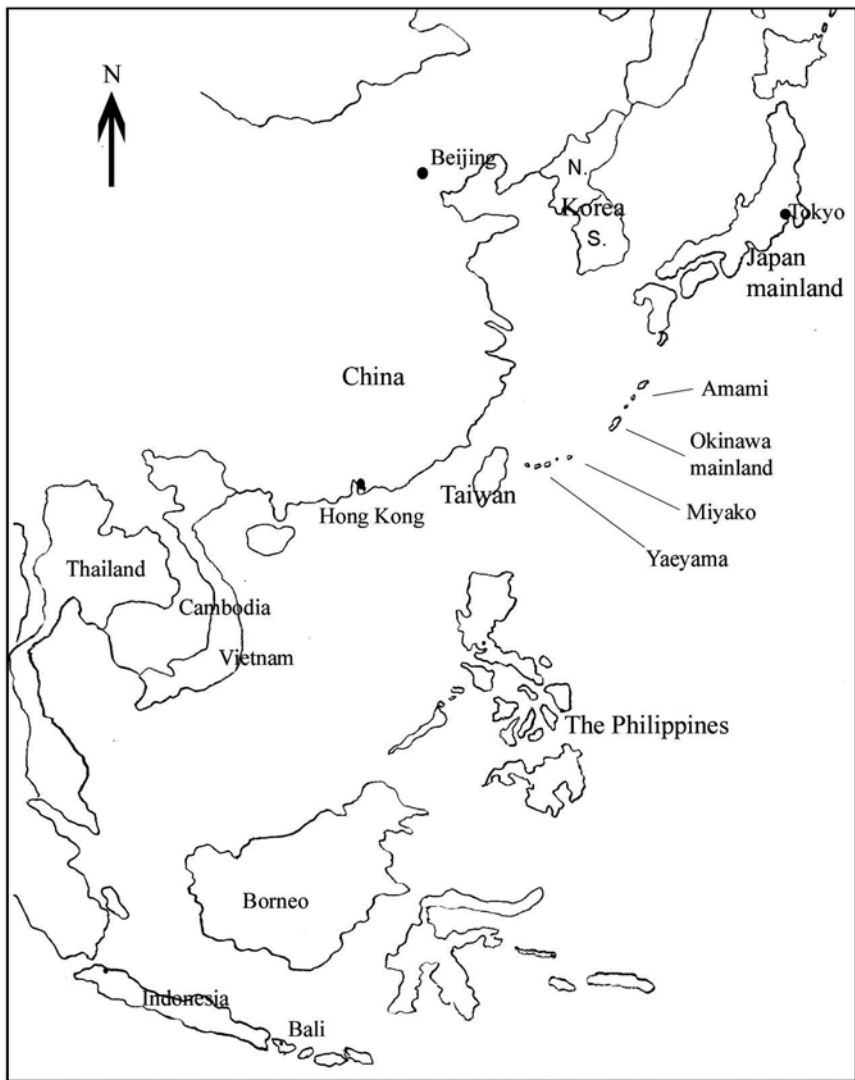


Figure 0.1 Map of East Asia

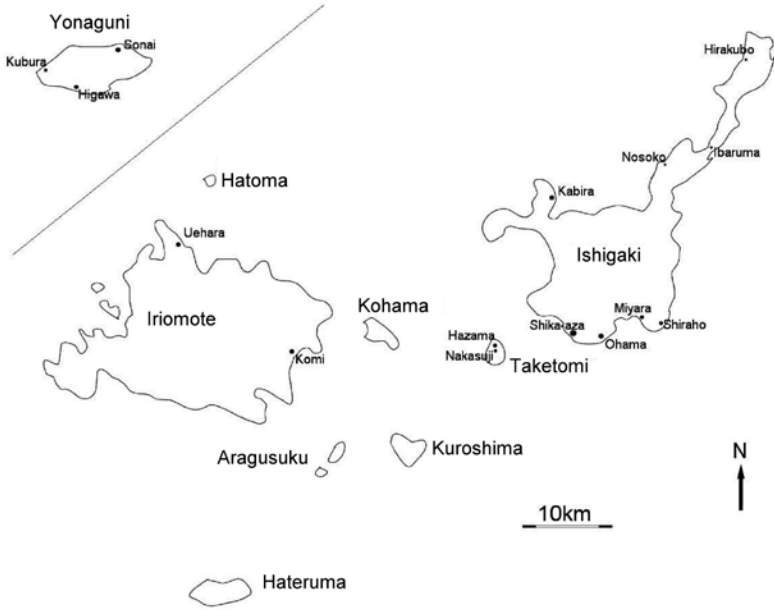


Figure 0.2 Map of Yaeyama

## A Note on Transcriptions

All transcriptions are my own, except where indicated. On many of my field recordings of unaccompanied genres the pitch at which a song was sung changed during the course of a song, either going up with the singers' excitement or, especially in the longer songs, down as the singers began to tire. In the accompanied *fushiuta* genre also, although the *sanshin* accompaniment ensures a constant pitch over the course of a song, singers commonly vary the pitch at which they sing a song according to their mood or energy level on a particular day. For this reason, and for ease of comparison, I have chosen to notate most songs in the same key (usually equivalent to *f-major* or *c-major*, according to *sanshin* tuning).

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## Chapter 1

Island Treasures (*Sima nu Takara*)**Introduction**

Travelling down the Japanese archipelago from Hokkaido in the north, it is possible to traverse the island chain as far as the main island of Okinawa without ever losing sight of land. Going from one island to the next by boat never involved more than a day's journey overseas that are relatively easily navigated. Further south from the Okinawan mainland,<sup>1</sup> to the 'Sakishima' island groups of Miyako and Yaeyama, involves crossing a stretch of ocean that is both large, and renowned for its unpredictable weather. The very name by which these islands are known, *Sakishima* (which translates roughly as the islands 'far ahead'), implies their separation from the central culture, originally of the Okinawan mainland, and later of Japan itself. This separation has led to the development of distinctive cultural forms in the islands, as well as an acute sense of local identity that has been maintained despite the strong influences of Okinawa and Japan over the centuries. Furthermore, the fact that Yaeyama is made up of a group of separate islands has meant that even within the region there are distinct local identities, based on individual islands or villages within islands, each of which proudly maintains its own traditional cultural patterns. Along with these local identities, the islands' geographical and cultural position at the very 'edge' of Japan has meant that Yaeyama has featured prominently in much cultural discourse surrounding the nature of the Japanese nation since the early 20th century. Yaeyaman culture, including music, has come to have meanings far beyond its place of origin, as it has been performed and positioned within Japanese and Okinawan cultural frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> Okinawa is modern Japan's southernmost prefecture, made up of around 50 inhabited islands, as well as many more that are not populated. I use the term 'Okinawan mainland' to refer to the prefecture's largest island, on which the prefectural capital city of Naha is situated. 'Okinawa city' refers to a smaller city on the Okinawan mainland. I have used 'Okinawa' to refer to Okinawa prefecture as a whole. The islands have also been known as 'Ryūkyū' at various stages of their history, in particular during the period of the Ryūkyū kingdom before the creation of Okinawa prefecture in 1879, and during the period of American administration between 1945 and 1972. I use this term here only in relation to the first of these.

Between the summer of 2001 and the autumn of 2002 I carried out an extended fieldwork trip to Yaeyama, studying practical performance of traditional styles and observing the performance of traditional and more modern musical genres in a variety of situations. During that time I was particularly struck by the way local musical styles were used in connection with the construction of Yaeyama's various local and national cultural identities. Two related examples made a particular impact, and contribute to the title of this chapter, 'Island Treasures (*Sīma nu Takara*)'. I first encountered the phrase as part of a lyric composed by Ōhama Anpan (1913–2001) in the mid-20th century to a well-known traditional Yaeyaman song melody *Tubarāma*. In this verse Ōhama, one of the most influential Yaeyaman traditional musicians of the 20th century, sang how 'our ancestors expressed their lives through song. As island treasures, let us preserve those songs in the present' (*mukasī pitu ya kurashi yu uta ni kake, sīma nu takara de nama ni nukushōri*; in Arashiro 2001: 70). Ōhama's expression of a Yaeyaman identity as 'island treasures' (*sīma nu takara*) in this verse is one based largely within a discourse of tradition that plays an important part in much music-making in the islands. Traditional musical genres continue to be performed throughout Yaeyama as part of everyday life, and these are implicitly bound up with the construction and maintenance of local identities. As Ōhama's verse shows, tradition itself is also something that continues to be actively imagined and discussed in song lyrics, print and everyday speech.

A counterpart to this backward-looking construction of local identity came in the early summer of 2002 with the release of the pop song *Shimanchu nu takara* (treasures of the island people) by the Yaeyaman band BEGIN (see discography). Despite the similarity of the title with Ōhama's expression of Yaeyaman identity, BEGIN's song seemed to position Yaeyama in quite a different way. First, the lyrics expressed an explicitly ambivalent attitude to the past, representative of the relationship many young Yaeyamans have towards their traditional culture in a rapidly globalising world. In one verse, for example, the singer expresses how he 'doesn't even understand the words' (*kotoba no imi sae wakaranai*) to traditional songs such as *Tubarāma*, that are sung in local Yaeyaman languages. Despite this disconnection from tradition, the song concludes that modern Yaeyamans continue to have a strong and unique cultural identity – the 'treasures of the island people' (*shimanchu nu takara*) of the title.

The context behind the composition and marketing of BEGIN's *Shimanchu nu takara* also reveals much about the various cultural issues that the song addresses. The song was written to commemorate the 30th anniversary in 2002 of the return of Okinawa prefecture to Japanese rule, and came at the height of a 'boom' of interest in Okinawan music and culture throughout the nation. While Ōhama's verse is relatively unknown outside the Yaeyaman islands, the considerable success of *Shimanchu nu takara* throughout Japan shows how issues of regional identity and tradition are being played out not only at a local level, but also have a national resonance. At one extreme, within weeks of its release in 2002, I witnessed the song being performed as part of a ritual harvest festival event in Yaeyama's

largest island of Ishigaki, showing its relevance to an immediately local Yaeyaman audience. By the end of the year, the band had been invited to perform *Shimanchu nu takara* as part of the NHK *Kōhaku uta gassen* programme, the most prestigious event in Japan's pop music calendar that is broadcast across the nation on New Year's Eve, indicating that the song also had strong cultural meanings at a much wider cultural level.

These two very different takes on the idea of cultural inheritance by Ōhama and BEGIN are basically concerned with the same issue – what does it mean to be Yaeyaman, and how can this sense of being Yaeyaman be expressed musically in the present? This book starts with these two very different ideas of island (people's) treasures – in Yaeyama, Okinawa and Japan – and attempts to analyse some of the cultural meanings behind music-making in modern Yaeyama and Okinawa. I draw upon fieldwork carried out since 2000 in Yaeyama itself, as well as the Okinawan and Japanese mainlands, and I analyse the meanings of Yaeyaman music largely from a contemporary perspective. I also draw on the large volume of written works by scholars and writers from Yaeyama and the rest of Japan to link Yaeyama's modern musical meanings to cultural debates that took place throughout the nation from the early 20th century. The majority of the book is concerned with what we might see as 'traditional' genres, and I consider historical aspects of the formation of these genres, with particular reference to the meanings of musical histories to contemporary musicians and audiences. I also consider the methods by which traditions are created and contested in the context of Yaeyama's position at the very edge of modern Japan, and as part of a globalising world.

As one of the few regions in Japan where traditional music thrives as a meaningful part of everyday life, Yaeyama and Okinawa are culturally important within Japan in a number of ways. In terms of the number of active learners, Okinawan music is one of the most popular 'traditional Japanese' music genres in Tokyo and other large Japanese cities as much as it is in Okinawa itself. The creation in 2004 of a nationally sponsored theatre for traditional performing arts in Okinawa, the only such theatre for a traditional Japanese genre outside Tokyo and Osaka, also speaks of the importance of Okinawan music on a national level. Yaeyaman music has had a presence in this Okinawan music scene far out of proportion to its geographic or demographic size. Traditional music thrives, as do attempts such as BEGIN's to forge new musical styles using traditional elements to various degrees. Yet behind this musical activity are always questions of cultural identity – what is Yaeyama's place in Japan and in Okinawa? How can the old ways of life and music-making be adapted to Yaeyama in the 21st century. And why does Yaeyama continue to have such a disproportionately large impact on mainland Japanese cultural life?

## Why Yaeyama?

I first became aware of Okinawan music in the mid-1990s, while living and working in Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. An acquaintance invited me to see a concert by the Nēnēs, a four piece female vocal group from the Okinawan mainland who were making waves throughout Japan with their mixture of traditional Okinawan, reggae, Hawaiian, pop, and many other musical styles. I had delved into various Japanese musical traditions, particularly the Tozan-ryū *shakuhachi* style in which I was taking lessons, but nothing had prepared me for the sound of the Nēnēs. Compared to the studied austerity and deliberate simplicity of much of the Japanese music with which I had been involved, the Nēnēs, with their combination of new and old, East and West, energy and soulfulness, were eye- and ear-opening. What was more, compared to my fellow *shakuhachi* students who were mostly at least one generation older than me, the Nēnēs seemed to appeal to audiences of all ages. Japanese music could sound and feel like this? Or was it Japanese music? Despite my – at that stage – rudimentary Japanese abilities, I could hear that much of the language used in the songs was very different from the Japanese that I was studying, and the musical aspects too, from the scales somehow reminiscent of the Balinese gamelan to the offbeat rhythms of the fast dance numbers, were unlike anything that I had heard in mainland Japan. I resolved to find out more. On a short visit to Osaka, I embarked on a search for recordings of Okinawan music in a large CD store. Scanning the Japanese traditional music rack, I went past the recordings of *shakuhachi*, *Tsugaru-shamisen*, *wadaiko*, but there was nothing from Okinawa. A store clerk eventually led me over to the 'World Music' section in a different part of the store where, in the subsection marked 'Asia', there were numerous CDs of Okinawan music.<sup>2</sup> This geographical dislocation, translated onto the shelves of a CD store, again raised the question of exactly what country the music came from.

Delving a little deeper into Okinawan music, I began to listen to a series of recordings of more traditional styles made in the 1970s on the Japanese Victor label. Singers such as Yamazato Yūkichi, Noborikawa Seijin, Kuniyoshi Genji and, in particular, Kadekaru Rinshō stood out for their soulful delivery and sense of playfulness. Another highlight in these CDs was the liner notes, especially those by the journalist Takenaka Rō, who had been the impetus behind the 1970s recordings, and who portrayed performers such as Kadekaru as a kind of cross

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<sup>2</sup> Large Japanese CD retailers are divided on their classification of Okinawan music, with some stores filing the genre together with traditional Japanese music, and some under world music. With a shift to Internet shopping, the situation has changed somewhat. On the Japanese Amazon.co.jp site, for example, traditional Okinawan music is filed in both the Japanese traditional music and world music sections. In 2009 the Japanese iTunes site had no category for traditional Japanese music – Okinawan music was mostly filed under world music, while traditional mainland Japanese music was distributed among a variety of genres – one (mainland Japanese) folk-song collection was filed under 'singer-songwriter'.