

Nuchibana: Okinawans Dancing for Peace

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In its earliest documented form, this Okinawan dance *nuchibana* is classified as a *koten onnaodori Ryûkyû buyû*, a classical women's dance of the Ryukyu performance genre (see Figure 1). The name, *nuchibana*, means "penetrated" or "threaded flowers" in reference to the garland manipulated by the dancers while moving.¹ The earliest version of *nuchibana*, now referred to as "*mutô nuchibana*" (original *nuchibana*), belonged to a court repertoire of dances from the Ryukyu Kingdom. Unified by 1429, the Ryukyu Kingdom developed into a culturally rich society defined by international trade and relations with a number of Asian countries including Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Historical sources suggest that the performing arts played a significant role in maintaining economic and diplomatic ties with these foreign powers. In fact, the Ryukyu government appointed dance officials of noble ranking called *odori bugyô* (dance magistrates) to be in charge of performances for foreign dignitaries, both at home and abroad.² However, with the dissolution of the Ryukyu Kingdom and various changes brought about by Japanese assimilation policies enacted throughout the Meiji era (1868-1912), courtly dances of the nobility experienced a popularization that altered the style and composition of the dancing. A new genre of performance known as "*zô odori*" or miscellaneous dances developed separately from the classical repertoire.

Okinawa no Geinô (Okinawan Performing Arts)

A. *Taishû Geinô* (General Public/Popular Performing Arts)

1. *Shima Uta* (Island Songs)
2. *Min'yô* (Folk Songs)
3. *Hayari Ongaku* (Popular Music)
4. *Sôzaku Buyô* (Original Works/ Created Dances)
5. *Okinawa Shûbai* (Okinawan Plays/Drama)
6. *Kageki* (Operas)
7. *Zô Odori* (Miscellaneous Popular Dances)
 - a. *Nuchibana* (Pierced Flowers/Flower Lai Dance)
 - b. *Manjuru* (Wheat/Barley Woven Hat Dance)
 - c. *Tanchame* (Couple's Fishing and Gathering Dance)

B. *Koten Geinô* (Classical Performing Arts)

1. *Kumi Odori* (Group Dance-Drama)
2. *Koten Ongaku* (Classical Music)
3. *Koten Buyô* (Classical Dances)
 - a. *Nisai Odori* (Young Men Dances)
 - b. *Onna Odori* (Women Dances)
 - i. *Mutô Nuchibana* (Original Nuchibana)
 - ii. *Kashiki* (Spool and Frame Sewing Dance)

- iii. *Yanaji* (Willow Dance)
 - c. *Wakashu Odori* (Young Men and Women Dances)
 - d. *Rôjin Odori* (Elderly Dances)
- C. *Minzoku Geinô* (Folk Performing Arts)
1. *Eis* (Okinawan Obon Dance)
 2. *Bô Odori* (Stick/Pole Dance)
 3. *Hachi Gatsu Odori* (August Dance)

Figure 1: Categories of Okinawan Performance (Excerpted and translated from *Gekkan Ryukyu Buyô* (1999) Issue 2, Number 3, pps. 14-15.

Under the umbrella of this new *zô odori* category, Tamagusku Seigi (1889-1971) choreographed the present-day stage version of *nuchibana* in 1934 (Yano 1988: 245).³ Tamagusuku's *nuchibana* developed in a particular socio-political context that contributes to the multi-layered significance of the dancing. During the politically tense 1930s, discourses about Japanese identity struggled to define "Japan" as both a modern nation and a regional empire. As a result, competing discourses on Okinawa either portrayed the perceived negative (even "primitive") qualities of Okinawan culture that must be assimilated, or argued that Okinawa stands as a repository for ancient Japan, which should be preserved.⁴ Both arguments served the creation of a dominant Japanese nation and justified the violence necessary for Japanese empire-building strategies. In light of these pressures, the use of the performing arts can be seen as an effort to rescue and reconstruct an aspect of Okinawan identity from colonial domination. That is, through the re-creation of dances such as *nuchibana*, Okinawans could produce a reality, a profound Okinawan sense of "being" in a complex socio-cultural context (Urciuoli 1995: 203).

In this paper, I examine how Okinawan performers understand the semantic value of *nuchibana* movements, not as separate from their bodies or senses, but as multi-sensory actions that help them to achieve certain objectives. I begin with an analysis of the present-day stage version of *nuchibana* including its music, props, and some specific action signs. I then present the politically charged adaptation of *nuchibana* performed by the student activist group, Okinawa Hands for Peace (OHP) at the 1999 Hague International Appeal for Peace. In this section, I emphasize that the group's decision to dance is deeply interwoven with how the members conceptualize their collective and individual identities. Throughout this paper, I highlight how the performance of *nuchibana* is inextricably connected to meaning-making processes that are multi-modal and contribute to the performers' lived experience of being and acting.

The Stage Version of *Nuchibana*: Multivalent Movements

The Performance of Gender

Present-day *nuchibana* consists of two sections differentiated by changes in movement style, music, tempo, and overall tone.⁵ The first half of the dancing includes action signs, bodily positions, and movement elements derived from the *mutô nuchibana* version. Originally, only biologically male dancers, gendered female, performed classical women's dances such as *mutô nuchibana*, since women were forbidden on stage.⁶ This assignment of gender had to be produced through the performance of movements and positions denoted as "feminine."⁷ Even with biologically female performers in contemporary times, *nuchibana* maintains elements that ascribe gender to the performer and her actions. For example, modern *nuchibana* begins with a walking style that echoes the classical "*Ryûkyû aiyumi*" (the way to walk in Ryukyu dances) in which the dancer moves as if "floating on a cloud."⁸ The most important aspect of this style is an action sign called "*suriashi*" (sliding feet) in reference to the dancer's footwork. The dancer lowers her center of gravity, bends her knees slightly, and then walks by sliding her feet across the floor, one after the other, gently elevating the toe at the end of each step (Figure 2). The body position employed during *suriashi* is also important for representing the ideal feminine body. Culturally embedded in Ryukyu court aesthetics, the ideal feminine body exhibits long flowing lines and a delicate yet controlled overall body form. Therefore, as the dancer walks, she focuses her energy and strength on her "*mizoochi*" (the pit of the stomach, or the area of the solar plexus) in order to move smoothly. *Suriashi* is performed in-correctly if the dancer alters her height/level or appears to be bobbing up and down with each step.

In addition to *suriashi*, the position called "*onnadachi*" (standing like a woman) may be characterized as a body posture that heightens the impression of femininity (Hanagusuku 1997: 39) thus contributing to the performance of gender in *nuchibana*. During this pose, the feet are apart and turned out to face the front diagonal directions, the left foot slightly in front of the right with the ankle flexed. The right leg is bent to support the weight of the body, and the pelvis is tilted forward such that the lower back curves (Figure 3). As in *suriashi*, the performer should focus her energy on the *mizoochi* to maintain control. *Onnadachi* functions in most women's dances as a posture from which movements begin or end. For example, in *nuchibana*, *onnadachi* appears at the conclusion of a given musical/movement phrase. Sometimes compared to the *kamae* standing position in martial arts, *onnadachi* expresses the feeling that the performer is on the verge of shifting from a stationary state to motion (Hanagusuku 1997: 32). Based on the *kamae*, Okinawan men's dances also include a standing position that serves as a transition between movements, but the male stance requires both legs to be straight, the feet symmetrical, and the body weight evenly distributed. The *onnadachi* is thus an important taxonomic element of the movement vocabulary associated specifically with Okinawan women's dances.⁹

A third gendered action sign in women's dances such as *nuchibana* is *koneri* or *konerite* ("kneading hands"). *Konerite* involves bending the index finger to

meet the thumb while rolling or circling the wrists (Figure 4).¹⁰ The visual appearance of *konerite* positions, especially the placement of the fingers, has led some scholars to emphasize the link between Okinawan dances and other Southeast Asian performance styles in Bali or Thailand.¹¹ While some influence is undeniably present, this assessment of *konerite* movements based on handshape alone only tells part of the story. *Konerite* may be used in combination with a variety of other movements to create different action signs. However, according to Kodama Yōko, a professional performer and instructor of Okinawan dances, nearly every movement that contains *konerite* serves one main purpose—to portray feminine hands.¹² Given the specific socio-cultural context in which *mutō nuchibana* and other courtly dances developed, *konerite* aided male performers to cultivate movements that could express femininity, and mask their "male" qualities. *Konerite* helped biologically male hands to appear delicate, gentle, and dainty.

Figure 2. Suriashi, Sliding Feet

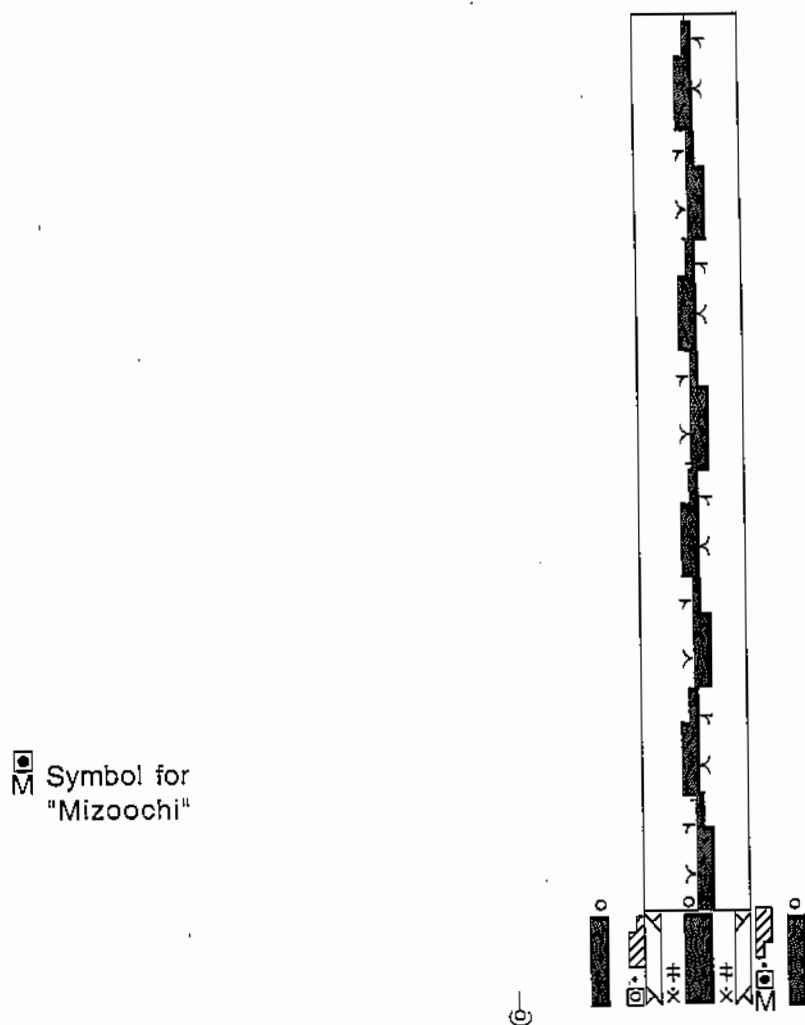


Figure 3. Onnadachi,
Women's Standing
Position

☐
M Symbol for
"Mizoochi"

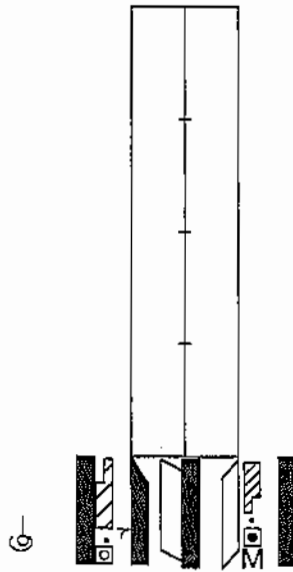
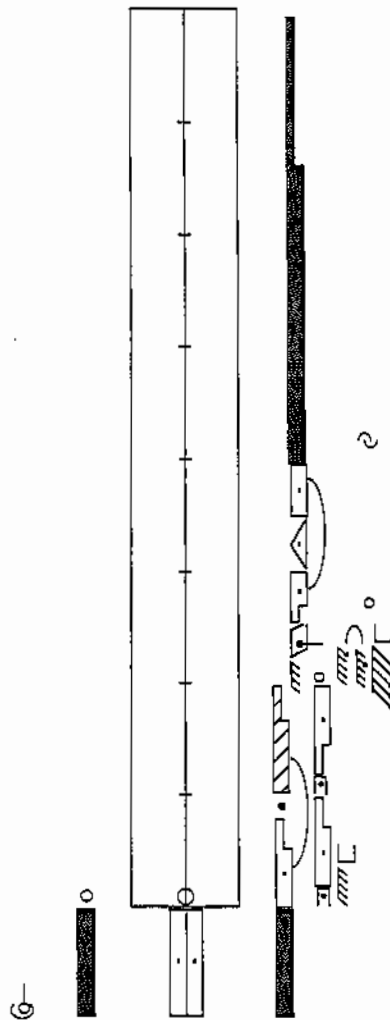


Figure 4: A Version of Konerite,
Kneading Hands



Relationships between Music and Movement

In addition to the performance of gender, the relationship between the music and movement is crucial to the multivalent nature of *nuchibana*. The first half of present-day *nuchibana* utilizes the song *dakidûn bushi* with lyrics excerpted from the original *mutô nuchibana* song, *Shirashi haikawa bushi* (Shirashi River Song).¹³ While dancing, the performers depend on hearing the music and at times singing the lyrics to situate their movements in a narrative context. A story is told as the visual-kinesthetic actions and the audio sounds occur simultaneously. Echoing themes in Okinawan poetry, the action signs of *nuchibana* recount the tale of a love-struck woman longing for her lover who is probably overseas.¹⁴ The lyrics can be translated as:

Let us go pick cotton blossoms! But the blossoms are soaked in dew and cannot be picked. How I long to scoop up the cherry blossoms flowing along the swift running Shirase River and make a garland to place around the neck of my beloved. This red-threaded garland is for my beloved to wear. This white-threaded garland is for you children to take (Yamazato 1995:113).

Corresponding with the lyrics, certain actions function as indexical signs. The act of pointing is a common example of an indexical sign (Farnell 1995a: 52). In this case, when the lyrics refer to picking flowers, the dancer gestures towards forward-right-diagonal to index "those flowers over there" (Figure 5). The performer's sense of vision and her ability to convey to the audience that she is looking at a particular place provides the meaning of the action sign. If she did not look in the right direction, the semantic value of the action would be essentially distorted or confused. This indexical sign also serves to situate the performer in a particular context (Farnell 1995a: 52). A dancer fails to execute the movement properly if her gaze focuses on any other location; she may appear distracted or even lost in her own performance space (Figure 6).¹⁵

Complementing, yet independent of the lyrics, the instrumental musical accompaniment plays a significant role in *nuchibana*. While the dancer moves, musicians play the *sanshin*, a three-stringed instrument made of snakeskin, originally imported from China in the 1400s. The song *dakidûn bushi*, created through the vibrating sounds of the *sanshin* and the musicians' voices, follows a "ryûka" style defined by four musical phrases of an 8:8:8:6 repeating pattern.¹⁶ The beats in the music are critical to the dancer's performance. For example, certain movements are defined by the length of time that the musicians allow for a given musical phrase. In some sections of the dancing, the performer does not count an exact number of steps or beats between actions, she must rely on the music.¹⁷

Figure 5.
 Correct Execution of "Those Flowers
 Over There"

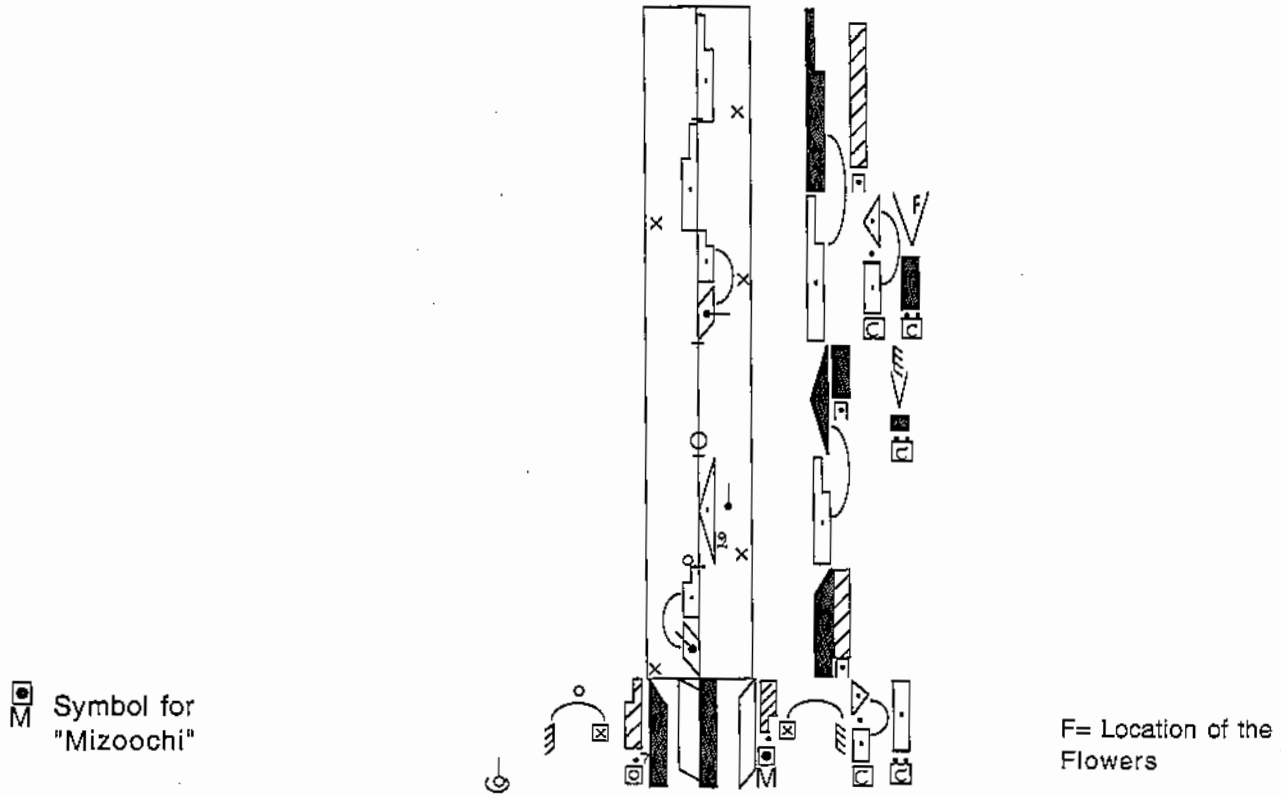
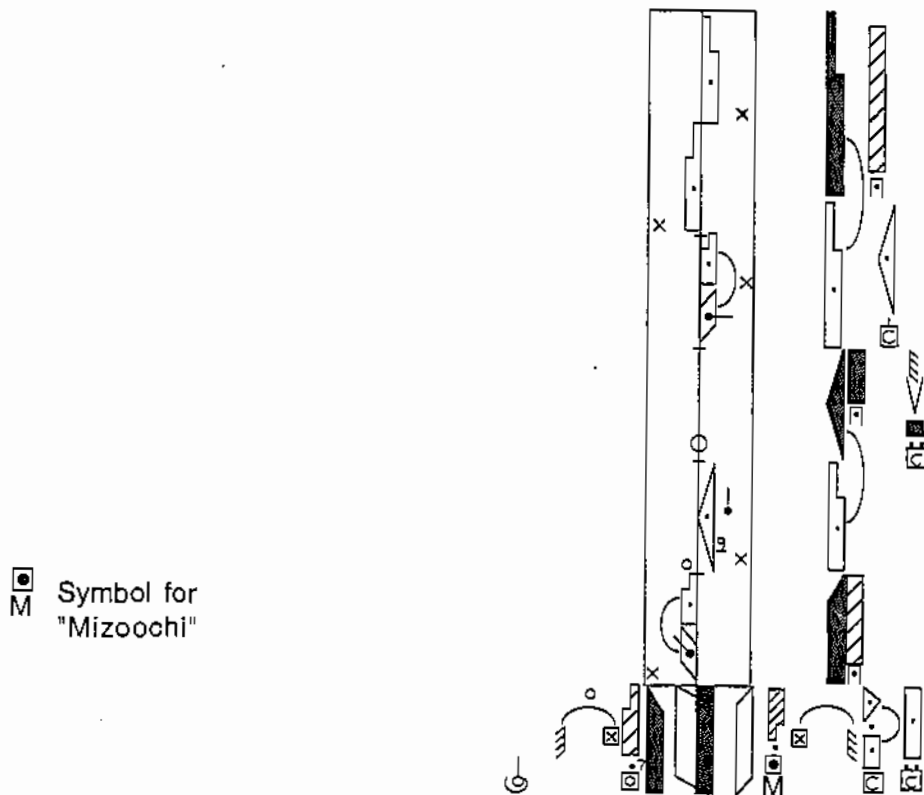


Figure 6.
 Incorrect Execution of "Those Flowers
 Over There"



The music also helps contextualize the emotional implications of the movements. In comparison with *mutô nuchibana*, the tempo of present-day *nuchibana* moves much faster, thus altering the tone and meaning of the dancing. For example, *Mutô nuchibana* expresses feelings of lamentation through movements and music that might be characterized as slow, serene, or even somber. These qualities reflect the aristocratic dances of the Rukyu court that were subsequently replaced by more festive, lively elements during the process of popularization. Influenced by commoner audiences, modern Okinawa *buyû* and musical compositions developed a more celebratory tenor.

Highlighting an atmosphere of celebration, the music for the second half of *nuchibana* is even more upbeat in tempo and mood. To the tune of "*nan dake bushi*" (southern mountain song), the dancer portrays the same female character from the first section, but instead of communicating emotions of longing, she expresses a sense of celebration. She dances to rejoice in the day—presumably the day her lover returns. The lyrics can be translated as:

Sound, sound, sound the castanets! How beautiful is the sound of the castanets! What a pleasure it will be to appear at today's banquet (Yamazato 1995:113).

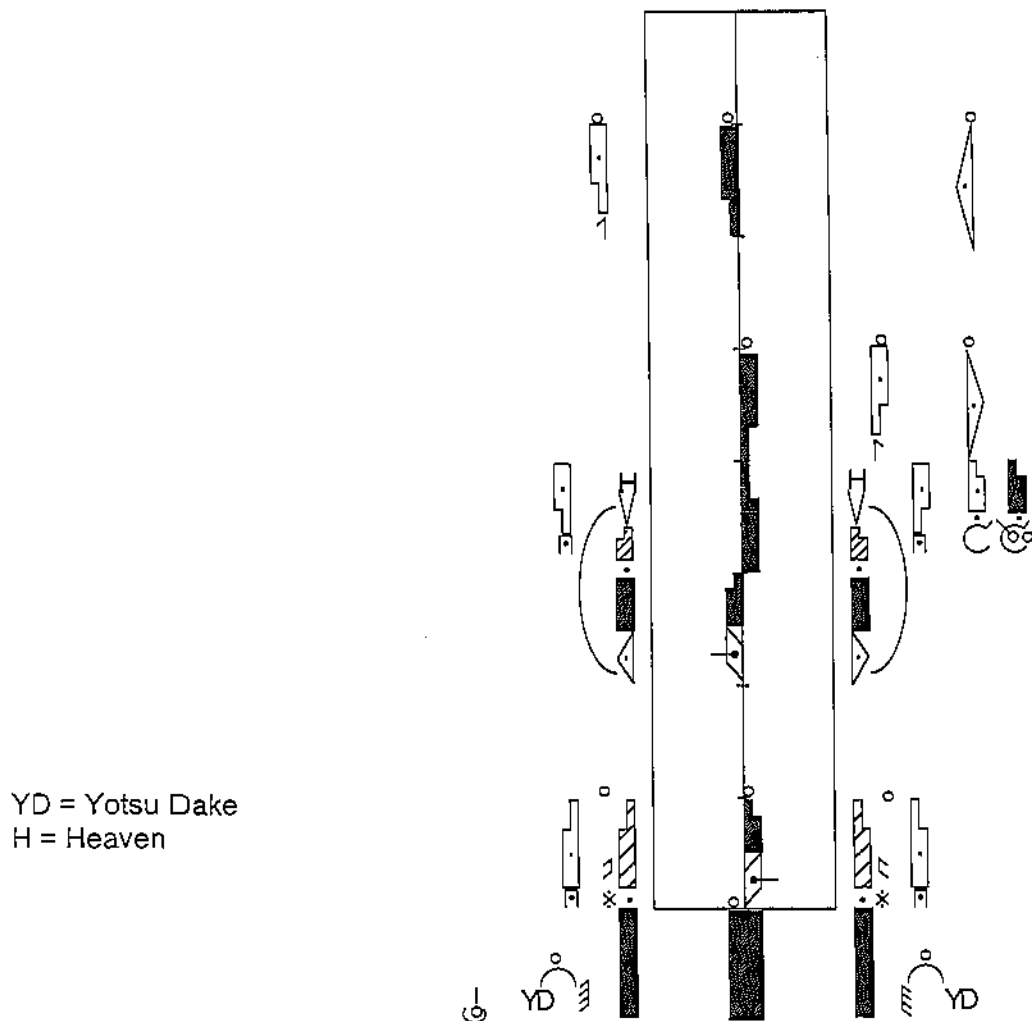
In this case, "sound, sound, sound" might also be translated as "click, click, click," to indicate the actual noise created by an accoutrement called *yotsu dake* (four pieces of bamboo). *Yotsu dake* are integrated into the second half of *nuchibana* not only as a dance prop, but also as an additional musical instrument that incites the energy of the performers and the audience. Somewhat like castanets, the dancer holds the pieces of bamboo in her hands and clicks them together, thus contributing to the musical quality and overall rhythmic effect of the performance.

The use of *yotsu dake* extends beyond issues of musicality to include a poignant reference to Okinawan religious and cultural beliefs. Even prior to the unification of the Ryukyu Kingdom, female priestesses with divine powers functioned as the spiritual leaders of society. As part of their rituals, ceremonies and festivals, these *noro* priestesses utilized dancing as a performative act to maintain socio-religious bonds in the community.¹⁸ Local myth also supports the belief that prior to their religious performances, *noro* would click slabs of bamboo in rituals to purify a sacred space. The sound generated by the bamboo could both arouse gods to be appeased or exorcise evil spirits.¹⁹ In this sense, the use of *yotsu dake* as a multi-modal aspect of *nuchibana* may be understood as an allusion to Okinawa's past and to deeper levels of cultural meaning that transcend the immediate visual aspects of a given performance.

Additional mythical-religious elements appear in the second half of *nuchibana*. Similar to mainland Japanese performance styles, many Okinawan performances reflect an overlap between "*seikatsu*" (lifestyle) "*shukyô*" (religion) and "*asobi*" (play) (Hattori 1975: 8). Instead of merely entertaining human audiences, performances functioned as a form of "*kami asobi*" (gods/spirits play), a particular type of playfulness enacted for divine spirits.²⁰ Through the act of dancing, these spirits could be ritually pacified or

summoned to aid humans in times of need. As part of this larger tradition that connects performance with religious significations, *nuchibana* contains action signs that explicitly symbolize the worshipping of gods through performance as "play."²¹ For instance, while clicking the *yotsu dake*, the dancer extends her hands upward and bows her head slightly. With this action, she praises the gods and displays reverence towards the heavens (Figure 7). She performs an act of worship and thanksgiving as an integral part of her dancing celebration.

Figure 7. Reaching Towards Heaven,
Praising the Gods



In sum, the present-day stage version of *nuchibana* presents important aspects of the complex history of Okinawan dances and Okinawan cultural identity. Performed during the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom and then choreographed anew as a reinvented tradition in 1934, *nuchibana* maintains various musical and movement elements characteristic of classical women's dances, while incorporating modern tones and styles. Carefully constructed and ensconced in a rich socio-cultural background, it is this version of *nuchibana* that was standardized, and eventually appropriated by the OHP activist performers.

OHP's Version of *Nuchibana*: Similar Movements, Different Meanings

From September of 1998 to August of 1999, I lived in Okinawa, Japan, studying citizen participation in politics and grassroots social movements. Only a month after I arrived, a terrible accident involving a U.S. Marine and a young Okinawan girl shook the community. In response to this tragedy, myriad groups, from labor unions to women's associations, held parades, prayer sessions, and protest meetings in honor of the girl and against the presence of U.S. military bases on the islands. Adding to previously established organizations, a fresh set of Okinawan activists rallied around the issue of "peace." The Okinawa Hands for Peace (OHP), a student group consisting of 25 Okinawans between the ages of 17 and 25, contributed a new voice to the anti-base/peace movement. Encouraged by their English teacher, a founding member of the local women's movement, the students formed an organization that would henceforth play an active role in Okinawan politics.²²

After hosting protest sessions in front of a U.S. military base and participating in some island-wide demonstrations, the OHP members felt compelled to expand the scope of their political movement. Through an invitation from the former Governor of Okinawa, Ota Masahide, the students were offered a unique chance to join an Okinawan delegation to the 1999 International Hague Appeal for Peace Conference.²³ I participated in preparations for this conference, as the group practiced English, studied Okinawan history, visited battle sites from World War II, and discussed the most effective way to present the plea of young Okinawans in an international context. Finally, the group decided that beyond talking about military base problems in Okinawa, they wanted to include *action* in their political statement. The OHP chose to *perform* their message of peace by dancing a version of *nuchibana*.²⁴

In the next section, I focus on the varied levels of meaning conveyed in the OHP's use of *nuchibana* during the Hague conference. Using the semasiological premise that dancing constitutes a form of dynamically embodied social action (Farnell 1999: 341), I explore ways in which OHP members utilize *nuchibana* as an Okinawan action sign system (Williams 1982: 162) to express and communicate specific cultural meanings and political goals.

As mentioned above, the professional stage version of *nuchibana* requires proper execution of action signs and knowledge of a movement vocabulary particular to Okinawa *buyū* (dances). Embedded in a given performance space and genre of dancing, *nuchibana* movements tell a story and signify elements

of Okinawan performance history. However, as part of the anti-base/peace movement in Okinawa, student activists performed *nuchibana* in an international arena to symbolize Okinawan “peacefulness” and to plead for the removal of military bases.²⁵ In this context, the exact execution of action signs proved less important than the indexing of larger political arguments, such as the belief that Okinawans and Japanese constitute culturally and historically different peoples.

Through their particular use of *nuchibana*, the OHP act as meaning-making agents (Farnell 1995b: 10) who “talk from the body” (Varela 1995: 221) and “think with movement” (Puri and Hart-Johnson 1995: 158). My argument here is grounded in a definition of human agency which provides for dynamic embodiment (Farnell 1999, Varela 1994). The students of OHP employ an enacted body (Varela 1999: 399) to convey complex thoughts and multi-layered meanings. Thus, with an embodied intentionality to act (Gibson 1979: 218-219), the OHP members selectively appropriated specific elements of *nuchibana*, yet altered others to suit their particular needs.

For example, in the first half of *nuchibana*, the members utilized some of the movements from the professional stage version, but the group’s creation of a politicized performance space modified the actions and their corresponding meanings or semantic values. As activists, the OHP members were not concerned with minute details of the movements, such as exact hand positions or arm levels—matters that would be crucial to professional stage execution—rather they focused on producing a political space in which they could express their culturally embedded message of “peace.” That is, the *konerite* component of certain movement sequences seems lost or indiscernible in the OHP’s performance of *nuchibana*. Instead of emphasizing individual action signs, the OHP members wanted their overall performance to index the larger socio-political issues that define the group’s purpose.

The OHP members’ purpose was explicitly political. As Sylvia Glasser notes in reference to South Africa, “dance is political, and for many people it is political movement” (Glasser 2000:4). This approach to dancing politics was especially evident in OHP’s presentation of the second half of *nuchibana*. While they utilized the same song as the stage version of *nuchibana*, “*nan dake bushi*,” the dancers merely repeated a few kinemes taken out of context such that many action signs and their original meanings were lost. For instance, they omitted the action of raising their hands towards heaven in celebration and prayer.

They also changed the choreography and overall structure of the dance: when the dancers from the first half of *nuchibana* began to click the *yotsu dake*, a new set of performers entered the performance space. These new performers wore different colored costumes and used typically unrelated props and movements. As the initial dancers sounded the *yotsu dake*, the new performers would strike small hand-held *taikô* drums called “*paranku*,” one beat for every two *yotsu dake* clicks. *Paranku* are usually found in Okinawan *eisa* performances presented in celebration of “*obon*” (a Buddhist ceremony; a festival of the dead).²⁶ In general, this combination of various props and movements produced a different dance, a sort of *champururu* mix that included

nuchibana elements, but incorporated other influences as well.²⁷ Again, the members chose to modify the established *nuchibana* to achieve specific activist goals. In addition to voicing protest against the military bases, the goals of the OHP connect with a larger movement to reconstruct Okinawan identity and to rewrite Okinawan history via a discourse of "peace."

By celebrating the performing arts and heralding the cultural treasures of the Ryukyu Kingdom, some historians and activists seek to foster a view of Okinawans as inherently "peace-loving people" (in Japanese "*heiwa aiko no min*") endowed with a pacified nature that contrasts sharply with the violent character of mainland Japanese. While in Okinawa, I was often told that music and dancing play an important role in the Okinawan way of life—so much so that historically "more has been decided by a flick of a [dance] fan than by the swish of a sword."²⁸ In addition, the social importance of *sanshin*, the traditional instrument described earlier, is often compared to the Japanese samurai sword. This comparison supports the belief in fundamental differences between Okinawan and Japanese socio-cultural history. In the preface to a book on Ryukyu dance published by the Okinawan Prefectural Government, Ritsuko Sakiyama writes:

Whereas in Japan, as a byproduct of the samurai tradition, it was often the custom to display a sword as an heirloom in the *tokonoma* alcove of a living room, in Okinawa the lack of a militaristic tradition and the importance placed on cultural pursuits meant that it was the *sanshin* which occupied a position similar to that of the Japanese sword as a family heirloom. That a musical instrument rather than a murderous weapon should occupy this position is a reflection of the different orientations of Ryukyuan and Japanese society in the past (Yamazato 1995:10).

This view of the Japanese as sword bearing warriors and the Okinawans as cultural peacekeepers became pervasive in the rhetoric of the anti-base/peace movement. For example, Ota Masahide, a former governor of Okinawa, employed this theme in his speech to the Japanese Supreme Court in July of 1996. During his testimony on why he refused to sign the new land leases for the American military bases, he posited a unique Okinawan peaceful spirit against the view of Japan as a "*gunkoku*" or military country. He explained that Okinawa's notable "absence of militarism" derives from a cultural history which he describes as "*josei bunka*," feminine culture, or "*yasashisa no bunka*," (a culture of gentleness/kindness) (Ota 1996: 171).²⁹

I suggest that the OHP's use of *nuchibana* at the Hague indexes this dichotomy between peaceful Okinawans and war-loving Japanese. In the context of such a discourse, the act of dancing *nuchibana* allows OHP members to perform this difference, thereby producing an Okinawan identity separate from Japan that is embodied in human movement.

In subsequent interviews, OHP members shared some powerful statements, which substantiate the relationship between Okinawan identity and OHP's decision to use dance as a form of social action imbued with layers of meaning. For instance, one college freshman in the group explained:

I feel it is important to preserve Okinawan culture. It is a part of who we are as a people, part of our history. Even now, I too have a sense of the past, a warm feeling about the times when Okinawa was an independent country.³⁰

Another student commented on performing as a form of cross-cultural communication. He told me:

Actually I think we danced because it seemed the best way to express ourselves to others. We could say more about ourselves and it was easier for people to understand us through music and dance.³¹

But the group's adult leader, an Okinawan English teacher, presented the most succinct and convincing argument. She said:

I believe that identity is very important. I am most certainly *Uchinanchu* (the name for Okinawan in the local dialect). In the past when I went to the mainland, I needed an Okinawan passport, and so I was troubled by whether or not I was "Japanese." Even now when I write my nationality, I think about it and often I cannot write "*nihonjin*" (a "Japanese" person).³²

On Okinawan performing arts, she added:

The performing arts are a part of our Okinawan consciousness. Music and dance are not just for shows, for the stage, like *Kabuki* or *Noh*, but rather they are a part of our lifestyle, our daily life. Traditional arts are something we Okinawans have in common, a way to express ourselves. It is just natural for us in our homes after a meal or with friends to take out the *sanshin* and sing, dance, and celebrate our Okinawan culture.³³

In general, her statements emphasize the sense of difference between Okinawans and mainland Japanese, as experienced in the past and perpetuated in current sentiments. During her lifetime, she remembers being told by officials that she was *not* Japanese, and that memory affects the current conceptualization of her personal identity as inextricably linked to a particular collective identity. It is this sense of collective identity that was simultaneously re-presented and created in the movements of the OHP activist performers.

Multi-sensory Aspects of OHP's *Nuchibana*

The movements, costumes and props employed by the OHP serve visually to inscribe and audibly denote Okinawan "difference." The members wore handmade costumes with colorful combinations intended to reflect Okinawan patterns found in "*bingata*" pieces. *Bingata* refers to a dyeing process that incorporates bright reds, yellows, and purples, to depict images of island flora and animal life such as birds.³⁴ *Bingata* patterns, hand-woven or mass-produced, mark objects and places as "Okinawan." These representative patterns and accompanying colors are often visible on commercial goods, restaurants, and even pop star albums as signs of "Okinawa." The OHP members also made their own *nuchibana* garlands—another object intended to represent Okinawan uniqueness. Although the *nuchibana* song lyrics mention cherry blossoms, the flowers used in the garlands actually depict a

type of hibiscus plant indigenous to Okinawa. Along with the *deigo*, a local variety of the Indian coral bean plant, the red hibiscus is often used as a symbol of the Okinawan islands especially noticeable on tourist brochures and other publications.³⁵

As mentioned above, the *yotsu dake* prop is also of special significance in Okinawan cultural history, particularly as a symbol of the *norō* priestesses and their ritual practices, who represent local Okinawan power and traditional culture. The Meiji Japanese government attacked the position of the *norō* as part of a set of policies known as *Ryūkyū shobun* (policies to destroy Ryukyu culture and social organization). The Japanese government perceived the symbolic role of the *norō* as a threat to their attempts to assimilate the Okinawans.³⁶ The OHP's re-appropriation of the *yotsu dake* prop is significant in light of this history. Just as the *norō* created their sacred space, the OHP sounded the castanets to designate and claim a political space and to promote their cultural identity. The OHP used multi-sensory actions to produce a symbolically charged space through the tactile manipulation and audible sounds of *yotsu dake*. The human senses are an integral part of this process. For the performers themselves, their use of *yotsu dake* and the added *paranku* drum stimulates tactile, kinesthetic and aural senses, contributing to a rich human experience. In addition, the bright colors and loud sounds proved instrumental in attracting attention to the OHP's presentation at the Hague—one of several occurring simultaneously. The multi-sensory aspects of the OHP performance allowed members to beckon to fellow conference participants to listen, watch, and engage in their message of peace. The human senses are not somehow separate from a "mind" in these embodied actions. The senses play an active role in the lived experience of being, and in this case, serve as a crucial aspect of OHP's use of "dance as a mode of becoming" (Urciuoli 1995: 196).

Concluding Remarks

The choice of actions in the performance of the Okinawa Hands for Peace at the Hague conference provides a good example of how action sign systems may be utilized to achieve specific cultural, political, and even historiographical goals. As dynamically embodied agents, the members of OHP not only pleaded for the removal of military bases on their small island prefecture, but also fostered a particular reading of the past and understanding of the present through their performance of *nuchibana*. The group's social activism, manifested in the selection of specific bodily movements, includes an effort to redefine Okinawan identity in opposition to Japanese nationalism by contributing to a discourse of peace that equates dancing with pacifism.

This representation may itself be problematic, of course, an issue I hope to address in future work.³⁷ Nonetheless, OHP members embrace the notion that dancing functions as a meaning-making process that can be instrumental in political and intellectual pursuits. In this sense, I agree with Sylvia Glasser's statement that "dances and dancing are not only expressions of political feelings, they also influence the perceptions of their participants and viewers, contributing to the transformation of socio-political systems" (Glasser 2000:34). The OHP members indeed sought to transform their immediate local

environment, but they also hoped to reach the international audience present at the Hague conference. To share their message with other organizations in the peace movement, the OHP members relied on the power of visual-kinesthetic actions and rhythmic audio sounds. The efficient use of costuming and props as part of their performance suggests that OHP activists were mindful of the power and importance of such multi-sensory appeals, outside of any specific understanding of particular action signs. The signifier/signified relationships of action signs in the *nuchibana*, described earlier, were dispensible in this context and could be reconfigured to suit the political goals as well as the international audience.

Endnotes

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¹ The word "*nuchibana*" comes from the characters for "*tsuranuku*" (to penetrate/pierce) and "*hana*" (flower). Pronounced in *Uchinâguchi*, Okinawan dialect, the name of the dance becomes "*nuchibana*."

² For more information on performances at the Ryukyu court for Chinese *sappushi* officials, and at Edo castle, see Ryūkyū Shinpōsha, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 326-327.

³ Tamagusuku Seigi, nephew of the famous Tamagusuku Seiji credited for creating a number of Okinawan dances and *kumi odori* performances, became a well-known choreographer and performer in his own right.

⁴ The Japanese government promoted various assimilation policies in Okinawa, however scholars such as Yanagita Kunio helped to reinvent Okinawa as a repository for Japanese traditional culture and language, see Yanagita 1968-1971, vol. 25. Some scholars such as Harry Harutoonian have argued that Yanagita's seemingly positive portrayal of Okinawa may have helped to support the process of "figuring the folk" in Japanese ethnic nationalist ideology, an ideology that ultimately contributed to fascistic beliefs and actions. Harutoonian, 1998, pp. 144-159.

⁵ Although I refer to the present-day version of *nuchibana* as a single entity, stage performances differ due to stylistic choices of individual dancers and performance families. To be clear, I am speaking specifically about the version of *nuchibana* performed by my teachers from the Kodama Kiyoko line of Okinawan performers. Kodama descends artistically from Tokashiki Shuryō (1880-1953) a central figure in Okinawan performance. His influence helped Kodama to establish the Tōkyō Okinawa Geinō Hozonkai (Tokyo Okinawan Performance Preservation Society), now housed in Yokohama and still giving

regular performances in Tokyo. For more information on Kodama, her performances, and pedigree as a dancer, see Gushikawa Kyōiku Inkai, 2001.

⁶ Women dancers were not prevalent on stage until after World War II.

⁷ Several scholars have recently addressed the notion of the production of gender through performance; see especially Butler, 1990, p. 25.

⁸ When I first studied Okinawan dance from 1998-1999 with the Ryūkyū Geinō Kenkyō Kurabu (Ryukyu Performance Research Club) at the University of the Ryukyus on the main island of Okinawa, I was told that properly to execute this movement, I should conceptualize floating on a cloud. I was also required to perfect this walking style before I was allowed to learn any of the actual choreography for the dances.

⁹ Hanagusuku Yōko (1997) includes a chart that compares different dance stances including Okinawan male and female positions, Japanese female *buyō* positions, *Nō* stances, and ballet first position.

¹⁰ In her dissertation on Okinawan dances, Ito Sachiyo explains *konerite* as an element that “refers to the wrist movements whose range extends from the elbow to the extremity of the fingers” (1998: 128). She lists three different types of *konerite*, but my understanding is that there are several action signs throughout Okinawan women’s dances that include *konerite* elements.

¹¹ This topic of the origins of Okinawan dances seems to have stirred some controversy among scholars. Gibo Eijiro refers to this discussion in Gibo, 1979.

¹² Kodama Yōko, niece and artistic heir to Kodama Kiyoko, explained the meaning of *konerite* during an interview on April 26, 2002. I asked about an action sign known as the “moon viewing” movement, which I had accidentally conflated with *konerite*. She then took the opportunity to correct me and to further explain the significance of *konerite*.

¹³ The Japanese characters used for *daikidūn bushi* can mean “militarily wealthy” and are often found together as the surname, Taketomi. But, I have also heard that this song originally used a different first character pronounced “*take/dake*” meaning bamboo (as in *yotsu dake*). This spelling may refer to the Okinawan island, Taketomi-jima, or to Taketomi village.

¹⁴ International trade and diplomatic relations were an important part of Ryukyu society. On this topic in English, see Smits (1999).

¹⁵ When I studied *nuchibana* under the professional Okinawan dancer, Kodama Yōko, she reprimanded me for not looking in the proper direction during the execution of this action sign. She explained that the movements were supposed to mean “*achira no hana*” (those flowers over there), the flowers that exist conceptually in a space just beyond the gesturing hand. For some reason, I tended to look behind me or to the left side, and she would ask me if I knew where the flowers were supposed to be.

¹⁶ The *ryūka* pattern is also found in Okinawan poetry. For more information on *ryūka* poetry and song lyrics, see Shimizu (1994: vol. 1-2).

¹⁷ While video-taping my dance teacher and I performing *nuchibana* together, I captured a useful scene. At one point in the dancing, she could not tell me exactly how many steps to take between movement sequences. After repeating the same section several times, she finally explained that I should follow the music, since it might be different depending on the musicians.

¹⁸ On the topic of *noro*, Okinawan religion, and ritual performances see Miyagi 1975 and Lebra, 1966.

¹⁹ Shintô and other Japanese ritual-religious performances also include actions that click bamboo slabs to purify a space.

²⁰ Irit Averbuch (1995:2) emphasizes the confluence of religion and performance especially in rural Japan. In the case of Okinawa more specifically, Yano (1998:10-20) explains that Okinawan performances also originated with "*kami asobi*."

²¹ The concept of "*asobi*" (play) is a complex notion and difficult to define. Hattori Yukio (1975) tries to explain how this notion used to function in Japanese society before the influence of modern theatre and performance practices that tended to elide the role of the gods in performance.

²² For more information on the group and their early involvement in the anti-base/peace movement, see articles in the *Ryûkyû Shinpô* Sunday, Morning Ed., November 8, 1998 and Friday, Morning Ed., November 19, 1998.

²³ On Ota's participation in the Hague Peace Conference see the following newspaper articles: *Ryûkyû Shinpô* Monday, Morning Ed., May 10, 1999, and Saturday, Morning Ed., May 15, 1999.

²⁴ In addition to *nuchibana*, OHP also performed a *taikô* drum presentation, music played on the *sanshin*, and a popular dance called *kachashi* that includes audience participation. However, for the purpose of this article, the *nuchibana* performance will receive the most attention.

²⁵ After the conference, the group published a pamphlet on their preparations and experiences. The preface, written by Ginoza Eiko, also mentions why they wanted to perform. See *Okinawa Taimusu* Wednesday, Morning Ed., June 9, 1999.

²⁶ For more information on *eisa*, see especially, Naha Shuppansha, 1998.

²⁷ *Champururu* is an Okinawan word that means, "to mix or combine together." It is often used to describe Okinawan culture more generally. The musician Kina Shokichi called his band the "Champururus" because they play a mixture of traditional and pop music. *Champururu*, as in *goya champuru*, is also the name of a popular Okinawan dish that combines seemingly different elements such as *goya* and eggs to make a delicious meal.

²⁸ I have not been able to find a textual citation for this comment, but I heard similar remarks in several circles while living in Okinawa.

²⁹ This speech was originally published in the *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, July 11, 1996. However, I found these citations in Ota's re-publication of the speech (Ota 1996:171) along with several other notable writings.

³⁰ This quote is my translation of an interview from June 16, 1999, with Shinzato Eri, a female member of the group. She also wrote an article for the local newspaper about her experiences at the peace conference, see *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, Friday, Morning Ed., June 11, 1999.

³¹ My translation of comments made by Katsuyoshi Miyagi during an interview conducted at the University of the Ryukyus on June 16, 1999.

³² Interview with Ginoza Eiko, on April 31, 1999.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ For more information on *bingata*, see *Okinawa Prefectural Government*, 1997.

³⁵ Even mainland Japanese depictions of Okinawa tend to associate the *deigo* and the red hibiscus with the Okinawan Islands. When I reviewed a film about Okinawa produced by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I noticed that the first few scenes included shots of both the *deigo* and the hibiscus plant.

³⁶ On the topic of *Ryūkyū shobun*, see especially Shinobu et al., 1992: 105 and Seitoku 1978. In addition, George Kerr talks about the eagerness of the Japanese officials to institute state Shinto in Okinawa, which affected the position and power structure of the *norō*. See George Kerr (2000: 451-452).

³⁷ Even Okinawan *buyō* include young men's dances that utilize weapons and relate to military themes. The assumption that dancing is peaceful or pacifistic in nature needs to be explored further. I suspect it relates to the feminization of culture in Okinawa and the misguided understanding that movements and people gendered female cannot be connected with warlike or militaristic activities.

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