

Uchinaanchu in the Midwest: An Oral History Project

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Abstract

Uchinaanchu, the term for Okinawans in our language, are an indigenous people from the Ryukyus, a chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean. Since the 19th century, Okinawan emigration has engendered a large diasporic population in the United States, organized into regional organizations called *Kenjinkai* (Japanese for prefectural association). This project documents the histories of the Okinawan communities in Minnesota and Chicago through oral history interviews and participant observation in *Kenjinkai* events. Through oral history interviews, this project unearths the historical processes by which these communities were organized, revealing the colorful stories of those who left Okinawa to start something new in the Midwest. Through participant observation, this project analyzes the current status of these two communities to identify the developments made since their beginnings. With no existing research done on Okinawan communities in the Midwest, this project exposes the narratives of these two communities and the unique cultures and identities they formed in the diaspora.

Methodology

My research methodology is categorized as “oral history.” I used a camera to video-record my interviews with Okinawans living in Minnesota and Illinois. I asked the following core questions:

1. Where were you born? Tell me about life growing up in Okinawa.
2. How did you end up in Minnesota?
3. What was the transition from Okinawa to Minnesota like?
4. How long has the Okinawan community here been established? Tell me about the Okinawan community here.
5. What does it mean to be Okinawan?

These questions were meant to hold structure and consistency among interviewees; however, this methodology uses natural conversation to identify the experiences of these Okinawan communities. Thus, conversations did not hold rigidly to this structure of questions, but rather ebbed and flowed with the natural tide of conversation.

The purpose behind using oral history is to give voice to a historically silenced community. Oral history provides a source through which Okinawans can tell their stories from the bottom up. Furthermore, it documents the culture, history, and identity of Okinawans from our own lips; it gives younger generations of Okinawans a primary source to learn about themselves. While many of the younger generations can easily find literature on Okinawa from a top-down perspective, projects that express what it means to be Okinawan from the bottom up are few and far between. Moreover, this type of project on Okinawans in the Midwest is non-existent. Thus, this project is necessary to document the lives of a community whose unique culture, history, and identity are quickly slipping out of the world’s memory and consciousness as the term “Okinawan” becomes colonially subsumed under the category “Japanese.”

My secondary research methodology is categorized as “participant observation.” I recorded my observations at the annual summer picnic events in Minnesota and Chicago, my own experience being an integral part of these observations. I analyzed these observations through a larger theoretical framework, placing the experiences at the picnics in the context of the international and transnational conditions within which these diasporic communities operate. Through “participant observation,” I was able to invest emotionally in this project and unearth perspectives invisible under other methodological frameworks. As Wesley Ueunten points out, this methodology rejects masculinist, elitist approaches to research that encourage “emotional detachment,” invalidate the power of feelings, and delegitimize such ground-level work.¹

Acknowledgements

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1. Ueunten, Wesley I. *The Okinawan Revival in Hawai'i: Contextualizing Culture and Identity Over Diasporic Time and Space* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007).

Observations

This project summarizes the recordings and participant observations within the following categories: Identity, Performance, Language, and *Chimu*.

Identity

What does it mean to be *Uchinaanchu*? The interviewees of the older generation made clear that Okinawans are much different than Japanese; Okinawans are a separate race. Younger generations were not so clear about this and refused to accept the idea that Okinawans are separate. Younger generations held a loyalty to the definition of Okinawa as a legal entity of the supposed nation-state of Japan; thus, they did not, or could not, delineate Okinawans as a different people. Here we see how colonial logic penetrates through space and time and into the minds of younger generations in the diaspora.

Performance

At both picnic events, everyone participated in traditional dance and music. These art forms play an important role in Okinawan cultural preservation, while also serving as a connecting point among *Uchinaanchu* around the world. The spiritual force behind this expression of *Uchinaanchu* identity is significant in understanding *Uchinaanchu* collectivity and resistance. Younger generations joined with the older generations in these performances, connecting them with their identity as uniquely *Uchinaanchu*.

Language

Language is spiritual. At the picnics, older generations relish the chance to speak *Uchinaaguchi* with one another. It is a time to express themselves in ways Japanese and English will not allow them to. The older generations emphasized their appreciation for the chance to speak their own language. The younger generations did not speak *Uchinaaguchi*; clearly, language retention of *Uchinaaguchi* in these two diasporic communities is essentially non-existent. We have an urgent need to take action to save our language.

Chimu

Chimu, meaning “heart” in *Uchinaaguchi*, is a central theme in Okinawan culture. The heart signifies the Okinawan culture of acceptance, empathy, and love. Regardless of where *Uchinaanchu* live, we all share a collective connection of the heart.

Chimu is the main reason why non-Okinawans are present at these picnics. These *Kenjinkai* refute rigid definitions of community that exclude those without Okinawan blood. Instead, these communities extend a heartfelt acceptance to those non-Okinawans present.

In my experiences within the *Uchinaanchu* community, I have always felt the heart to heart connection with fellow *Uchinaanchu*. My time with the communities in Minnesota and Chicago were no exception.

Conclusion

Culture and identity are processes—fluid modalities through which a people experiences the fullness of life. Through summer picnics, Okinawans in Minnesota and Chicago gather to engage these processes and express what it means to be Okinawan. Through this oral history and participant observation project, I documented the narratives of these communities, unearthing the beautiful stories of *Uchinaanchu* in the Midwest.