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Performing Okinawan Tamashī:

The Contributions of Eisā to Building Youth Community in Southern California

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of

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by

Elyse Emi Kono Izumi

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Valerie J. Matsumoto, Chair

This thesis explores the ways in which eisā, practiced and performed by the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch (RMD-LA) is significant for the community building and cultural perpetuation of the Okinawan American youth community in Southern California. While a global art form, eisā in Southern California has been greatly overlooked because of Japanese American community hegemony, rooted in longer legacies of colonialism, militarism, and imperialism. I trace the history and transformation of eisā as it traveled from Okinawa to the United States while simultaneously attempting to fill a gap in the literature of both eisā and the Okinawan American community in Southern California. I draw upon interviews with six prominent leaders and members of RMD-LA to examine major themes that encourage

community building and cultural perpetuation within the community. Lastly, I put into conversation how a gap in the literature and the dedication of eisā practitioners manifest on Southern California stages in a choreographic analysis of RMD-LA's 25th anniversary show entitled "Gajumaru." Through this performance, an alternative way of history-making and history-learning is enacted as Okinawan history is remembered, reproduced, and transmitted.

This thesis of Elyse Izumi is approved.

Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns

Keith Lujan Camacho

Valerie J. Matsumoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

For my grandparents,

Lily and Heihachiro Izumi

& Keiko and Yasutoshi Kono,

I recognize how your lives have shaped who I am today.

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GLOSSARY

Ali`i - Rulers or leaders in ʻōlelo Hawai`i

Bachi - Wooden stick used to strike the drum

Bōsōzoku - Japanese motorcycle gangs

Chimu - Uchināguchi for heart

Don- The phonetic sound used to describe the beating of the odaiko

Fujinbu - The women's wing of the Okinawa Association of America

Fuku Shibucho - Assistant branch leader for the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles branch

Geinobu - Performing Arts Committee for the Okinawa Association of America

Gosei - Fifth-generation Japanese American

Happi Coat - Happi coats are Japanese straight-sleeved robes that generally do not have a way to fasten them in the front

Hālau - School in ʻōlelo Hawai`i

Heishi - The call and response associated with eisā. Someone will yell “Hiya sa sa!” and everyone in response will yell back “Haiya!”

Ichariba chōdē - Ichariba chōdē roughly translates to “once we meet, we are friends for life” in Uchināguchi

Issei - First-generation Japanese American. Characterized by having been the ones to migrate from Japan or Okinawa to the United States

Kachashi - The rotation of the wrists back and forth above the head, sometimes maintaining a loose fist or an open, soft hand. It is often done during celebrations

Kaona - Tactic used in Hawaiian mele to hide actual meaning

Karī - The gift of happiness and belonging produced in performance and necessary for life in Okinawa

Kumu Hula - Hula teacher in ʻōlelo Hawai`i

Kyūyō - An official document of the history of the Ryūkyū Islands dating back to the 1700s

Mele - Song in ōlelo Hawai`i

Nembutsu - Form of Japanese Buddhist meditation

Nisei - Second-generation Japanese American

Obon - The Buddhist celebration and commemoration of one's ancestors

Odaiko - Large barrel-like drum

Pārankū - small hand-held drum

Sansei - Third-generation Japanese American

Sanshin - Three-stringed Okinawan instrument.

Shibucho - Branch leader for the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles branch.

Shikata Ga Nai - Japanese saying for "It cannot be helped," with the implication that it must therefore be endured

Shimedaiko - smaller hand-held drum held together by rope

Tabi - Japanese socks characterized by their single split toe

Tamashī - Okinawan soul

Uchināguchi - Okinawan language

Uchinānchu - Okinawan people, characterized not necessarily by "blood" but by "soul."

Yonsei - Fourth-generation Japanese American

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Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch, this thesis is for you. I want to specifically thank Kyosuke Kataoka, Kohki Nishioka, Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, Sora Kime, and Rachel Nishida. This would not be possible at all without your support, your time, your kindness, and your generosity. You all are needed in the Okinawan American community of Southern California. I encourage you all to continue to think critically about your performance, to engage with one another and with the students that come after you about the importance of eisā and the history that comes with it, and to continue performing with the same enthusiasm and power that you have been. This is what draws people to you all, including myself.

INTRODUCTION

Little Tokyo, August 2017. My sister and I were volunteering with the Okinawan Association of America (OAA) of Southern California during the Nisei Week parade. We carried upright long, brightly colored flags bearing the names of various OAA community programs, most of which we could not read because they were written in Japanese. As we marched in the four o'clock California summer heat through the streets of Little Tokyo, bouncing off the buildings were the deep, rhythmic drumbeats of eisā practitioners, who were dancing and drumming behind us to upbeat music incorporating sanshin and Uchināguchi. Their unique performance and striking attire captivated crowds along the streets of Little Tokyo: they wore black, yellow, and red shirts resembling traditional Chinese clothing with colorful trim, loose black pants, and white tabi.[1] Accenting their already eye-catching outfits, they wore bright belts, head wraps with long fabric tails (male) and headbands (female) that danced and flowed along with the turns and jumps of the dancer. Some carried large red drums attached to a purple shoulder strap, and others had smaller handheld ones. Two of the older male members of the eisā group whistled loudly to the rhythm of the music. They kicked their knees up high as they powerfully struck their drums with their bachi,[2] yelling at the top of their lungs the call and response of the dance. The drumming, the whistling, and the presence of these dancers were mesmerizing not only to the onlookers—it was unlike anything else in the parade—but to those who marched along with the OAA. The entirety of their being moved with determination, intention, boldness, and precision. We were proud to be marching alongside them as Okinawans.

[1] Japanese socks characterized by their single split toe.

[2] Wooden stick used to strike the drum.

A couple of things remained unseen and seen in this spectacular demonstration of eisā in Little Tokyo amidst Japanese American organizations. While eisā practitioners marched down the streets of a significant location for the Japanese American experience, what remained unseen is the little-known history of the relationship between Japan, Okinawa, and the United States and the effect that it has had on the people of Okinawa as well as the diaspora. Today, many Okinawan Americans either consider themselves Japanese Americans or are unaware of their Okinawan background and history. Thus, I use the identity of being Okinawan American throughout this writing to bring to light the multiple layers of colonization that have oppressed Okinawans, to recall and to remember erased histories, and ultimately to critique imperial, colonial, and capitalist ideals of power that seek to subsume the stories of racialized subjects into larger homogeneous narratives—in this case, absorbing the lived experience of Okinawan-descent people into a Japanese narrative. Throughout my thesis, I will argue that eisā, and more specifically the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch, are a vital means of community building and cultural perpetuation for Okinawan youth[3] living in Southern California. As a global art form, eisā specifically in California has been underappreciated and overshadowed because of legacies of Japanese colonialism, U.S. militarism, and Japanese American community hegemony.

What does remain seen is a captivating expression of Okinawan tamashī by youth. In this thesis I define youth as those who are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Not only does this age group encompass the leadership of those who practice eisā in Southern California, but it is the age range of my interviewees. Also, because the Okinawa Association of America (OAA) in Southern California currently has only a small number of members under the age of sixty, it is

[3] For further information on youth studies, please see Awad Ibrahim and Shirley R. Steinberg, eds., *Critical Youth Studies Reader* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014).

common to group those under the age of forty as "youth" or "young." These youth involved in eisā have been the purveyors of Okinawan tamashī, defined by Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda as the Okinawan soul. For practitioners, the emphasis on Okinawan soul also negates the construction of race, thus promoting the inclusion of all people. From my interviews, observation of practices, and witnessing their shows, it is evident that this display of Okinawan soul draws people to want to learn more about eisā—including myself. It is critical to think about how youth are performing tamashī, educating younger generations, and simultaneously reconstructing, challenging, and upholding Orientalist images of Okinawan American bodies. Eisā aids in positioning these practitioners to contribute to the broader Okinawan American community in Southern California amidst a particular prevailing Japanese American narrative.

What is Eisā?

According to *Eisā,* a book produced by the Okinawa Department of Culture and Environment, eisā is "a dance that is performed by the young on the main and outlying islands of Okinawa Prefecture during the midsummer *Bon* Festival. Its aim is to give response to the spirits of deceased ancestors."[4] Originally performed to coincide with Buddhist nembutsu[5] songs, it has been transformed over time and can now be seen throughout the year in competitions, U.S. military base protests, festivals, and of course, Obon season—the Buddhist celebration and commemoration of one's ancestors.[6] Eisā can now be seen danced to nembutsu, folk, love, and other festive songs.[7] In Okinawa, it typically consists of lines or circles of practitioners who are

[4] *Eisā* (Okinawa: Okinawa Department of Culture and Environment, 1998), 17.
[5] Form of Japanese Buddhist meditation.
[6] *Eisā,* 8.
[7] *Eisā,* 8.

dancing and drumming along to live music accompanied by the sanshin.[8] Eisā can also take various forms, with gendered aspects that vary in different parts of the island. Location also influenced which drums would be used and by whom. When both men and women participated it was called eisā shinka.[9] In Senbaru of Kadena town, eisā is danced only by men, but in Ogimi Village of north Okinawa, only women danced.[10] In other parts of the island, women may not dance with drums, but are a part of the ensemble.

Eisā, performed and transformed by youth, is a multifaceted practice that requires the practitioner to be physically fit and to have bodily coordination, while also being able to yell or whistle at times. It requires incredible stamina and strength because the performers are constantly moving their legs, either bringing their knees up to a perfect ninety-degree angle or kicking their leg up so that it is perfectly parallel to the floor. In addition, they must jump, turn, and squat, all while expressively beating their drums. Because it is such a dynamic, physically demanding practice, practitioners in Southern California usually stop in their thirties. Three different kinds of drums are used in eisā. One is a large drum called an odaiko that is strapped around the left shoulder so that the face of the drum can be hit with the right arm, which is holding the bachi. Sometimes, the eisā practitioner holds two bachi so they are able to strike both faces of the drum. The pārankū is a smaller hand-held drum that is struck with the bachi and only has one face; it is generally used by the older, more experienced female practitioners. The shimedaiko is also a smaller hand-held drum, but instead it has two faces held together by rope that can be struck and is generally used by the older, more experienced male practitioners.

[8] Three-stringed Okinawan instrument.
[9] *Eisā,* 34.
[10] *Eisā,* 42.

Since the 17th century, eisā has not only evolved as a means of resistance to the U.S. and Japanese empires, but has also become a means of collective cultural memory for the global Okinawan diaspora. It is no longer danced only in Okinawa and can be seen in Okinawan diasporic communities and at various events ranging from Obon festivals, to U.S. military protests, to Japanese American parades. What has allowed for the process in which eisā has transformed from a means of entertaining the dead to a way of resisting the U.S. military? And why is it that this practice has not only survived but has also transformed with historical occurrences? The meaning and usage of eisā has changed over the past two hundred years, as large, detrimental world events caused by imperial and colonial forces have impacted the global community. However, with these changes important organizations to the Okianwan diasporic community such as the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko (RMD), the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch (RMD-LA), and the Okinawa Association of America (OAA) have emerged.

Key Organizations in the Development of Eisā in Southern California

The Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko (RMD)[11] is a global eisā group that was founded in 1982 in Awase, Okinawa by Takeo Medoruma and has expanded to other countries, with branches in Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, and the United States. According to Rachel Nishida,[12] a prominent eisā practitioner who has practiced with Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko-Los Angeles (RMD-LA) for six years, RMD was originally established in response to the increasing delinquent population of bōsōzoku[13] in Okinawa in order to help "them to focus their energy on

[11] Throughout this paper, I use RMD and RMD-LA to signify different things. RMD refers to the diasporic eisā group as a whole, while RMD-LA specifically refers to the Los Angeles branch.

[12] Pseudonym used at the request of the practitioner.

[13] The bōsōzoku are motorcycle gangs

something productive that preserves their culture."[14] After a member of one of the bōsōzoku died in a motorcycle accident, in response his group decided that instead of showing their sense of spirit by gripping the motorcycle handlebars, they would do it by gripping a bachi.[15] I was told that the establishment of RMD was the first time that eisā was done as a non-sacred performance and in a public setting outside of a setting associated with Obon and the honoring of ancestors. Eventually, RMD found its way to Los Angeles when the OAA was struggling to involve more youth in the community.[16] Through a four-year process, several conversations, and flights back and forth from Okinawa, Washington D.C., and Los Angeles to witness RMD perform and to train, leaders of the Okinawa Association of America Geino-Bu[17] helped to officially establish an RMD branch in Los Angeles in 1995.[18]

The Okinawa Association of America (OAA) is an important institution in the Okinawan American community of Southern California in terms of its dedication to cultural memory and practices, resources, and community building, especially for older generations. As a central hub of the community, their mission is to "promote the Okinawan culture, to assist social and educational advancement of the members, and to contribute to local and international cultural exchanges."[19] Founded in the early 1900s, the group has gone through various name, structure, and mission changes, with a pause in the 1940s during World War II while Okinawan Americans were incarcerated in camps along with Japanese Americans. The organization has continued to change with the larger U.S. political climate, but as of 1994 has chosen to use the name Okinawa

[14] Rachel Nishida (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.
[15] Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, October 11, 2019.
[16] Kyosuke Kataoka (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, September 22, 2019.
[17] The Okinawa Association of America's Performing Arts Committee
[18] *Gajumaru: RMD LA 25th Anniversary* (2020), 14.
[19] "Mission," Okinawa Association of America, accessed November 2019, http://www.oaamensore.org/about_us/about_mission.htm.

Association of America (previously the Okinawa Club of America) in its current bylaws, has planted roots in Gardena, California, and also has an Internal Revenue Code 501 (c)(3) status as a public-benefit, nonprofit organization.[20] Although not directly under the OAA, RMD-LA has a close relationship with the OAA and its members—often members of RMD-LA have come to know about it through OAA events—thus the two organizations have ties of mutual support.

A Sparse Archive…

Despite its significance to the Okinawans globally, there is little scholarly work done on eisā, let alone eisā in Southern California. There are a few studies on eisā in Okinawa that have significantly helped shape my thesis. In particular, anthropologist Christopher Nelson's *Dancing with the Dead* has been extremely impactful in my understanding of eisā in Okinawa and its significance for the youth community there, as a means of resistance, and as a connection between those alive and those who have passed, especially after World War II. Cultural anthropologist Shirota Chika's chapter entitled "Eisaa: Identities and Dances of Okinawan Diasporic Experiences" in *Okinawan Diaspora* helped me understand how eisā began to transform and appear in different spaces, including military bases and competitions. However, neither of these works expand on eisā as a practice outside of Okinawa. Similarly, there has been little research on the community of Okinawans in Southern California.

Two key books have provided insight into the development of Okinawan American life in southern California: the *History of the Okinawans in North America,* translated by Ben Kobashigawa, and Issei[21] Hana Yamagawa's *From Okinawa to the Americas: Hana Yamagawa*

[20] "A Brief History of the Okinawa Association of America," Okinawa Association of America, accessed November 2019, http://www.oaamensore.org/about_us/about_history.htm

[21] Japanese word for first-generation immigrant. Issei are classified as those who left Japan or Okinawa and settled elsewhere. Generational terms such as Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei, and Gosei are used by both Japanese Americans and Okinawan Americans to help categorize immigrants and their descendants.

and Her Reminiscences of a Century, edited by her daughter Akiko Yamagata Hibbett. These works are also special to me because in both of them my great-grandfather's name, Yuhachi Miyagi, has appeared several times as someone who was committed to the well-being and perpetuation of the Okinawan immigrant community and the generations to come. The *History of the Okinawans in North America* draws on the experiences of Issei, including their personal histories as well as documents from various planning and organizing meetings. The community events that started in the 1950s (such as the New Year's Party, the summer picnic, and the Okinawa Bazaar) still continue to this day. Within these pages there is mention of eisā being practiced by women and as a form of prayer. This book, published and translated in 1988, carries the legacy of the Issei, predominantly from various areas of California, for future generations to learn from. While there is a significant gap in the literature specifically about eisā and the Southern California Okinawan community, there has been another scholarly work done on eisā in another Okinawan diasporic community.

Yvonne Siemann's research on an RMD branch in Bolivia revealed striking similarities with RMD-LA. Finding her article later in my research after I had already identified core themes, I was shocked (yet also not shocked) by the similarities between her findings and my own. Siemann also seeks to fill the gap in the eisā literature by "understanding the relation between Ryūkyūkoku Matsuridaiko dance and identity formation in the case of young Okinawan descendants in Bolivia."[22] Throughout her work, Siemann also finds similar themes at the Bolivia branch: expressing identity and resisting cultural change, the inclusion of those who are not Okinawan, the transmission of values, creating a transnational community, and the

[22] Yvonne Siemann, "'Transmitting the Message of Okinawa by Drums': Representations of Japanese-ness and Okinawan-ness in Okinawan dance in Santa Cruz, Bolivia" in *Contemporary Japan* 29, no. 2 (2017): 178, accessed April 12, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/18692729.2017.1351026.

importance of the audience. Ultimately, these themes are a legacy of RMD's vision and goals of creating an inclusive global community that is accepting of all, as long as they are "willing to share the group's values," that perpetuates the Okinawan culture through drums, and that "emphasizes friendship and community, joyfulness, respect, and gratitude thought to be typically Okinawan."[23] RMD-Bolivia seeks to do all these things while remaining an apolitical nonprofit.[24]

… But a Plentiful Repertoire

Historian Adria Imada's notion of the counter colonial, integral to her research on hula circuits on the continental United States, has been helpful to my analysis of eisā. After its annexation in 1898, Hawai`i became a place to be conquered, dominated, and consumed at the United States' pleasure, including indigenous culture, aloha, and hula. Imada argues that because of capitalist ideologies, live hula on the continental United States contributed to the creation of Hawai`i as an eroticized and feminized space, while it also became a space in which Hawaiian performers could participate in counter-colonial acts.[25] Little did White audiences know that the songs being performed often honored Hawaiian monarchs, land, and gods, thus allowing for the reproduction of Hawaiian culture to become an act of political critique.[26] Imada defines these moments as "counter colonial" because of the "inherently political content of the dance" hidden by tourism and how practitioners avoided the surveillance of missionary descendants, thus

[23] Siemann, 182.

[24] Siemann, 182.

[25] Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 17.

[26] Imada, 123.

framing the hula dancer as active in the shaping of hula, rather than as a victim of colonial and capitalist schemes.[27]

Eisā does not exist in the colonial imaginary in the same way as hula, and in Southern California eisā is also not overtly political in content or intention. In fact, there has been an erasure of both eisā and an Okinawan American identity by dominant Japanese American narratives. However, performing eisā within a Japanese American context such as Nisei Week in Little Tokyo is important for making visible and representing Okinawan Americans, who are often considered to be just another part of the large, multidimensional Japanese American community. In these contexts, though, Okinawan American youth not only perform Okinawan pride, but many also claim an Okinawan American identity outside of their practice. This is significant because, within the United States, many Okinawan-descent people—especially those in the Yonsei and Gosei[28] generations—no longer consider themselves Okinawan, but Japanese Americans, if they even know that they have Okinawan roots.

While there are not many readily available written resources on eisā, it does not mean that a history of eisā does not exist—perhaps it does not take form in accordance with western normative ideas of history. I believe that eisā in and of itself is theorizing its history while simultaneously filling gaps in the Okinawan past because of the inherently historic content that imbues the music. Remembering history does not necessarily have to come in written form—arguably performance and dance are other means of transmitting history.

Diana Taylor helps us to understand alternative forms of creating history in her work *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Performance, she

[27] Imada, 73.

[28] Gosei is the Japanese word for fifth-generation Japanese Americans.

argues, "carries the possibility of challenge, even self-challenge, within it."[29] Archival memory, according to Taylor, consists of material items that are supposedly "resistant to change."[30] However, the meaning of these archival objects can be manipulated because the source of "knowledge" is separated from the knower whether by time or space.[31] This can give new meaning and value to the archive depending on who holds the power to determine it. The repertoire, however, "enacts embodied memory" through "performances, gesture, orality, movement, dance, singing" and requires the presence of people to reproduce knowledge, therefore allowing scholars to trace change.[32] However, the repertoire is also mediated in that there is a process of choosing what and how it gets remembered, internalized, and transmitted.[33] Although the archive and the repertoire often work in tandem, there is a tendency within the institution to favor the archive as more legitimate and render the repertoire as a part of the past. Taylor claims that performance studies in particular help expand understandings of "knowledge" beyond Western epistemologies. These epistemologies have claimed that because indigenous peoples "did not have written history, their past 'had disappeared.'"[34] She argues that embodied expression has always been, and will continue to be, a part of transmitting social knowledge and memory and can aid in decentering "the historical role of writing introduced by the Conquest"—referring specifically to the Latin American experience.[35]

Studying eisā in Southern California in the context of Taylor's understanding of the archive and the repertoire allows us to think critically about the eisā history that is actually

[29] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

[30] Taylor, 18.

[31] Taylor, 19.

[32] Taylor, 20.

[33] Taylor, 20.

[34] Taylor, 16.

[35] Taylor, 16-17.

present in Southern California. Perhaps this history is not fully recognized or interpreted because of a western hegemonic view that privileges the value of written history. For example, the U.S. K-12 school system offers little, if any, exposure to alternative versions of history beyond writings that center western hegemonic views of the United States. Taylor's work is significant for Okinawans considering their history of colonial relations with Japan and the United States. Shuri Castle was once the center of the Ryūkyū Kingdom until Okinawa was annexed by Japan in the 19th century. It was destroyed during the Battle of Okinawa, and, along with it, Ryūkyū Kingdom records of trade and diplomatic relations.[36] Since then, scholars studying Okinawa have had to look to historical records in places such as Japan to trace the history of Okinawa prior to annexation.[37] If eisā can be seen as another form of remembering and history making, could it also aid in recovering stories of the past?

Another theoretical approach that has helped me to think through the visibility of eisā and performance as history is surrogation. Theater historian Joseph Roach's book *Cities of the Dead* examines how "culture reproduces and recreates itself" through surrogation, specifically through circum-Atlantic performances.[38] According to Roach, surrogation does not begin or end but continues as "actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations…" in the presence of multiple participating cultures.[39] My understanding of Roach's work is that where there appears to be a historical 'vacancy' speaks to power dynamics within networks of relations. However, these apparent vacancies are not necessarily empty. Rather, they may be filled with substitutes or alternative versions of history, as communities try to engage in the "doomed search

[36] Mamoru Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai`i Press, 2017), 8.

[37] Akamine, 8.

[38] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 2.

[39] Roach, 2.

for originals," thus perceived as performances.[40] The process of trying to find replacements for these originals is meant to challenge complacency within society when performances of the past are done in the presence of others.[41] Surrogation thus has to do with not only what histories remain vacant and what gets retold and reproduced, but *how* histories are vacated, retold, and reproduced. Taylor and Roach help us to think about how history is in the process of being vacated yet (re)created in the fact that eisā is present and thriving in Southern California. With every practice and performance, history is being interpreted, embodied, and passed on to those present.

The idea of eisā as a counter-colonial practice and a surrogate for Okinawan history provokes many questions about the visibility of the Okinawan American community and eisā in Southern California: what takes the place of erased history in Okinawan American communities? In the diaspora, what is missing in eisā practices? What is being put in place of that and by whom? Who are the authoritative bodies that become surrogates of the nation-state in the diaspora? As the acclaimed only eisā group in Southern California, the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko (RMD) has become a surrogate of Okinawan identity and culture. Having multiple branches globally, the RMD branch in Los Angeles (RMD-LA) is unique in that it is currently made up entirely of people under the age of 35. Because of the transnational nature of the group, the RMD headquarters in Okinawa are able to quickly disseminate their material via the internet. However, the material they send consists only of the dance choreography—with no lyrics, translations, history, or meaning of the songs—arguably leaving a historical vacancy connected with the dance for the young leaders of RMD-LA to fill as they teach their even younger

[40] Roach, 3.
[41] Roach, 3.

students. Through the process of surrogation, RMD-LA challenges conceptions of eisā and tradition by filling this historical void with research conducted on their own. Not only does the material (or lack of material) in this vacancy matter, but even more so the process of local decision-making about how this vacancy is filled.

The Interconnectedness of the Researcher

This thesis has been hard to write for several reasons. It is not only too easy for me to project my desires for the Okinawan American community and the practice of eisā into the spaces where I am doing research, but I also have relationships outside of this work with the people whom I have interviewed. How do I make this study both accessible yet academic, gracious yet critical, and protective yet uncovering? Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod **w**rites about the dangers of ethnography and culture as a process of constructing the "self" versus the "other."[42] However, there are overlapping complexities that cannot make categories of the self versus other so rigid. To combat the creation of the other, Abu-Lughod makes three suggestions: to use the term "discourse" or "practice" instead of "culture"; to address interconnectedness between the researcher and the community in which they are doing research; and to write "ethnographies of the particular."[43] I will address the latter two points.

To address the interconnectedness between the researcher and the community is to acknowledge what has allowed the researcher to be in that space. My father's grandparents immigrated to the United States from Okinawa in the early twentieth century to seek opportunities outside of recession-struck Okinawa after annexation in 1879. They faced discrimination and the colonial pressure of Japanese homogeneity back in Okinawa, but also

[42] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present,* ed. Richard G. Fox (New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1991), 139.

[43] Abu-Lughod, 149.

faced racial discrimination in California for being immigrants from the Japanese nation-state. During World War II they were identified as having Japanese blood and were incarcerated in the Poston camp in Arizona with my grandma while my great-uncles served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. After World War II, my family became increasingly Americanized, took on a Japanese American identity, and transmitted this to younger generations. I often mourn the fact that I did not get the chance to know my grandparents, both having passed at a relatively young age when I was still a toddler. However, as I grew older I began to recognize the legacies of my great-grandparents' and great-great grandparents' experiences through my father and the stories of my family. This process did not start with an understanding of Okinawan history, however—it started with hula.

I started dancing hula in March of 2008 after attempting various other extracurricular activities while growing up. Through my kumu hula[44] and the mele[45] that they choose for us to dance to, I have learned, and continue to learn, so much about the story of Hawai`i—a narrative not told in my earlier schooling. Dancing hula and learning about the history of Hawai`i sparked my own self-reflexive journey as an Okinawan diasporic subject living in the United States. As a Yonsei[46] Okinawan American living in Southern California, I had little understanding about the history of Okinawa until I started college in 2012, and have even less knowledge about eisā, having become more familiar with it only in the past two years. Growing up, I thought being Okinawan was like saying, "I am a Californian from the United States." A few years after I started dancing hula, I learned a brief history of the colonial relationship between Japan and Okinawa from my father.

[44] "Hula teacher" in ʻŌlelo Hawai`i.
[45] "Song" in ʻŌlelo Hawai`i.
[46] Japanese word for fourth generation Japanese Americans

Having danced hula for much of my life, my kumu hula inspired me to think critically about what music I danced to and how I performed, thus inspiring me to think more critically and analytically about the ongoing relationship between occupied Hawai`i and the United States. As stated by ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong, "This is the performative function of performance: performance changes accepted social realities and can either maintain or transform how people think about themselves and their relationship to others."[47] As a college undergraduate, I began to question not only the history of Okinawans in the United States, but why this narrative was hidden from me, how it affects Okinawan Americans today (especially other people in my generation), and why a Kānaka Maoli practice was more accessible to me than that of Okinawa. If hula is able to provide a counter-colonial way of remembering, connection, and resistance, is there something that can do the same for the Okinawan diasporic community living in Southern California? I began to draw parallels between Hawai`i's relationship with the United States and Okinawa's relationship with Japan. In my senior capstone project, I learned that as a Yonsei Okinawan American diasporic youth, my ignorance was common among other Yonsei like myself. Thus, I took this opportunity to ask if there is a performance practice that challenges the problematic history of Okinawa and its relationship with both the United States and Japan for Okinawan American youth. I began to get more involved with the small young-adult group at the Okinawa Association of America community as I sought answers and had the opportunity to connect with members of the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch (RMD-LA), the acclaimed only eisā group of Southern California.

In addressing Abu-Lughod's point of writing ethnographies of the particular, one aspect of this research that has been especially difficult to navigate has been conversations surrounding

[47] Deborah Wong, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy and the Body Politic In Asian American Taiko* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019). 5.

the apolitical nature of the Okinawan American community in Southern California. Through interviews and by attending RMD-LA's practice, I began to recognize the assumptions that I have made about ei̇sā in Southern California and the intentions of RMD-LA over the past five years of my involvement in the Okinawa Association of America and in the context of my hula background. However, my tendency to overgeneralize the Okinawan American community—a community to which I belong—has caused more difficulties and limitations to my understanding of RMD-LA. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that generalization of communities leads to the most "problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness."[48] Instead of overgeneralizing, Abu-Lughod suggests that the ethnography of the particular helps center a specific set of individuals rather than risking over generalizing communities.[49] An ethnography of the particular would then center the RMD-LA practitioners' experiences as not being recognized by them as necessarily political, if at all, and the causes and effects of this understanding.

Sundays are for Practice

The practitioners of RMD-LA have been kindly supportive throughout my process of writing. Originally, I had hoped to join their practice in the summer of 2019. However, because they had already begun training and practicing for their monumental twenty-fifth anniversary show scheduled for the spring of 2020, they offered to let me sit in on and watch their practices. From July 28, 2019 to December of 2020, I attended several of their practices as well as a few from January 2020 leading up to their anniversary show. These weekly Sunday practices lasted from two o'clock to six o'clock in the afternoon. The first two hours would be for more

[48] Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," 154.
[49] Abu-Lughod, 153.

advanced practitioners and the latter would be for beginners. However, some beginners would come early to practice with the more advanced group as they transitioned between classes.

In the summer and fall of 2019 I also had the opportunity to interview six prominent members of RMD-LA. Of the six, their experience ranged from just over six years to twenty-four years, and their ages range from twenty-two to thirty-two. Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda and Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha had originally started with other RMD branches in Houston and Peru, respectively. Kohki Nishioka and Sora Kime have been with the Los Angeles branch since they were under the age of ten, joining because of a performance they witnessed and were intrigued by. Kyosuke Kataoka and Rachel Nishida both joined in the last six to seven years as they were invited by previously involved RMD-LA members. These interviewees not only shared a plethora of wisdom from their experience, but also their kindness and support, for which I am grateful.

The Program of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, I will discuss how eisa has transformed with significant historical moments in Okinawa, eventually making its way to Southern California. Given the limited scholarship on the Okinawan American community of Southern California, it is also hard to find scholarly studies of eisā and even harder to trace the extent of the practice in Southern California. There are only a few main works in English that have been done on eisā. I will put the limited scholarship on eisā in conversation with the literature on the history of Okinawa prior to World War II, the effects of the war on Okinawa, and immigration to the United States—specifically Southern California. This is only one of many ways that eisā can be historicized. Other ways to think about historicizing eisā include analyzing the music involved or comparing it with other indigenous practices or karate.

In Chapter 2, I discuss integral themes that have emerged from my interviewees' experiences with eisā, as well as from my time in practice with the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles Branch (RMD-LA). The themes that I will explore, based on interviews and practices, are: belonging and inclusivity, ethnic visibility, and youth aesthetic. The similarities between my research on RMD-LA and Siemann's study of eisa in Bolivia affirm RMD's vision of perpetuating culture, establishing a global community, and creating an inclusive space that avoids political debate.

In Chapter 3, I will conduct a choreographic analysis of three songs performed at RMD-LA's 25th anniversary performance: "Oyake Akahachi," "Shima Uta," and "Shinkanucha." They had been practicing for over a year for this show and even invited the participation of other members of RMD from Okinawa, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Ohio. These members flew to Los Angeles within the week of the 25th anniversary performance. For that week, RMD-LA held practices that lasted several hours and late into the night. A culmination of a year's worth of long practices, late nights, and much traveling led to this commemorative performance for RMD-LA. In this chapter I assert that this performance, and arguably eisā in general, can be seen as counter colonial.

Despite having a history that is unique to the Okinawan American community, the Okinawan past has often been subsumed into the Japanese and Japanese American narrative. In the U.S. national imaginary, Okinawa is usually either associated with Japan as another prefecture, or with U.S. military bases, or maybe *The Karate Kid* movie and one of the main characters, Mr. Miyagi. More often than not, mainstream American society is unaware of an Okinawan American identity and history. Alongside other scholars who center the Okinawan and Okinawan American story, I advocate for the study of Okinawan and Okinawan American

histories. Studying Okinawan American history aids in dismantling imperial, colonial, and capitalist understandings of race and ethnicity because of a perceived Japanese homogeneity. This belief in a homogeneous, pure, racial Japanese identity is a legacy of Japanese imperialism that has followed Japanese and Okinawan migrants to the United States, affecting communities across generations.

CHAPTER 1: THE DEVELOPMENT OF EISĀ IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before World War II

In order to understand the importance of eisā in Southern California, an exploration of the immigration from Okinawa to the United States is needed. There are many gaps in the history of eisā in Southern California, yet it has become a widely sought-after performance amongst Nikkei communities, including the Okinawa Association of America (OAA). In this section, I will trace the movement of eisā not only geographically, but also its transformation catalyzed by World War II.

Once the autonomous Ryūkyū Kingdom, Okinawa has endured multiple complex relations with various nation states such as Japan and the United States. As scholars Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu state, a premodern Okinawa has been obliterated from conventional historical memory in order to perpetuate the Japanese nation state—a reality that has deeply affected succeeding generations living in Southern California.[50] The Ryūkyū Kingdom was once a center of trade to surrounding nation states such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and flourished under an independent economic, cultural, and political system.[51] The Ryūkyū Kingdom became Okinawa prefecture in 1872 after two hundred years of being a semi-independent kingdom associated with both China and Japan.[52] Japan annexed Okinawa in the name of ethnonationalism and homogeneity as they sought to become a pure Japanese race and an imperial world power. Thus, the Uchinānchu were forced to drop Uchināguchi along with other cultural customs, and participate in the imperial, biopolitical Japanese order.[53] The

[50] Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2012), 2.

[51] McCormack and Norimatsu, 2.

[52] McCormack and Norimatsu, 4.

[53] McCormack and Norimatsu, 6.

Uchinānchu became racialized subjects under the Japanese imperial order as they were discriminated against and no longer were living to take care of themselves and their communities, but rather their labor was for the perpetuation of the nation state in an increasingly globalized and capitalist world. Japan's excuse was that their aim was to rescue, transform, and assimilate the "uncivilized" Uchinānchu, not to discriminate against them.[54]

To further complicate matters, it is also important to consider Okinawa's own imperial past. Okinawa's history is often conflated with one of annexation, when in fact there is also a history of imperial practice prior to the 1600s, thus obscuring an Okinawan identity. As a part of their imperial expansion, the Ryūkyū kingdom in 1500 conquered the Yaeyama Islands, now a part of the Japanese Okinawa prefecture.[55] However, the overthrow is described in the Kyūyō[56] as a "revolt" led by Oyake Akahachi, implying that Yaeyama had already been part of the Ryūkyū kingdom. Similarly, the Amami Ōshima Islands, once a part of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and currently a part of Japanese Kagoshima prefecture, were also once an independent island chain, separate from the Ryūkyū Kingdom. The Ryūkyū Kingdom was at the time ruled by Shō Shin who sought to take control and colonize the Amami Ōshima islands in 1537 under the premise of unifying all the islands into a single stable kingdom with a centralized government.[57] Okinawa provides an example of the complexity of a homogeneous conceptualization of race, especially when considering Okinawa's history as a kingdom, as well as the massive flow of trade and people that circulated throughout the islands from China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines.

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[54] Nomura Kōya, "Colonialism and Nationalism: The View from Okinawa," in *Okinawan Diaspora*, ed. Ronald Y. Nakasone (Hawai`i: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002), 114.

[55] Gregory Smits, "The Ryukyu Empire," in *Maritime Ryukyu, 1050-1650* (Hawai`i: University of Hawai`i Press, 2019), 179.

[56] The Kyūyō is an official document of the history of the Ryūkyū Islands dating back to the 1700s

[57] Gregory Smits, "The Ryukyu Empire," 179.

Eisā has been transformed by and shifted with significant historical moments in Okinawa. In his work *Dancing with the Dead,* anthropologist Christopher Nelson talked about the romanticization of Okinawan history through various performance arts such as eisā—eisā being the "most widespread modality of public memorative practice in the islands"[58] with very little scholarly attention. Prior to Japanese colonization, eisā had been performed in a circle during Obon to guide spirits back home from their tombs. Nelson stated:

> …**e**isā is introduced as an ancient Okinawan performing art described in the Omorosōshi, its origins lost in Ryūkyūan antiquity. People have told me that eisā has its roots in the *nenbutsu odori*--the dance to memorate the spirits of the dead--brought to Okinawa by Buddhist missionaries from Kamakura and practiced widely throughout the 17th century. I've also heard that eisā bears a strong resemblance to the commemorative rituals of the Ryūkyūan court once performed before the royal tombs during the 7th month, and described by emissaries from the Korean peninsula during the 5th century…[59]

Because of its purpose, pre-colonial eisā appears to have been slower and less energetic than it is today in Southern California. As mentioned previously, its gendered aspects varied depending on what part of the island one was from.

Eisā in Okinawa began to change with the influence of Japanese empire. Specifically, in central Okinawa it became a practice of mourning in natal communities as it began to embody the desire of young Uchinānchu noblemen to return to the Ryūkyū capital, Shuri, after Japanese annexation.[60] The more energetic forms of eisā began to develop in tandem with annexation and colonization by Japan and the United States after World War II. Nelson argues that the romanticization of an Okinawan past was needed, especially when critiquing the Japanese nation state and the construction of race under biopolitical order and production.[61] The idea of a

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[58] Christopher Nelson, *Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), 180.

[59] Nelson, 180.

[60] Nelson, 176.

[61] Nelson, 4.

romanticized past implies nostalgia, trauma, and a longing for what once was. My research suggests that this same romanticization may not be found in the Okinawan American community practicing eisā in Southern California.

Annexation not only had economic ramifications as Okinawa became a part of the imperial and biopolitical Japanese agenda, but it also had dire discriminatory consequences. Okinawans became sugarcane producers and began to grow and export food items not a part of their diet, while using the money they earned from sugar to import and buy what they did have to consume.[62] When sugarcane prices fell in the 1920s, a depression fell across Okinawa, contributing to emigration that had already begun in 1899. Interdisciplinary scholar Annmaria Shimabuku argues, however, that this was a part of subsuming Okinawa into the biopolitical order—to exclude them from it.[63] As Okinawa suffered through economic recession under Japanese order, Taiwan (as a Japanese colony at the time) saw their sugar industry boom.[64] Between the years 1899 and 1940, approximately 31,000 Okinawans left for different countries, creating a large Okinawan diaspora in places such as Japan, Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and the United States. Okinawans who relocated to mainland Japan experienced the "lifestyle improvement movement" (seikatsu kaizen undō)—a movement to "rid themselves of their ethnic markers in hopes of attaining a better life, whether physically, linguistically, or even moralistically."[65] Okinawans were thus surveilled by Japanese nationals, but they also surveilled each other in an attempt to survive within the biopolitical order.[66] This surveillance did not end

[62] Wesley Ueunten, "Japanese Latin American Interment from an Okinawan Perspective", in *Okinawan Diaspora*, ed. Ronald Y. Nakasone (Hawai`i: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002), 94.

[63] Annmaria M. Shimabuku, *Alegal: Biopolitiics and the Unintelligiblity of Okinawan Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 40.

[64] Shimabuku, 40.

[65] Shimabuku, 41.

[66] Shimabuku, 41.

in Japan, but followed them to the United States. Their initial immigration to the United States ended with the passage of the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1908, which barred Japanese laborers from entering the country, thus affecting Okinawans as well because they were categorized as subjects of the Japanese nation and, therefore, Japanese.[67] However, they were not only expected to hide their Okinawan ethnicity by their conflation with Japanese immigrants, but they were also subject to the discrimination faced by Japanese Americans,[68] as well as facing discrimination *from* Japanese Americans. The suppression of Okinawan identity had serious implications.

The Impact of World War II on Okinawa and Eisā

The bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941 led to war between the United States and Japan. In February of 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the removal of Japanese-descent civilians from the west coast of the United States, forcing them into incarceration camps. Okinawan descendants were also included in this incarceration, which further complicated their sense of identity as they were subsumed into the Japanese American narrative. This further erased and muddled an already complex relationship between Japanese and Okinawans that continued to play out, at times negatively, in the United States. Not only were Okinawan people subsumed in the Japanese American narrative by the U.S. government and national culture, but they also experienced discrimination from the Japanese American community. In Okinawa, meanwhile, the Uchinānchu were sacrificed as Japanese nationals in the Battle of Okinawa.

[67] Edith M. Kaneshiro, "The Other Japanese": Okinawan Immigrants to the Philippines, 1903-194" in *Okinawan Diaspora*, ed. Ronald Y. Nakasone (Hawai`i: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002), 75.

[68] Korea, also having been annexed by Japan, faced similar discrimination by the Japanese empire.

During World War II, the Japanese government began to ban public gatherings and suppress Okinawan arts, including eisā, in an attempt to create a unified Japanese front.[69] By banning eisā, the Japanese not only erased the idea of a return home to the Ryūkyū capital, Shuri, but they also severed relationships between the living and the dead. Through both of these processes, Japanese imperial forces erased the idea of Okinawa as an independent kingdom while preventing transmission and remembering of history through performance. They simultaneously transformed Uchināānchu into Japanese citizens and prepared them to prove loyalty to the Japanese emperor—even to death. The peak of the clash between Japan and the United States manifested in the Battle of Okinawa, fought between April 1, 1945 and June 22, 1945. Rendered sute ishi, or a disposable castaway stone, by the Japanese empire, this battle kept U.S. forces from invading mainland Japan.[70] Within this time, over a quarter of Okinawa's population was killed, some by Japanese imperial forces that blamed them as "spies" for speaking in Uchināguchi, and some taking their own lives out of fear of "American Beasts." Ninety-percent of homes and buildings were destroyed.[71]

Following World War II and the Battle of Okinawa, amidst a disheartened populace in a devastated land, the don[72] of odaiko drums echoed. As Uchināānchu began to rebuild their lives, they revived eisā and it began to flourish, seen as vital to the survival of the Okinawan people. Not only was it viewed as a means to lift up the spirits of the living, but it was also important as a response to the demands and desires of ancestral spirits, especially the hundreds of thousands

[69] Nelson, *Dancing With the Dead*, 174.
[70] Shimabuku, *Alegal*, 43
[71] Shimabuku, 43.
[72] The phonetic sound used to describe the beating of the odaiko

of people who were killed during the war.[73] What was once a solemn, slow practice began to evolve into one that was not only meant to serve and entertain the dead, but also a means of joy for the living as well as those yet to be born. Uchinānchu who did not belong to the aristocracy began to be invited to join in. The continuing and transformed practice of eisā in central Okinawa became a symbolic performance of resilience, unity, courage, and strength, as youth were encouraged to explore and express through eisā themes of anticipation, hope, sexuality, and defiance.[74]

Eisā did not stop there. After World War II and the establishment of U.S. bases on Okinawa, the practice resurged, with eisā competitions and eisā anti-base demonstrations. From the years 1945-1972 Okinawa remained under direct U.S. military rule, thus allowing the establishment of military bases.[75] In particular, Futenma Marine Corps base (established in 1945 and used for training) remains a site of protest and resistance in 2020 as the U.S. relocates the base to Henoko Bay, ignoring protestors.[76] In cultural anthropologist Shirota Chika's chapter entitled "Eisaa: Identities and Dances of Okinawan Diasporic Experiences" in *Okinawan Diaspora*, Chika speaks at length of how eisā was creatively developed because of eisā competitions in Okinawa, while also serving as a means of resistance to U.S. military bases.[77] The creation of eisā competitions arguably allowed for the perpetuation and the continued development of eisā as a cultural practice, as young adults creatively expressed themselves by

[73] Nelson, *Dancing with the Dead*, 180.

[74] Nelson, 190.

[75] McCormack and Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands*, 9.

[76] Rapes, murders, and training accidents by U.S. soldiers remain an issue to this day. The most widely known case is the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl by three U.S. servicemen as well as an airplane accident that occurred in the 1950s—crashing into a school. Currently, protestors can also be seen outside of Futenma as the U.S. government desires to relocate the base to Henoko. The construction has already begun. This not only has devastating environmental effects, but also has political and military implications for the U.S. presence in the Pacific.

[77] Shirota Chika, "Eisā: Identities and Dances of Okinawan Diasporic Experiences" in *Okinawan Diaspora*, ed. Ronald Y. Nakasone (Hawai`i: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002), 120-129.

expanding upon practices considered "traditional" to eisā. Chika also notes that eisā practices and competitions in the 1950s were revived in the center of Okinawa—where most of the American bases were located.[78] In fact, in response to one of the biggest mass rallies against the U.S. military bases, the U.S. civil administration even tried to use eisā in their favor by sponsoring a "happy-friendship" Obon eisā event for surrounding areas to lessen growing opposition.[79] However, Okinawans continued to utilize eisā at base demonstrations as land was expropriated without consent, people were forcibly removed from their land, and homes were destroyed.[80] Eisā remains part of U.S. base protests in Okinawa to this day.

The main goal of eisā in Okinawa following World War II (and arguably even before World War II) was not only political protest, but to produce karī, not only in the practitioner but also in the audience—alive or dead. The idea of karī is the gift of happiness and a sense of belonging produced in performance and necessary for life; karī is important for the "well-being of the community as well as the happiness of the individual."[81] The concept of karī has expanded across the world with the Okinawan diaspora, including Southern California, as it renews and strengthens the bonds between the living, the ancestors, and those who are yet to be born. This is important to consider when thinking of the colonial context in which Okinawan people have settled in Southern California. If eisā in Okinawa is meant to produce karī amongst people—those who have passed, who are living, and who are yet to come—in spaces of devastation caused by imperial and colonial forces, what then does eisā provide to the diasporic community in Southern California?

[78] Chika, 123.
[79] Chika, 123.
[80] Chika, 123.
[81] Nelson, *Dancing with The Dead*, 191.

Okinawan Americans After World War II

The intimate, violent impact of Japanese colonization and annexation of Okinawa in the 1800s has transcended time and space, following Okinawans to the United States. According to *The History of the Okinawans in North America*, the first wave of Okinawan immigration began in the late 19th century and lasted through the early 20th century, as the Uchinānchu left for Hawai`i, San Francisco, Mexico, and eventually Los Angeles.[82] Despite a new American ethnic identity amongst Nisei, Okinawan Americans continued to face discrimination from Japanese American communities. Not only did Japanese Americans discriminate against them, but they were simultaneously viewed as Japanese American by the U.S. nation state and white Americans. Facing discrimination on all fronts, Okinawan Americans began to assimilate into U.S. society as Japanese Americans, putting aside their histories and their culture. As mentioned earlier, the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans in the United States reinforced and perpetuated Japanese ethnonationalism and its emphasis on racial purity. The Japanese and U.S. empires ironically worked in tandem during the war to erase the Okinawan narrative in order to advance their competing goals of hegemony and power. Although the nation state still categorized them as Japanese, some Okinawan diasporic communities continued to share stories and maintain their own cultural practices within close networks. However, many younger generations of Okinawan Americans today are often unable to differentiate between Japanese and Okinawan ethnicities and have become unaware of their Okinawan roots.

This is where a major gap in the history of eisā in Southern California exists. While a discussion of Okinawa's experience with ethnonationalism and imperialism is important to understanding the transformation of eisā over time and the Okinawan immigration experience in

[82] *History of the Okinawans in North America*, trans. Ben Kobashigawa (California: Regents of the University of California and the Okinawan Club of America, 1988), 11-32.

the United States, there has been no scholarly work that puts the two together. The performance of eisā by Okinawan immigrant groups in Hawai`i, at Southern California summer festivals from the 1950s to the present, and amidst communities of military brides throughout the United States have left only whispers on the pages of various research projects.[83] The silence within the research literature about eisā in the United States could imply several things, but it is impossible to fully know. This would be a rich subject for further research, but it is currently beyond the scope of this project. What I do know is that since the introduction of the RMD to the OAA in Gardena, RMD-LA has become a significant site of belonging, ethnic visibility, and youth aesthetic.

[83] In scholar Etsuko Takushi Crissey's (2017) *Okinawa's GI Brides: Their Lives in America*, Crissey mentions eisā practiced amongst GI brides in the Okinawan community in Washington D.C. In an article by dance scholar Judy van Zile (1996) entitled "Non-Polynesian Dance in Hawai`i: Issues of Identity in a Multicultural Community," van Zile mentions eisā being taught by a 73 year old elderly woman in Hawai`i and vaguely speaks of Okinawan dance (which could take on different forms and may or may not be referring to eisā) throughout the chapter. African Americanist and historian Yuichiro Onishi (2012) also mentioned eisā practiced by Issei communities in his work entitled "Occupied Okinawa on the Edge: On Being Okinawan in Hawai`i and U.S. Colonialism toward Okinawa." *The History of the Okinawans in North America* (1988) also mentioned eisā several times in the context of Okinawa Club of America meeting notes from the 1950s to the 1970s.

CHAPTER 2. INTERVIEWEE REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CULTURAL PERPETUATION

Directly across the street from the Okinawa Association of America (OAA) in Gardena, California, stands an inconspicuous two-story brick building. Entering from the street, one takes a flight of stairs to the second floor of the Gardena Dance Studio, which for the past 25 years has been home to the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles (RMD-LA) branch, as well as many other classes on cultural practices offered by the OAA and various related organizations. A cool, gentle breeze dances through the un-air-conditioned space to the sound of cars driving by as the members take out their bachi (the drum stick, which is usually about a foot and a half in length) and stretch, preparing to begin their warm up. All wear athletic clothes and athletic shoes, tabi, or are barefoot. To begin their warm ups, they leave their odaiko, shimedaiko, or pārankū at the side of the room.

The Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles branch (RMD-LA) is one of many global branches of the eisā organization called the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko (RMD). Starting in 1995, the RMD-LA branch has generally consisted of younger generations and has gained recognition throughout Southern California for their dynamic eisā performances and high energy. They have performed at various events such as multiple Nisei Weeks in Little Tokyo, Obon festivals, and Okinawa Association of America events. Because RMD-LA is the only official eisā group in Southern California, it continues to play an integral part in youth formation for Okinawan diasporic people residing in Southern California. The makeup of the group is currently a wide range of youth—from age ten to thirties. As mentioned previously, I speculate that most practitioners stop by their thirties because of the physical demands of eisâ.In my observations of their practices and the interviews that I conducted with six prominent members of RMD-LA,

three main topics emerged in the context of community building and cultural perpetuation: inclusivity and belonging, ethnic visibility, and youth aesthetic. As the influencers, teachers, and mentors to younger members, the interviewees made clear in our interviews and in practice that these three themes are foundations to their dance.

The leadership of RMD-LA consists of a shibucho, a potential fuku shibucho, a treasurer, and a social media/marketing coordinator. The shibucho, or branch leader, serves a two-year term alongside the fuku shibucho, or the assistant branch leader—both of whom are voted in by the rest of the RMD-LA members. During the time that I was interviewing and attending practices, the shibucho and fuku shibucho were Kohki Nishioka (age twenty-six) and Kyosuke Kataoka (age twenty-four), respectively. At the beginning of this year, leadership shifted and the shibucho is now Kyosuke. Both RMD-LA and RMD in Bolivia seem to have a more horizontal form of leadership, with the instruction and leadership pool coming from fellow eisā practitioners, most ranging within a similar age group. Eisā is thus being taught to youth by young adults. This is different from what Christopher Nelson described in his writing on eisā in central Okinawa where an elder oversaw the practice and reproduction of eisā.

RMD-LA practices with three different drums: odaiko, shimedaiko, and pārankū. The odaiko is a large, red, barrel-like drum that is strapped around the practitioner's left shoulder by a purple cloth strap. It is utilized by both men and women. The shimedaiko and pārankū have a gendered aspect to them because of the traits associated with them— according to Yvonne Siemann, the shimedaiko used by men represents agility and the pārankū used by women represents gracefulness.[84] The shimedaiko and pārankū are both hand-held drums, the main difference being that the shimedaiko is double-faced and is bound together and held by rope-like

[84] Siemann, "'Transmitting the Message of Okinawa by Drums,'" 182.

material. The pārankū is held on the side and only has one face that the practitioner is able to strike.

It is important to mention that, with the quick changes in social media in the last decade, RMD has utilized technology for the transnationalism of their performance material. Because RMD is completely volunteer-based and they are not making profits from their practice, technology has enabled a convenient, economically practical way of disseminating material. The leaders in Okinawa have been utilizing Vimeo to send new choreographies to the shibucho of the diaspora. A few songs, such as "Tachiutushi" and "Miruku Munari," are staples in the RMD eisā practitioners' repertoire, and anything else that is taught is chosen by shibucho such as Kohki and Kyosuke. "Tachiutushi," which has no lyrics and is traditionally performed to honor ancestors prior to any ceremonial event, such as a wedding, was game-changing for RMD. Not only was it RMD's preview song, but what was meant to be more slow became high energy, which shocked the public.[85] "Mirukumunari," sung in Uchināguchi as a prayer for a good harvest, is the song that made RMD more popular.[86] Currently, the RMD headquarters distribute approximately two to three new dances per year and they range from traditional Okinawan songs, and Japanese songs, to pop culture songs, incorporating traditional eisā moves, karate, and pop. The incorporation of karate[87] is a legacy of the Japanization of Okinawa, which included the Japanese trying to end native practices of self-defense.[88] As a way to remember and resist, eisā practitioners started to create movements that were karate based in an attempt to remember the

[85] Kyosuke Kataoka, November 23, 2019.

[86] Kyosuke Kataoka, November 2019.

[87] Karate is a martial art linked to the history of Okinawa. Prior to Japanese annexation, karate was referred to as Tou-de (after Sakugawa Tou-de) or te, literally translating to 'hands'. Depending on where one came from, the styles differed. For example, Shuri-te, Naha-te, and Tomari-te were all various styles of te. It became karate after the annexation and Japanization of Okinawa when the kanji was retranslated. See Kevin S. Y. Tan's *"Constructing a Martial Tradition: Rethinking a Popular History of Karate-Dou"* (2004).

[88] Sora Kime (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, September 30, 2019.

practice. To keep RMD relevant to youth, the headquarters also produce performances set to pop songs; however, RMD-LA does not practice these.

Theme 1 - "Being a Freaking Human Being": Belonging and Inclusivity

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christopher Nelson defines karī as the gift of happiness and belonging produced in performance; it is necessary for life and the well-being of communities as well as individuals.[89] Karī is also the "creation of a network of relationships that includes the performers, the diverse group of Okinawans and mainland Japanese, [and] the spirits of the dead."[90] The main goal of eisā in war-torn Okinawa after World War II was to produce karī within the practitioner and the audience, living or dead. However, within my interviews the importance of karī was never brought up, which was surprising considering the weight that karī had in the communities involved in Nelson's work. When I asked what karī meant to them, they translated it for me as "celebration" or "cheers."[91] I bring this up not as a criticism of the RMD-LA community. Rather, it is important to take note of the ways in which eisā and the values associated with it have continued to evolve as they have moved from Okinawa to Southern California. This is also not to say that karī does not exist in RMD-LA's practice of eisā. Perhaps instead it does not hold as much importance as do other themes, or perhaps it manifests differently because of the change in location and the history that comes with the space. In this section I discuss notions of belonging and inclusivity within RMD-LA and how they have developed and contributed to community building and cultural perpetuation, reaching beyond Los Angeles and across generations.

[89] Nelson, *Dancing with the Dead*, 191.
[90] Nelson, 211.
[91] Kyosuke Kataoka and Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, November 23, 2019 and October 25, 2019.

The purpose of RMD-LA, as defined by my six interviewees, is to evoke emotion and connection within the RMD community and their audiences. Similarly, Siemann stated that the Bolivia branch's "aim is to convey these positive feelings to the whole group and to the audience since happiness and well-being is not only important for the individual but the whole community."[92] When I asked both shibucho, "What is the purpose of RMD-LA?" Kohki replied that their purpose was to bring joy to any performance and make the audience feel as if they are at a festival.[93] Eisā, however, has not only brought a sense of joy to audiences Kohki has performed for, but also to his own life. Having danced since he was five-years-old, Kohki also expressed his deep appreciation for his eisā community over the past twenty-two years. He reflected, "I don't know where I would be if I didn't join and if I didn't stick to it… I don't know what I would do without these people in my life. Even the kids that I teach. It helped me become a better person."[94] Not only did he speak highly of the Los Angeles branch, but he spoke of how RMD globally is like "one big family" that "welcome[s] each other with open arms."[95]

Kyosuke spoke similarly about the diasporic RMD community as a big family, describing it using the Uchināguchi phrase, ichariba chōdē.[96] And while notions of karī may not have directly accompanied eisā to Southern California, Kyosuke made it clear that a desire to connect and belong did. When speaking about the RMD members that he met in Okinawa, he said more than anything, they "really value human connection… and not saying that they don't care about money but like, they really value connections."[97] This sentiment is true not only for the Los

[92] Siemann, "'Transmitting the Message of Okinawa by Drums,'" 182.
[93] Kohki Nishioka (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, September 22, 2019.
[94] Kohki Nishioka, September 22, 2019.
[95] Kohki Nishioka, September 22, 2019.
[96] Ichariba chōdē roughly translates to "once we meet, we are friends for life."
[97] Kyosuke Kataoka, September 22, 2019.

Angeles branch. One of the main themes that Siemann saw in her work with the Bolivia branch was also the creation of an imagined transnational community that is united by the drum.[98]

Relationship building is just as important on a local level as it is on a transnational level. Kyosuke made that evident when he talked about RMD-LA as a part of revitalizing a dying community and attracting younger generations to contribute. Over the past three years, he has had the opportunity to train a few younger practitioners, around the age of fifth grade. He has not only seen them grow up, build community ties with one another, and become good friends, but he has also walked with them through overcoming stage fright and shyness when it came to striking their odaiko. In particular, a moment that stood out to me while attending their practice was when Kyosuke had to discipline one of the students for what appeared to be trying to outshine his fellow fifth-graders. Kyosuke pulled him aside and, while reaffirming his success and improvement, also gently yet sternly reaffirmed the importance of group dynamics and the need to work as a team. The student seemed a little sad, but immediately rejoined the practice and his friends, and appeared to take Kyosuke's critique well in that he changed the manner of his performance to blend more with the group. In instances like this that I have witnessed in practice, belonging and inclusivity have been clearly apparent—there appears to be a mutual understanding of care and intention across generations.

RMD-LA has become family to the practitioners that I interviewed; these connections have outlasted some of their eisā careers, creating a large global network that has started with eisā. Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha was about seven years old (making her the longest committed eisā practitioner that I interviewed at twenty-four years!) when she started dancing eisā in Lima, Peru. Her father, having been a member of the Japanese Association there, encouraged her to join the

[98] Siemann, "'Transmitting the Message of Okinawa by Drums,'" 187.

eisā group (it was not established as RMD yet). For the 100th anniversary of the "Japanese immigration to Peru" the Okinawa Association of Peru wanted to gather approximately two hundred youth to learn eisā. This is when the RMD headquarters stepped in and offered to teach them a couple of dances to perform as well. In this process, the Okinawan Peruvian community decided that they liked this style and the RMD-Peru branch was born in 1999. Because Naomi grew up dancing RMD dances in Peru, moving to the United States—first to Plantation, Florida and then to Gardena, California—brought a smooth transition to join RMD-LA because the dances are all the same. This is arguably one way that RMD, and not just RMD-LA, create a sense of belonging and inclusivity, because there is not just a common appreciation and love for the dance, but there is common knowledge and choreography amidst the diaspora of practitioners. No matter where they go, wherever there is an established RMD branch the dances will be the same, which has fostered a feeling of familiarity and belonging amongst practitioners. Naomi, who is considering retiring after having danced eisā for approximately twenty-four years, is having a hard time letting it go because of how much of her community and her life have been intertwined with it. This community extends beyond California, back to Peru, and even to Okinawa where she has formed various relationships because of the opportunities that RMD has presented her to travel and connect with others through dance.

Naomi also expressed the importance of how eisā has connected generations of her family. Having two young children, one of whom she was pregnant with when I interviewed her, Naomi spoke of the impact of eisā on her life and how she desires that for her children. She also spoke about how eisā is the "only way for me to feel close or connected to my family"[99] and to her ancestors in Okinawa. In our interview she explained, "...I remember when I went to

[99] Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, October 25, 2019.

Okinawa, my grandma said to me, “Oh you know what, every time I see the ocean, I think about you guys.” There is something like a string that’s connected. So, like that, I feel like by doing [eisā], I’m connected to my Okinawa family.”[100]

Similarly, Sora Kime talked about a connection not only with her fellow practitioners in RMD-LA, but how eisā has connected her to her family. Sora, who has been practicing eisā for thirteen years, called it her “longest commitment other than breathing”[101], invoking the necessity and presence of eisā in her life. Throughout our interview, she not only spoke of the importance of the community that she has built through eisā, but she also emphasized how crucial eisā has been in keeping her family connected—both those who practice and those who do not. Sora started practicing eisā when she was around nine-years old because of a performance she and her family saw. Not only did she and sister join, but her cousins did as well. Since then, she said that eisā has “definitely helped my family stay close...we’re [her cousins and her] even closer because we go to [eisā] together and go to performances together.”[102] In addition, eisā has kept her connected to her ancestors, specifically her grandfather when he passed. Having been her only “tie to this whole culture,”[103] after his passing, eisā became her tie to the culture and thus her grandfather as well because of how proud he was of her, and his other grandchildren, for learning eisā. RMD has not only given diasporic youth a specific practice through which to bond, but it has given families the opportunity to create deeper ties with one another. In these experiences, it is also apparent that belonging, inclusivity, and connection have been linked with

[100] Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, October 25, 2019.
[101] Sora Kime, September 30, 2019.
[102] Sora Kime, September 30, 2019.
[103] Sora Kime, September 30, 2019.

the practitioners' own understanding of themselves and their positionality as a performer, a parent, a teacher, a grandchild, a cousin, a mentor.

For Rachel Nishida, who does not identify as Okinawan American, the community she has built within RMD-LA has been the most significant for her. Having grown up dancing hula and practicing taiko, she joined RMD-LA because a high school friend encouraged her to try. Not only has she made new friends around the world, but she has also sustained friendships (such as with her childhood friend, Kyosuke) that had been established prior to her dedication to eisā. She expressed her affection for the community:

> but sometimes it's like when I do take a step back I'm like, "Why am I doing this?" Not being negative or anything, but it's not like we get paid… I'm like, "I'm not Okinawan," so it's this weird like, "Why am I?" But I'm like ... I end up doing it, because ... Well, I enjoy being with the people… I like RMD because of the people. Learning the songs, performing the songs is fun because of the people I'm with."[104]

Rachel reflected that through eisā, she has learned things about Okinawa that she probably would not have had exposure to otherwise. This is significant in terms of the underrepresentation of Okinawan history in media, education, and home life.

Why the emphasis on belonging and inclusivity in correlation with cultural perpetuation in spaces such as RMD-LA and their practice of eisā? When thinking about the very foundation of the term Asian American, it was meant as a pan-ethnic attempt at coalition building amongst people of Asian descent, not an erasure of each other's histories or differences.[105] RMD-LA has been a significant space of coalition building because of their emphasis on inclusion of all people to help celebrate this particular Okinawan cultural practice. Similarly, the Bolivia chapter celebrates an Uchinānchu spirit, regardless of one's background. Through my interviews, I have

[104] Rachel Nishida (eisā practitioner) in discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.
[105] Wong, *Louder and Faster*, 38.

come to believe that they advocate for an Okinawan tamashī, rather than an Okinawan identity defined by blood quantum, to aid in creating an inclusive space.

According to Itsuki, the Ryūkyū tamashī is the Okinawan soul. This concept is important especially in dismantling notions of race that have been used to justify the erasure of Okinawan stories within western hegemony and Japanese homogeneity and ethnonationalism in both the United States and Japan. Significant U.S. legislation that has contributed to the erasure, racialization, and trauma within minority communities includes the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow laws, the one-drop rule, and blood quantum laws pertaining to indigenous people. In contrast to western hegemonic views of race, my interviewees suggest that being Okinawan is not about blood but soul, thus emphasizing the idea of belonging. Itsuki said it best, stating, "In our minds, to be Okinawan doesn't have to be the blood, you know, blood has nothing to do with it. It's all about the tamashī, the soul. Ryūkyū tamashī, Okinawan tamashī, and that's what it meant for us to be Okinawan, not the blood."[106] Naomi voiced similar sentiments in reference to RMD globally: "They don't discriminate [against] anyone—sex, race, religion—like there are people that are *not* from Okinawa, has nothing to do with Okinawa… So everyone is welcome."[107] Kyosuke added, "Eisā is not limited just to Okinawans. Anyone can do it… Okinawa has had a mentality of welcoming others like I said. They're very open-minded for people with various backgrounds to do eisā. So I guess that helps… understanding differences. As long as you like to play eisā and are willing to learn more about Okinawan culture, you are Uchinānchu."[108] RMD-LA's practice of inclusion is a complicated one in that it challenges western hegemonic notions of racialization embedded in legacies of colonialism and capitalism in the United States, while

[106] Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, October 11, 2019.
[107] Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, October 25 2019.
[108] Kyosuke Kataoka, September 22, 2019.

simultaneously reinforcing a notion of liberal multiculturalism, which I will discuss in chapter three.

Itsuki's reflections on his time with the RMD-Houston branch prior to joining RMD-LA aid in understanding this feeling of belonging, inclusivity, and tamashī. He expressed his experience with eisā and the Houston community as one that was almost inexplicable:

> "... we had a raw feeling and we let out everything that we had. Every time, every practice, every performance, and that was the thing that we had you know. Everyone in the group really bonded together and that's what we were all about. We were a huge family. Everything that we'd do, it was just with us, you know all the group."[109]

Itsuki's experience with eisā was dependent on the group dynamic. This group was not just his team, but it was his family, and the other members felt likewise and they believed that this also became apparent in their performance. As Itsuki said, this meant that they brought all of who they were—their past, their present, and their hopes for the future—to the stage, to practice, and more importantly, to their relationships with one another. This allowed their performances and their group to thrive not only within the Okinawan community in Texas, but also within the wider Houston community. Even when I asked Itsuki, "What are you trying to express when you perform?" he answered with the following description of a show the Houston branch put on.

In 2013, the performance entitled "Kokyo: Dialogue Between Hearts" drew roughly 3,000 people in Houston, Texas. According to Itsuki, the group intentionally chose "Kokyo" because of its double meaning. In Japanese, Itsuki said, kokyo means "home and where we're from," but written in a certain way, ko means drum, and kyo means bridge.[110] When performing, the drum serves as the bridge between audience and performer. I am hesitant to say that the drum

[109] Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, October 11, 2019.
[110] Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, October 11, 2019.

expresses the emotion, making it seem as if it is just a vessel. While a vessel, it is also an extension of the performer and an embodiment of the raw emotion that Itsuki talks about:

> We can feel our emotion through the drums through the bridge that we make through the sound of the drum and that's what it is to us. It's, it's just—I have no idea—I have no idea what we're trying to express but it's—it's just this raw emotion we have. It's this raw emotion of being a freaking human being, you know? I don't know what it is but you know it's intense.[111]

Based on Itsuki's explanation of raw emotion, eisā is obviously not a dance that is meant to be done meekly. It also creates an intense emotional bond with fellow practitioners that can be felt by the audience as well. Naomi mentioned a similar sentiment in that her goal as an eisā practitioner is to "touch the other person's [the audience's] heart."[112] Itsuki and Naomi's reflections remind me of Deborah Wong's research on taiko practiced in the United States and her assertion of emotion as political.[113] However, most of the interviewees dissociated eisā from politics, except for Sora and Kyosuke (to an extent), and in the practices I attended, I do not recall hearing any discussion of song meanings or history tied to lyrics.

RMD's practice and dissemination of eisā have created a large network of performers, many of whom joined at a young age because they felt touched by a performance they witnessed. Eisā has become so ingrained as a part of their life and community that they cannot imagine life without it. Through my interviews I realized that, while karī was never clearly defined, a desire to belong and include others emerged—whether that be practitioners or the audience. This idea of belonging and inclusion is not only found in RMD-LA, but also RMD globally, especially in practitioners' experiences interacting with their international RMD community. I speculate that these notions of belonging and inclusivity have become a priority because of practitioners'

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[111] Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, October 11, 2019.
[112] Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, October 2019.
[113] Wong, *Louder and Faster*, 18.

desires to perpetuate Okinawan culture through whomever they believe represents Okinawan tamashī. This is especially crucial in systems that do not actively teach about Okinawan history.

Theme 2: "If I didn't join…": Eisā and Ethnic Visibility

The Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko has given eisā practitioners the opportunity to perpetuate an Okinawan cultural practice while building a global community turned family. For the Los Angeles branch, RMD has also aided in making visible a group that has been historically discriminated against. The history of Okinawa and Okinawans in the United States is rarely taught in schools or shown in the media so there is little chance for exposure or representation. Considering much of the history of Okinawan Americans (their racialization under Japanese homogeneity, the discrimination they faced from Japanese Americans in the United States, and their conflation with Japanese Americans during World War II), it is not surprising that much of the Okinawan American community may find it difficult to speak of, recall, or acknowledge the past. However, RMD-LA has given youth practitioners an opportunity to gain exposure to a practice that has aided them in understanding their ethnic identities and history.

Four of the interviewees' lives have been greatly impacted by eisā in terms of how they understand themselves as Okinawan diasporic subjects living in Southern California. For interviewees Kohki Nishioka, Sora Kime, Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, and Itsuki Gramkow Yokoda, identifying and distinguishing themselves as Okinawan is important, not only for themselves, but for their families and communities. When I asked shibucho Kohki Nishioka if he grew up knowing he was Okinawan and when he feels Okinawan, he replied that he knew he was Okinawan when he started dancing eisā at the age of five. His mother wanted Kohki and his sister to practice something that was a part of their heritage. He also stated, "I feel most

Okinawan American when I'm with my taiko[114] group… I just feel so proud of doing something that is a part of me."[115] He emphasized the importance of educating others who either do not know about Okinawa, or may be Okinawan but do not differentiate themselves from Japanese—with eisā being an avenue for this opportunity. Most profoundly, Kohki talked about eisā's importance to him:

> Through eisā I've learned to appreciate my roots, where I come from… Literally where it all began. I would have probably never knew about what Okinawan culture was if I didn't join, and I'm so grateful that eisā won't go away, it'll stay, and more people will want to know about their Okinawan roots. Or even if you're not Okinawan. Join and be a part of something that's absolutely amazing.[116]

Member Sora Kime responded similarly, reflecting on how an eisā performance she witnessed exposed her and her sister at a young age to an Okinawan identity. She also said she felt most Okinawan when performing eisā because the music and drumming are, to her, distinctly Okinawan. However, she also commented on the lack of opportunity in the current educational system to be exposed to Okinawan issues. When asked if she thought there is a difference between Okinawan American and Japanese American culture, Sora replied, "I don't know that Okinawan Americans see a big difference. It's probably kind of the same as Japanese Americans because both have been in the United States for such a long time, it's pretty easy to get more blocked out because of the pressure to assimilate,"[117] thus making it all the more important to her and her family to identify as Okinawan. Eisā has thus become an avenue of Okinawan visibility

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[114] It was not uncommon for practitioners to interchangeably use taiko and eisā. I speculate because the drums they use are similar and have the same names as Japanese taiko drums even if they are played differently. This could also be a legacy of Japanese colonialism in that the language that they use to describe their practice is no longer in Uchināguchi, but Japanese. In Kohki's interview, it was interesting because when talking about the difference between Okinawa and Japan, he made a comment saying that he should stop calling eisā taiko to help differentiate.

[115] Kohki Nishioka, September 22, 2019.

[116] Kohki Nishioka, September 22, 2019.

[117] Sora Kime, September 30, 2019.

for Sora and Kohki, exposing others to Okinawan culture and history especially since they are not seeing reflections of themselves in the educational system.

These stories of the importance of eisā in interviewees' lives highlight the importance of eisā in terms of education and representation for both practitioners and audience members. In eisā practice and performances, feeling Okinawan in these spaces and with these people also implies that outside of this space, an Okinawan identity is not distinctive. As previously discussed, the relationship between Japan, Okinawa, and the United States caused much erasure of Okinawan American immigrant stories. Eisā is a space for practitioners to reclaim, shape, and own their identities.

Other eisā practitioners whom I interviewed did not identify as Okinawan but still valued this practice because of the way it has shaped their view of life as well as the community that it has helped them create. Both Rachel and Kyosuke, currently among the more prominent leaders of RMD-LA, did not identify as Okinawan, but became aware of their own interconnected histories with Okinawa through RMD-LA. Rachel, who identifies as Japanese American and has been involved with RMD-LA for over six years, said that eisā has exposed her to a part of history that she "probably otherwise would've never learned about,"[118] except maybe in a documentary. Kyosuke mainly identified himself as Japanese American, but spoke in depth about how part of his mother's family was from Amami Ōshima. Thinking about how Amami Ōshima (see Chapter 1) further complicates an understanding of an Okinawan identity as it exists in the U.S. nation state, Kyosuke's commitment to eisā shows the need for eisā in Southern California as a starting point for others to begin to grasp the complexity of an Okinawan identity that is beyond the scope of this paper. He explained that the reason he still dances eisā is that he

[118] Rachel Nishida, September 16, 2019.

feels as though "it's my job in the community to spread the forgotten Japanese American culture [in reference to eisā] to the younger generation… At the end of the day, Okinawa is a part of Japan and I feel like if the Okinawan American community thrives, then the whole Japanese American community thrives too."[119] Rachel's and Kyosuke's experiences with eisā are also significant when thinking about and advocating for the importance of eisā in coalition building. It is also important when considering the biopolitical order under which Okinawans have existed as Japanese nationals, yet not been treated entirely as such. Their leadership and engagement with eisā contributes to the complexity not only of an Okinawan American identity, but also a Japanese American identity, in that it challenges western hegemonic and Japanese ethnonationalist understandings of history.

Four of the six interviewees mentioned Okinawa as having a history similar to that of Hawai`i. When trying to explain to others the Okinawan history of annexation, they found that people did not understand unless they paralleled the history of Okinawa with the history of Hawai`i. This reference to parallel pasts sheds light on the imperialist, colonial, and capitalist histories that have led to the annexation of both Okinawa and Hawai`i in the name of Japanese ethno-nationalism and western expansionism, to seize land and resources for the sake of militarization, and ultimately to assert global power.

By reinforcing the importance of ethnic visibility and representation, the question then becomes: can anyone, regardless of ethnic origin, perpetuate Okinawan culture? Racialized frameworks created by imperial and colonial forces have made this issue extremely complicated, especially thinking about how there seems to be an intentional separation of the cultural and political as categorized entities. Within my interviews there were varied responses about the

[119] Kyosuke Kataoka, September 22, 2019.

political potential of eisā, most of them disassociating eisā from the political. My speculation is that, within the RMD-LA context, people are not really talking about past or current issues as they relate to a complicated Okinawan American identity. Silence and legacies of shikata ga nai[120] thus reinforce a multicultural discourse that ignores matters considered political, ranging from Okinawan American as an identity to the presence of U.S. bases in Okinawa.

Building on understandings of tamashī as discussed in the context of belonging and inclusivity, there are benefits to the idea of an Okinawan tamashī as it relates to coalition building. It is important that Kyosuke and Rachel made it clear that, although they did not identify as Okinawan American, they were dedicated to the practice and all that comes with it—the community, the history, and the representation of both. Because U.S. society functions within a colonial and racial framework, being able to relate to and empathize with people who are not co-ethnics, and to remain in spaces that have the potential to be tense, I believe, is a part of understanding an Okinawan tamashī. RMD-LA's main purpose is not to bring to light issues complicating identity, race, the nation state, or colonialism and imperialism, but it does begin to expose practitioners to the history of Okinawa, which involves these topics.

While I want to make a point of the importance of Okinawan history in the United States and the politics of whose histories get forgotten or retold, I do not want to imply that the Okinawan American community has been stagnant. Rather, the OAA itself has a rich history of trial-and-error efforts to build community networks and forge linkages with Okinawa. In the past twenty-five years, RMD-LA has not only aided the community by creating a space in which one feels as though one belongs, regardless of one's background, but they have also created a space for people to be seen. They also made it clear to me that the establishment of RMD in Okinawa

[120] Japanese saying for "It cannot be helped."

did not involve a political goal, but was intended to perpetuate the culture.[121] Within this new dynamic of eisā as a stage performance in Southern California, ethnic visibility has become a goal for RMD-LA.

Theme 3 - Telling Stories in Movement : Eisā and Youth Aesthetic

As previously discussed, the foundation of RMD came from the bōsōzoku members in Okinawa as a way to express their emotions after a fellow member of their bike gang died in an accident. Instead of gripping the handlebars of a motorcycle, they decided instead to grip the bachi. As RMD has become a diasporic movement, a part of the goal of RMD-LA has been to continue expressing themselves through the drum. Not only that, but according to Kyosuke, eisā globally is essential to reenergizing the diasporic community by engaging young men and women. This is made possible by the attractiveness of the aesthetic and dynamism of eisā; the practice itself is captivating and energetic. Throughout the interviews and my time in practices, it was evident that the aesthetic of the performance was important and even aided in their recruitment of members.

I realized that the majority of my notes taken during RMD-LA practices over several months were about the aesthetic elements of eisā: how to properly disengage contact with the drum and extend your arm, how to practice expression through heishi[122], how to lift oneself out of a lunge with a folded back leg. Their movements required not only strength, but flexibility and agility. I rarely heard people talk about the history related to lyrics, however I also am not aware if there were other means of communication such as email where they were. Pushups were the punishment if one dropped their bachi. A high priority that was emphasized in every class was to

[121] Naomi Shinzato-Yonaha, October 25, 2019.

[122] The call and response associated with eisā. Someone will yell “Hiya sa sa!” and everyone in response will yell back “Haiya!”

have students practice as if they were performing. This would ensure that when on stage, the practitioners did not look tired because that would correlate to a poor performance. Despite their sweat-soaked shirts and the perspiration dripping down their face, their practices usually remained engaging. Frequent reminders included to smile, to heishi, hit certain moves or poses more sharply, and to bend lower. At times, practitioners tried so hard, their bachi would splinter on contact. Through these practices, although the meaning of lyrics was not discussed, there is a passing down of how to produce a certain Okinawan look or feel that correlates with the idea of an Okinawan tamashī. By training in Okinawan practices, one can better engage and understand the Okinawan diasporic experience. In addition to the aesthetic aspects, values are simultaneously transmitted. The RMD-LA practice becomes a place of learning how to be disciplined, how to take constructive criticism, how to function as a team, and how to show respect for elders. I have seen shibucho Kohki and Kyosuke, along with other influential older members such as Rachel and Itsuki, take this role very seriously in their interactions with the younger generation and how they present Okinawanness to the audience.

When thinking about the importance of a youth aesthetic, one must also consider the racialized history of Asian immigrants. Due to legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans were, and continue to be, racialized. Some tried to adapt to western hegemonic beliefs while forming ethnic enclaves and communities as a source of resistance and survival. In particular the Nisei tended to lean towards assimilationist politics because of national and international sociopolitical pressures during the twentieth century including the Great Depression, unsettled relations between Japan and the United States

leading up to World War II, domestic racism, and wartime incarceration.[123] These assimilationist politics deterred Nisei from "affirm[ing] their ethnicity and practic[ing] ethnic politics."[124] However, because of major social shifts in the 1960s and 70s with the rise of liberation movements—such as the Asian American Movement—working to advance Civil Rights and Ethnic Studies, ethnic cultural arts and expression become acceptable, and even "cool." For example, in the 1970s taiko started gaining popularity as a way for Sansei[125] to express anger about the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans.[126] In her work, *Louder and Faster: Pain, Joy, and the Body Politic in Asian American Taiko,* musicologist and taiko practitioner Deborah Wong asserts that taiko in the Americas is a "means by which communities of Japanese descent explore heritage and assert new diasporic sensibilities. More broadly, taiko has attracted multiethnic interest but is strongly and self-consciously Asian American…"[127] Wong contends that, since the 1970s, taiko has become a part of a "fatal dialogue" that has put Orientalism, multiculturalism, and cultural and political self-determination into a complex conversation.[128] This "fatal dialogue" is one that both sustains taiko as a cultural practice while simultaneously being "flawed, powerful, and imperfect" with the potential of political promise.[129] Eisā arguably does the same: it simultaneously upholds and complicates Orientalist notions because eisā challenges the feminization and silencing of Asian Americans that Orientalism has painted.

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[123] Angela K. Ahlgren, "A New Taiko Folk Dance: San Jose Taiko and Asian American Movements," in *Contemporary Asian American Dance,* ed. Yutian Wong (Madison, WI: The university of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 41.

[124] Jere Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese Identities and Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 2.

[125] Japanese for third generation.

[126] Wong, *Louder and Faster,* 7.

[127] Wong, *Louder and Faster, 5*.

[128] Wong, *Louder and Faster, 2*.

[129] Wong, *Louder and Faster,* 2.

Although it is hard to trace the history of eisā in Southern California through literature, despite the presence of an Okinawan American community since the early 20th century, it is evident that women played a key role in early eisā organizing. According to the *History of the Okinawans in North America*, a book written and produced by the Okinawa Club of America, eisā groups have been organizing since the 1960s, mostly in association with the Fujinbu, the women's wing of the Okinawa Association of America. It appears as well that, at one point, there was also an eisā pārankū group that was known as the Prayer Drum Club.[130] The Fujinbu's main performances throughout the 1960s and 70s took place at the annual OAA picnics held at Elysian Park, as well as the annual fundraising event, the Okinawa Bazaar. Both events continue to this day, with RMD-LA performing at both. In an email exchange, Corrine Tokunaga shared with me her insights into the history of eisā within the OAA: She recalled that in the 1970s Nancy Nakaya, an OAA member, was trained with the pārankū during a two-week program at the University of Hawai`i at Manoa by a Mr. Matsumoto.[131] Ms. Nakaya brought what she learned back to Los Angeles and continued to teach and perform to more traditionally Okinawan songs throughout the 1980s.[132] This group consisted of mostly senior women, although men were also involved. They performed at the annual OAA picnics as well as during Obon season. It is important to note that women have maintained the practice of eisā in the Southern California Okinawan American community. In contrast, eisā in Okinawa has been associated with and performed primarily by young men during Obon.

However, I do not imagine the women's earlier practice was similar to that of RMD-LA, considering that RMD was not established until the late 1980s in Okinawa and did not become

[130] *History of the Okinawans in North America*, trans. Ben Kobashigawa (California: Regents of the University of California and the Okinawan Club of America, 1988).

[131] Corrine Tokunaga, email message to author, April 16, 2020.

[132] Corrine Tokunaga, email message to author, April 16, 2020.

official in Los Angeles until 1995. According to my interviewees, RMD was the first to practice eisā as an entertaining performance instead of the "traditional" use of eisā in Obon rituals. RMD became popular in Los Angeles in the 1990s as a means of revitalizing the youth community. RMD-LA's distinct eisā style is thus not only a means of strengthening community ties and ethnic visibility, but is also meant to attract and please audiences. This style has drawn people to try eisā, and it has also attracted crowds, as elaborated previously by Itsuki, speaking of his experience in Texas. He talked in depth about how their goal as a Houston branch was to look "cool" and entertain the audience, many of whom were not familiar with Okinawan cultural history, yet they were drawn by the energy of the performance. Itsuki also spoke about the reality that people do not know anything about Okinawa and thus RMD has an opportunity to shape the images of Okinawa. Kohki expressed a similar sense of responsibility, not just to represent Okinawa and the Okinawan American community because of their lack of visibility, but also the importance of representing RMD well. Naomi, as previously mentioned, also stated that the purpose of eisā is to touch the hearts of the audience. This also raises questions linked to previous discussions of Okinawan Americans being overshadowed as a minority group within another already minoritized group, the Japanese American community. Why then, has an Okinawan ethnic identity recently become more valuable in Southern California? And has the eisā aesthetic contributed to this? If so, how? This suggests that ethnic culture is no longer a source of shame but now a source of social and cultural capital.

According to literary scholar Mark Chiang, cultural and social capital are facets of symbolic capital, which "encompasses immaterial forms of social value such as honor, prestige,

status, legitimacy, authority, charisma, and charm."[133] More specifically, cultural capital refers to "knowledge deemed to possess value" and social capital refers to "social connections and networks that can be mobilized to productive or valuable ends."[134] This idea will be made more evident in the next chapter as I discuss "Gajumaru" and not only the aesthetic of the RMD dances, but also the relationships of the various diasporic branches as they flew from around the world to support RMD-LA's two-hour anniversary celebration and perform alongside them.

The three themes—belonging and inclusivity, ethnic visibility, and youth aesthetic—all come together to create a vibrant connection between practitioners as well as the audience. The three work in tandem to form networks of people of various backgrounds in Southern California as well as throughout the Okinawan diaspora. Thus, RMD-LA's performances become an assertion of Okinawan presence that is contagious and can inspire the audience to feel their Okinawan tamashī in the pit of their stomach—in their chimu.[135] The eisā practitioners are able to conjure this within themselves, practice it, and then perform Okinawan tamashī, creating a shared sense of that feeling within their group and in front of those for whom they are performing. In Okinawa, karī produced by eisā reaffirms the community, keeps it thriving, maintains connections between ancestors and descendants, and creates networks. RMD-LA's eisā practice in Southern California is a loud, hyped, in-your-face assertion of Okinawan American presence.

[133] Mark Chiang, "Cultural Capital," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, ed. Rachel Lee (New York: Routledge, 2014), 92.

[134] Chiang, 92.

[135] Uchināguchi for heart.

CHAPTER 3. EISĀ PERFORMANCE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AS COUNTER COLONIAL

On February 15, 2020 I sat in the crowd of the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko - Los Angeles (RMD-LA) branch's 25th-anniversary performance called "Gajumaru." For approximately the past seven months, I attended their practices, watched them perform at Okinawa Association of America (OAA) events, and interviewed some of their key members. It all led up to this moment—a moment in which other diasporic members of Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko (RMD) traveled from around the world to perform alongside and support RMD-LA on this monumental anniversary. In attendance were members of RMD branches from Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Okinawa, Texas, and Ohio.

I sat in the right front row of the theater and looked up at the practitioners as they put all of their might into each strike of their drums and each heishi. The members would shut their eyes tightly, perspiration dripping down their faces emphasizing their endurance, while they pumped their bachi once towards the ceiling, calling out a heishi. They furrowed their brows in concentration as they managed to land a jump and spin. They smiled, sang along, and some even did their own little choreography in the middle of a group number—kachashi-ing[136] and whistling to the beat. By the end of the show, the practitioners were drenched in sweat, but still smiling as they kept the energy up for their grand finale. Their performance was infectious and filled me with emotion as each practitioner brought all of who they were to the stage. As I turned around to look back at the rest of the crowd behind me, I was not alone in feeling this joy. To my left, in the middle of the front row, an elderly man sat and whistled and clapped along. Groups of people were up on their feet kachashi-ing, while others lifted their hands above their head to clap

[136] The rotation of the wrists back and forth above the head, sometimes maintaining a loose fist or an open, soft hand. It is often done during celebrations.

along. From my understanding of eisā, I was experiencing the RMD-LA show as they had hoped their audience would experience it. This is the power of eisā—it engages everyone and elicits a response not only from the crowd, but also within the practitioners.

In my last chapter, I will argue that "Gajumaru" is evidence of eisā as a counter colonial performance because of its inherently political nature despite the performers' apolitical intent. Because of its counter colonial nature, eisā in Southern California thus can be seen not only as a performance but also as an untapped tool for raising critical consciousness. To help guide this chapter I ask the following questions: How does "Gajumaru" reflect a change in eisā in Southern California? What makes it counter colonial? And why is eisā, as a form, able to take on counter colonial meaning? To answer these questions, I conducted a choreographic analysis of several dances presented during the 25th-anniversary celebration and consulted various secondary sources as well as the program for "Gajumaru." Although limited in its explanations, the "Gajumaru" 25th-anniversary program provides a brief description of the meaning of each song that is danced to. These explanations raise crucial questions that help in the search for deeper meaning not only in the songs, but in the history of Okinawa.

One of my main critiques of RMD as a transnational organization is that, with the dissemination of their material throughout the world, it is my understanding that they do not include lyrics or translations. The shibucho are left to do their own research and pass on the information they have gathered to those they teach. The songs taught are usually in Japanese or Uchināguchi. Luckily, the shibucho both speak Japanese and are able to understand songs in Japanese, unlike those in Uchināguchi. Because I do not speak Japanese, let alone Uchināguchi, and given the difficulty of finding translations for Uchināguchi lyrics, this complicates my ability to fully understand what is being portrayed. I not only have to rely on the information provided

in the program, but I also have to trust the mid-twenty-year-old eisā practitioners who are not only in charge, but also in the midst of coming to understand their identity. What is the process of translating these songs? And what is the potential for, perhaps unknowingly, giving new meaning to these performances, which may involve vacating the original meaning? The absence of explanatory information from the RMD headquarters supports the agency of this particular group of youth in RMD-LA leadership positions to shape the future of Okinawan American understandings of identity in Southern California.

To understand eisā as counter colonial, I turn once again to Adria Imada's work, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire*. With the annexation and colonization of Hawai`i came the commodification of Hawai`i's people and practices. The hula girl has become a global image that supposedly represents Hawai`i—warm, welcoming, exotic, and sensual—as seen in various travel ads. Focusing on the hula dancers who were hired to travel the U.S. empire from the late 19th century to the 1960s to contribute to the global imaginary of Hawai`i and tourism, Imada explores how these performances in hula circuits can be seen as counter-colonial. Borrowing the term from Vicente M. Diaz's work on Chamorro Christian converts, Imada talks about hula performers not simply as "converted" subjects, but as ones "with counter-colonial desires that were neither clearly oppositional nor accommodating" to the demands of U.S. colonialism and capitalism.[137] Imada quotes Marx when she says that "commodity fetishism… removes the production of a commodity from view and transforms relations between people into relations between things."[138] This became evident as hula transformed from a physical,

[137] Adria Imada, *Aloha America*, 18.
[138] Imada, 72.

historical, and spiritual practice in service of the indigenous community and ali`i[139] to a tourist commodity as Hawai`i became fetishized in the global imaginary, and especially by white America.[140]

However, even within a new tourist commodity that sought to turn a relational practice into one of transactions, hula flourished as it "enabled cultural reproduction away from repressive forces within the colony."[141] The kaona[142] of the songs that were performed on the tourist stage allowed for the perpetuation of political content that was only meant to be interpreted and understood by select audiences, thus allowing for a "productive disguise for subtle and more dramatic political critiques and struggles against colonial incorporation."[143] The kaona of these songs is significant because it "reflects a Hawaiian way of knowing that begins with fluidity, complexity, and contradiction, which is in contrast to Western ways that seek categorization, compartmentalism, fixity, and truth."[144] These hula practitioners were not only able to survive and thrive as entertainers within the new system that had attempted to overthrow their way of living, but they also used this capitalist system to maintain practices important to their cultural perpetuation. I look towards hula and Adria Imada's work because of the wide gap in the literature of eisā in North America, particularly in Southern California. Although Hawai`i and Okinawa do not have parallel histories, they have had similar experiences with annexation, colonization, and militarization by the United States and Japan, respectively. Okinawa's experience of annexation, colonization, and militarization has ultimately had effects on diasporic

[139] Rulers or leaders in 'ōlelo Hawai`i.

[140] Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire,* 72.

[141] Imada, 72.

[142] According to Imada on page 18 of *Aloha America*, the kaona of the song is the hidden meanings. It is a "tactic of enclosure and revelation, demarcat[ing] those who could interpret and those not meant to know."

[143] Imada, *Aloha America*, 19.

[144] Stephanie Nohelani Teves, *Defiant Indigeneity: The Politics of Hawaiian Performance* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 18.

youth identity. With a brief understanding of hula as counter colonial, one can begin to imagine the possibilities for eisā being counter colonial as well.

I will also incorporate the themes from the previous chapter (belonging and inclusivity, ethnic visibility, and youth aesthetic) into my choreographic analysis, not only to show how these ideals are the pillars of the RMD-LA community, but also how they aid in maintaining cultural performance. I highlight these themes to show how the youthful leadership of RMD-LA are utilizing what they have been given to the best of their ability and are offering practitioners the opportunity to manifest these values on stage and pass them on to audience members. The audience members thus also have the opportunity to learn more about Okinawan history, whether or not RMD-LA purposefully intends this.

Choreographic Analysis of "Gajumaru"

The three songs that I have selected for choreographic analysis are “Shima Uta” by The Boom, “Oyake Akahachi,” and “Shinkanucha” by Kazufumi Miyazawa (The Boom's lead singer) and the Diamantes, a Latin band comprised of Okinawan Peruvians. I chose these three songs in particular because of the historical references included in their brief descriptions in the anniversary program. Through analysis of their choreography and program descriptions, I will elaborate on ″Gajumaru″ as a counter colonial act.

The creative choreography by RMD to “Oyake Akahachi" brings to light the imperial history of Okinawa, formerly known as the Ryūkyū Kingdom. According to the anniversary program’s descriptions, Oyake Akahachi was a hero of the Yaeyama Islands who “fought to protect Yaeyama from the Ryūkyū Kingdom at the end of the 15th century.”[145] As the song begins, the practitioners are in three lines. The first row consists of three male dancers carrying

[145] *Gajumaru*, 4.

shame daiko and a bachi. They are dressed in black tops that look like a cross between a Japanese happi coat and Chinese changshan, pants, head wraps, and white tabi.[146] The back two lines each consist of five dancers, all carrying odaiko drums, two bachi, and conical hats that cover their faces to the point where the dancers are unidentifiable—purposely concealing their identity.

For the first minute of the song, the sounds of waves and an indistinct instrument play and the three main male dancers do a solo together while the back two rows kneel in position, with their right legs extended behind them. Their arms and bachi are pointed diagonally towards the ground in a prepared stance. In unison, the three men, all of whom have leadership roles at their respective RMD branches, break their statue-still stance and take a wide stride with their right foot and then their left foot to create a wide stance. They create a wide circle around them, lifting their bachi and shimedaiko over their heads as they sink low into a squat, not only showing strength but balance as they hide their faces with their shimedaiko and bachi. They quickly bring their feet back together and then lunge their left legs back into another low squat as they extend their arms to the front and back of the stage. Bringing their feet back together once again and standing up straight, the three men slowly draw their bachi to the opposite side of their body, as if sheathing a sword. They use sweeping gestures and karate-inspired movements[147] with their arms as they individually rotate in a circle prior to joining their fellow practitioners in the squatting position on the floor, as if they had just scoped an area and are ready to lead their comrades forward.

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[146] Happi coats are Japanese straight-sleeved robes that generally do not have a way to fasten them in the front. The Chinese changshan also has straight sleeves, buttons to fasten the shirt in the front, and a higher neck. Tabi are Japanese socks characterized by their single split toe.

[147] According to the *Gajumaru* program, RMD's style of eisā is a "fusion of odori (traditional dance) and karate movements, 1.

Having different drums, the three in the front also have a different choreography than the two lines behind them throughout the rest of the dance, creating an obvious dichotomy that suggests their importance and expertise. Because of this distinction and obvious nod to leadership, I speculate that the three in the front are embodying Oyake Akahachi through their dance and the practitioners with their faces covered represent those who were a part of Oyake Akahachi's rebellion against the Ryūkyū Kingdom. In particular, the front line's choreography consists of quicker, sharper, dynamic movements, requiring them at times to jump off the ground, turn 360 degrees, and land in a kneeling position with their right knee on the floor. The back two lines create an army-like performance as they march in place, lifting their knees to create 90 degrees angles. At times they drop into a low, wide squat before shifting their weight into a lunge, exemplifying their strength as if they cannot be moved. The choreography of their upper bodies consists of controlled and powerful movements while striking their odaiko. With their faces hidden and their large odaiko drums hanging in front of their bodies, the practitioners in the back two rows also carry two bachi and hit both faces of their odaiko—a practice that, according to my interview with Kyosuke, RMD was the first to incorporate into their eisā choreography. I question then why they would decide to implement a practice that pushes the boundaries of eisā in a dance that also expands understanding of Okinawan history.

"Oyake Akahachi" and its choreography are evidence of a counter colonial act for several reasons. As explored in my previous chapter, RMD's eisā has a youth aesthetic that not only attracts younger generations to engage in the practice, but is also very entertaining to watch even without context. Even if the audience (and honestly, probably the practitioners as well) cannot completely understand the meaning behind the song because it is sung in Uchināguchi, the practice and performance of this song carry on Oyake Akahachi's legacy of rebellion from the

end of the fifteenth century.[148] While many present in the crowd could speak Japanese, only a few might be able to understand the Uchināguchi lyrics, making the true meaning of this performance fully available only for certain people. This ultimately became a historical performance that engaged the crowd, even if it is a setting meant to celebrate and display the success and the talent of their practitioners in the 25 years of RMD-LA. Just from reading the short description, however, this performance raises questions about who Oyake Akahachi was, why the revolt he led was important in Okinawan history, and more specifically about Yaeyama and the colonial history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, thus complicating matters.

The next song that I discuss brings to light aspects of Okinawan history not commonly addressed. "Shima Uta", a "popular song by the Japanese band The Boom…is dedicated to the Okinawan people for the suffering they endured during the war."[149] "Shima Uta" was written after The Boom lead, Kazufumi Miyazawa, made a trip to Okinawa for a photo-shoot. Based on his experience, he produced this song in 1992 and since then it has become a global phenomenon.[150] Because of its fame, the lyrics were much easier to find. Written in a mixture of Japanese and Uchināguchi, the song has a solemn, yet powerful feel to it as it uses a mixture of personification and symbolism to represent not only the Okinawan experience during World War II but also Miyazawa's response decades later. For example, in both the first and second verses, Miyazawa sings about the deigo flower, the national flower of Okinawa that blooms in the spring—around the time when the Battle of Okinawa began. He sings "*Deigo no hana ga saki kaze wo yobi arashi ga kita / Deigo ga sakimidare kaze wo yobi arashi ga kita*" translating to "The deigo flower has blossomed, it has called the wind, the storm has arrived / The deigo

[148] *Gajumaru*, 4.

[149] *Gajumaru*, 3.

[150] Ana-María Alcarón-Jiménez, "Shima-uta: of Windows, Mirrors, and the Adventures of a Traveling Song" (master's thesis, University of California - San Diego, 2009), 18.

flowers are in full bloom, they have called the wind, and the storm has come."[151] The connotation of a storm implies unrest, fear, and chaos. He also sings about the ocean, a crucial aspect of the Okinawan lifestyle that, since World War II, has not only been the source of life but the source of death as thousands threw themselves from cliffs into the ocean, believing that suicide would be better than the torture that they would endure by the U.S. troops. Currently, the U.S. military bases in Okinawa have caused immense damage to the surrounding oceans and threaten vital habitats for animals, plants, and humans alike.

Reading the lyrics and watching the video of the performers dancing to "Shima Uta" is sobering and evokes an emotional response. To help me understand the experience felt between practitioner and audience, I consulted Deborah Wong's work on taiko. When interviewing women taiko practitioners and analyzing their experience, Wong identifies the "cresting waves of power and pleasure" as "confined to neither performer(s) nor spectator(s) but rather move dynamically between them.[152] While Wong specifically speaks about women's experience with taiko in this section of her writing, I also apply this idea to eisā, especially in the context of "Shima Uta" because of the emotion evoked by both audience and practitioners. I also think about how this exchange of energy is important when dismantling Orientalist and colonial views of Asian Americans, in this case Okinawan Americans, while simultaneously upholding them due to the performative aspect of ″Gajumaru.″ Wong talks further about the tension of both upholding and deconstructing problematic theoretical frameworks when she says that she cannot

[151] Alcarón-Jiménez, 16-17.
[152] Deborah Wong, *Louder and Faster,* 124.

"*see* taiko without reenacting and revitalizing other ways of seeing, including the colonial gaze and its contemporary cousin, the multicultural gaze."[153]

This performance dismantles Orientalist and colonial views by displaying Okinawan men and women on stage as strong, loud, and charismatic. The drumming of the eisā practitioners and their choreography adds another element of passion behind the songs, as drums are not meant to be hit timidly, but with force. As the verses build up to the chorus, not only does the don of their drums become more frequent, but so does their heishi, or call and response to each other. According to interviewee Kyosuke Kataoka, heishi is important because it is a rallying, supportive force that keeps the energy within the group up. The audience can feel it, too, as the elderly man sitting up front and center began to whistle loudly enough to catch on recordings of the show. The chorus reads "*Shimauta yo kaze ni nori tori to tomo ni umi wo watare / Shimauta yo kaze ni nori todokete okure watashi no namida"* translating to "Island Song, ride the wind, with the birds, cross the sea / Island song, ride the wind, carry my tears with you."[154] I interpret the translation of the song as a call to the Okinawan diaspora, as many moved from the island, to carry the legacy and the story of Okinawa with them. The lyrics of the chorus begin to merge with the almost constant "hiya sa sa!" "haiya!" "si!"—evidence not only of their support and unity, but the embodiment of shimauta.[155] The pain of war-torn Okinawa, lyricized in "Shima Uta", and the desire for the story of Okinawa to be heard, is counter colonial in that it exudes survival and the strength to keep living and thriving, evident in the next generation of performers who are carrying on the legacy of eisā. Although obviously not the same, I imagine that the

[153] Wong, 43.

[154] Alcarón-Jiménez, "Shima-uta," 16.

[155] Alcarón-Jiménez, "Shima-uta," 18. According to Alcarón-Jiménez, the difference between "Shima Uta" and shimauta is that the former is the name of the song dedicated to the Okinawan people by Kazufumi Miyazawa, the latter is Okinawan folk music.

energy felt from this rendition of a song about the war devastation is just a fraction of what eisā represented and evoked for those alive and dead (but still present) in war-torn Okinawa after World War II.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a main value for RMD-LA has been that of belonging. Many interviewees emphasized that it did not matter if one identified as Okinawan or not while practicing, but rather it was intention that was important. Two of the interviewees also did not identify as Okinawan. "Shinkanucha," a song intended for eisā by Kazufumi Miyazawa and the Okinawan Peruvian Latin band Diamantes, is dedicated to all who "work together to make Okinawa's future brighter," including the diaspora and those who do not have Okinawan ancestral roots.[156] The song begins in a slower rhythm, but gradually builds through the pre-chorus and reaches the climax during the chorus. During the 25th-anniversary event, the chorus became an obvious celebration amongst the practitioners as their perfectly choreographed dance that I had seen numerous times during practice was altered by various individuals. The practitioners' choreography for the lower halves of their bodies remained the same—stepping, kicking, and turning all in perfect synchronicity. However, instead of all hitting their drums, they began to vary what they did with their upper bodies. A couple of the dancers began to whistle with one hand in a syncopated manner, preventing one of them from hitting their shimedaiko. Instead, he pumped his shime in the air twice as the others scrunched their eyes to hit their odaiko twice and heishi, summoning all that they had into their "haiya!" Others began to kachashi, while others began to clap their hands above their heads.

[156] "Gajumaru: RMD LA 25th Anniversary", 4 & "Audio CD of *Shinkanucha*, Anthem of the 5th Worldwide *Uchinanchu* Festival Sold," translated by T& CT, Mark Ealey, *Ryukyu Shimpo* (7 February 2012): http://english.ryukyushimpo.jp/2012/02/16/5601/.

According to the anniversary program, shinkanucha means "team" or "friend" in Uchināguchi, and the song itself "has the message that all who work together to make Okinawa's future brighter are 'shinkanucha,' including those living outside of Okinawa and continue to preserve the culture, those who do not share the Okinawan ancestry, and yet have great life and appreciation for the culture."[157] "Shinkanucha" was also the theme song of the 2011 Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival—a gathering that occurs every five years in which the diasporic communities come together in Okinawa to celebrate and connect. RMD branches from all over the world performed this song together during the gathering.

During RMD-LA's 25th anniversary, although they had learned a completely choreographed dance for "Shinkanucha," in that moment they individually made choices to deviate from the choreography to express themselves. This also had an effect on the group, as others also began to express their enthusiasm in different ways. It also had a major effect on the audience, as described in my introduction. My friends and I clapped along with others in the audience. People stood up and whistled. The practitioners ended up pulling a group of us on stage to kachashi alongside them. It was organized chaos as everyone moved their body in a way that was simultaneously performing Okinawanness, while also appearing to be spontaneous. As audience members, we discussed later how in that moment, we each had a deep-seated and overwhelming feeling in the pit of our stomachs. We felt proud to be Okinawan and to be a part of this event.

I end with this song because of the complexity of how this dance can be seen as counter colonial. While I thoroughly enjoyed this performance, upon further reflection there is room for critique. The problematics of the song begin to seep into liberal multiculturalism while

[157] *Gajumaru*, 4.

simultaneously advocating for the continued perpetuation and appreciation of Okinawan practices. Scholar Brian Su-Jen Chung discusses liberal multiculturalism in the context of MTV's America's Best Dance Crew (ABDC), Season 1, as a narrative of "tolerance and exchange" that actually criminalizes blackness by not only hiding behind the supposed care for diversity, but by creating a competition based on a standard of professionalism and meritocracy that triangulates African American culture and history with those of Asian America and the European American mainstream.[158] Dance scholar Rosemary Candelario also asserts that liberal multiculturalism and Orientalism work hand in hand to create the hyper-visible Asian American body, producing a sense of exceptionalism or tokenism that actually benefits exploitative capitalist endeavors.[159] Similar logic can be seen in RMD-LA's performances in that there is a lack of acknowledgement of systemic racism, specifically concerning the relationship between Japan and Okinawa and how it has manifested in Southern California.

The apolitical goals of RMD include creating a hyper-visible global image of Okinawan culture as one that is associated with "friendship and community, joyfulness, respect and gratitude thought to be typically Okinawan."[160] "Shinkanucha" aids in creating this Okinawan image that arguably has not begun with RMD, but is a part of the legacy of Japanese colonialism. Starting in the latter half of the 20th century during Okinawa's reversion to Japan, an obsession with Okinawan culture by Japanese led to the Okinawa Boom. This "Japanese celebration and appropriation of Okinawan difference" was also linked with the "economically motivated exoticization and self-exoticization of Okinawan images in tourism and media representations,

[158] Brian Chung, ""Started in the Streets…": Criminalizing Blackness and the Performance of Asian American Entrepreneurship on *America's Best Dance Crew*, Season 1," in *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*, ed. Yutian Wong (Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 126-127.

[159] Rosemary Candelario, "An Asian American *Land*," in *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*, ed. Yutian Wong (Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 179-180.

[160] Siemann, 182.

both by Japanese and Okinawans themselves"—thus selling a more "authentic" or "premodern" fantasy of Japan.[161] It is almost disturbing to read about the deep obsession that some Japanese had with Okinawa during the time, calling themselves "Okinawazuki (Okinawaphiles), often dubbing their infatuation with Okinawa as a near pathology, such as Okinawabyō (Okinawa disease), Okinawa chūdoku (Okinawa addiction), Okinawa mania (Okinawa mania), and Okinawa furiiku (Okinawa freaks)."[162] While this obsession may not manifest to the same extent within RMD, I cannot help but wonder if the welcoming and apolitical nature of the group is a legacy of the Okinawa Boom. The exoticization of Okinawans in Japan mixed with Orientalist multicultural discourse in Southern California potentially contribute to the ongoing colonialism of Okinawa in that the two work together to produce a very particular image of Okinawans.

I simultaneously advocate for RMD-LA and the practitioners who are a part of this group. Throughout my time with RMD-LA, a couple of traditionalists from the OAA have warned me not to view RMD as "true" eisā. These people have told me to "be careful while working with RMD-LA," suggesting that they are not "traditional" or "authentic." While I respect their concerns, I also do not believe they are giving the diasporic youth of Southern California credit for how they are keeping the youth community together and engaged. In fact, I would argue for this reason that eisā exemplifies "defiant indigeneity," as delineated by scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves. She defines defiant indigeneity powerfully as:

> … a performance of indigeneity that constantly deconstructs, resists, and at times recodifies itself against and through state logics… It is a performance that intends to help your people survive. That is what makes it fundamentally defiant and its performance so crucial. Sometimes this defiance can be simply about asserting Indigenous presence, and at other times it can collude with the forces of heteropatriarchy or capitalism. Sometimes it invokes blood quantum to defend a land claim. Other times it prioritizes kinship and

[161] Sumi Cho, "The Politics of Difference and Authenticity in the Practice of Okinawan Dance and Music in Osaka, Japan " (dissertation, University of Michigan, 2014), 176.

[162] Cho, 177.

> being in a community and includes those whom the government does not count as your family.[163]

In a colonial and capitalist system that erases and divides, these youth in RMD-LA are choosing to be inclusive and not to withhold their knowledge and care from others. They are also committed to the perpetuation of eisā, and therefore the music, the history, the knowledge, and the responsibility that come with it. While they may be working within capitalist frameworks that value the dissemination of material in the diaspora over historically accurate translations, they are also simultaneously ensuring the survival of their community and doing the best they can with the resources that are available to them as a branch of RMD global and as a partner to the OAA—another group that has claimed an apolitical stance. I argue that defiant indigeneity in this case is also a part of being counter colonial in that both hold tension between working within and working for systems of oppression while also perpetuating community knowledge and care.

RMD-LA's eisā practice can be seen not only as counter colonial, but defiant. As explored throughout this chapter through "Gajumaru," eisā has the potential to hold anger, pain, hope, and creativity in tension together, and this is not only felt and seen by the audience, but it becomes an exchange between the audience and practitioners. The counter colonial aspect of eisā can be discerned in the captivating drumming and dancing to an inherently political song about World War II. It resides in the teaching of eisā to preteens by young adults because of their love for the practice and the community. It is experienced when one feels compelled by the synergetic energy during the performance, whether as an audience member or practitioner, to dance along or perhaps even slightly modify the choreography for oneself. It is the assurance of survival and the thriving of community, not only for those in the past and present, but also those yet to come.

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[163] Stephanie Nohelani Teves, *Defiant Indigeneity*, 11.

CONCLUSION

On October 31, 2019 three of Shuri Castle's main buildings—the same mentioned in my introduction—burned to the ground. The reasons remain unknown, but it is suspected that an electrical short circuit caused the immense fire. After being rebuilt in the 1990s, it was a home to a public university, named a UNESCO World Heritage site, and popular for tourism. Most importantly, though, it was a symbol of resilience to many Uchinānchu, including those in the diaspora. The burning of Shuri Castle in the midst of my research was devastating, but also reminded me of the utmost importance of eisā. While the buildings no longer stand, and much material history was destroyed, eisā continues on, and with it the stories of Okinawa and the Okinawan diaspora.

I have argued throughout this thesis that, while a global art form, eisā specifically in Southern California can be seen as inherently counter colonial, despite its apolitical intent, for the historical content that is present in the songs that are danced to. It is also important to think of eisā in Southern California as a counter colonial practice because of the ways it has been overshadowed by and subsumed into a monolithic Japanese American narrative. Eisā as a global praxis has transformed with significant developments in history—the reasoning behind these changes speaking to the times, whether related to Japanese imperialism and colonialism, war, immigration, or the current multicultural discourse. Eisā has thus found its way to Southern California with the immigration of Okinawans and continues to transform. The legacy of eisā has been carried on in Southern California throughout the 20th century by Okinawan women who were a part of the Okinawa Association of America. In the 1990s, the Ryūkyūkoku Matsuri Daiko was introduced, once again transforming eisā into a practice done mostly by Okinawan American youth. It has continued to develop as it is no longer practiced by just Okinawan

Americans—all people are welcome. This feature is not unique to the RMD-LA experience, but is also found in the Bolivia branch, as shown in Yvonne Siemann's research. Inclusion of all people is a top priority for RMD globally. Not only are belonging and inclusiveness core values for RMD-LA, but so are ethnic visibility and a youth aesthetic. This was made apparent through my observations of RMD-LA in their practices, during interviews, and at their 25th-anniversary show.

While eisā practiced by RMD-LA is clearly counter colonial, defiant, and a surrogate for Okinawan history, I believe eisā could have great potential moving forward if viewed and practiced through a decolonial lens. I had originally anticipated that, through my thesis, I would find a decolonial Okinawan practice in Southern California through eisā. I was wrong, and admittedly that was hard for me to let go, especially because of how hula has challenged my consciousness. However, this does not mean that eisā in Southern California has no room to grow. Because of its legacy of honoring the dead, resilience in the face of war, and powerful presence, eisā would be significant in aiding Okinawan American youth in Southern California in acknowledging their own histories. Not only that, but eisā could also assist in drawing connections between the history of the space in which they practice and how these spaces and identities are intimately connected with legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. Eisā thus could be utilized not only in performance, community, and education, but it could also be a vehicle for developing solidarity, critical consciousness, and resistance in Southern California. Ethnic studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang define decolonization as an action that "brings back the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" and not as a "metaphor to

improve our societies and schools."[164] They describe how living as if decolonization is a metaphor actually re-centers whiteness and extends innocence to the settler.[165] According to their perspective, RMD-LA and its practitioners are also settlers. A decolonial lens is needed for RMD-LA to further question and critique the missing gaps of Okinawan American history in the United States and why it is hard to access English translations for lyrics in Uchināguchi. It would also ask practitioners who identify as Okinawan to question what it means to be considered an indigenous group of Japan, but settlers in the United States as Japanese Americans and Okinawan Americans.

Eisā has immense potential as a means of performing history and resistance. I believe eisā has the ability to help foster these conversations because of how it attracts youth, stimulates people to think about their ethnic identity, and evokes a sense of belonging. Within RMD-LA (and the OAA), discussion of history and the implications of systemic issues is vital to the perpetuation, growth, and health not only of eisā and RMD-LA, but of the future of the Okinawan community in Southern California. A more holistic understanding of imperial relations between the United States, Japan, and Okinawa would aid in introspection and the further development of the individual, ultimately benefiting the group as a whole.

For now, though, eisā practitioners in RMD-LA are doing their best with what they are given and definitely cannot be characterized as a decolonial praxis. This does not mean, however, that they do not have a significant impact on their community, as discussed throughout this study. On a particular Sunday, a couple of parents joined me in watching RMD-LA's practice. This was not uncommon, but this time a mother was accompanied by a practitioner's

[164] Eve Tuck et al. "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1.

[165] Tuck et al., 3.

younger sibling—a child too young to start practicing eisā. They sat across the room from me and I watched the child become captivated. During a particular dance, the practitioners' energy was so potent, it even elicited an emotional reaction within myself. The child sat on his mother's lap, hands pressed to his ears, mouth slightly ajar, as he stared almost without blinking. With the last strum of the sanshin and don of the odaiko, the child could not contain himself and immediately burst into a smile and a round of applause.

EPILOGUE

When I was in high school, several hula hālau came together in Southern California for an event that honored Queen Lili`uokalani, the last reigning monarch of Hawai`i before the United States illegally overthrew the Hawaiian government in 1898. While still queen, Lili`uokalani was thrown into prison and forced to surrender her throne by the Committee of Public Safety, a group of White businessmen and descendants of missionaries, or else she and her followers would be executed. I was told that, while she was in prison, several letters in the form of song went back and forth between her and her followers. Each hālau got a letter, or song, to perform at this particular show, thus creating a performative dialogue not only between practitioners and audience, but between Queen Lili`uokalani and the people of Hawai`i. I will never forget this performance for how it challenged my consciousness, how it challenged my views of Hawai`i, and how it challenged the audience's understandings of hula, and therefore Hawai`i as well.

While I am unsure if something of the sort exists for Okinawan people, it is memories like these that make me desire a critical performative practice for Okinawan people. It not only addresses widespread systemic issues that have caused detrimental global effects, but interpersonal and introspective effects that simultaneously affirm the Okinawan American experience. A performance like this has the potential to bring to light what has unjustly been kept hidden for so many years—hundreds of years—and can no longer remain silent.

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