

Music as Weapon: Ainu musician fights for cultural survival

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By Tomoko OTAKE

Keeping traditions alive is not easy; it's even harder when there is no one to teach them. When Ainu musician Oki recently re-created traditional tunes on the tonkori, the stringed instrument of the Ainu people, his only guides were pre-1970s recordings of tonkori music collected by ethnomusicologists on bulky open-reel recorders.



Ainu musician Oki with a tonkori

The result, "Tonkori," an album that was released in late May by Oki's own label Chikar Studio, reflects the artist's continued quest for his Ainu roots. But this time, the musician, who is famed both in Japan and abroad for mixing reggae, dub and other roots music in his tonkori performances, stuck to an authentic rendition of the endangered traditional tonkori music.

Day and night for three months, Oki listened to

the researchers' poor-quality tapes, trying to imagine how the tonkori players had moved their fingers across the strings. Because there are no living tonkori masters and compositions were never written down, this was his only option. He even tried to reproduce the subtle tunings of the tonkori and the varied thickness of the five strings -- all through intense listening. It was a straight-forward but challenging process, Oki recalled.

"Looking back, I feel it might have been premature for me to undertake this project. Maybe I should have waited another two or three years," said Oki, a handsome man with chiseled features and pitch-black hair swept back in a ponytail. "There were some pieces I just couldn't figure out how to play and so I left them off the album."

Still, the album's 15 tracks -- 14 of which are instrumental and one which is a lullaby accompanied by his voice -- showcase a variety of songs played by the Karafuto (Sakhalin) Ainu for centuries.

"Tonkori" is the fifth work for Oki, who majored in sculpture at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and started his career in the ad and film industries. After working in the United States for five years, he returned to Japan in 1992 and discovered the tonkori by chance and began learning about the dying Ainu music by himself.

Oki has made a name for himself as the only commercial tonkori player in the world. Making records that can be found at major outlets such as Tower Records, he has collaborated with artists from various genres, such as J-Pop singer-songwriters Toshiki Kadomatsu and Hitomi Yaida. In March 2004, Oki made his first appearance at World of Music, Arts & Dance (WOMAD) in Australia.

The tonkori, whose strings are traditionally made from deer tendons, has a beautifully

resonating twang. It creates a soothing, comforting sound but, according to Oki, it played a vital role in the lives of the indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido and Sakhalin. It was said to be used by shamans to communicate with the spirit forces of kamuy, which control the wind, rain, hail and fire, or to hypnotize enemies during battles. Tribeswomen also used it to seduce men.

Also, one tonkori song can have several meanings. One piece on the new CD, titled "Ikeresotte," is a song used to trick children into sleeping, according to Oki. It is believed to represent the sound of a ghost's footsteps. "Ikeresotte" also acts as a talisman, as ghosts supposedly hate the sound of the tonkori.

Some tonkori songs were played all night long, with steady rhythms and repeated melodies, eventually leading people into a trance.

So what do these traditions mean to Oki? The Kanagawa native, who, in his 20s, learned that he had Ainu relatives on his father's side, says that even before this discovery of his roots, he had been fascinated by the resistance music of reggae and the "Back to Africa" Rastafarian movement.

"[The Jamaican crusader of black nationalism] Marcus Garvey once said, 'A people without a knowledge of their history is like a tree without roots.' When I realized that I had Ainu blood in me, it all came together (like pieces of a puzzle).

"To me, keeping tonkori music alive is like loading a gun. We must fight for survival, and the tonkori is our weapon. Our music must be passed on to the next generation, even though it will not be the same as before because it will be filtered through me. But I must make sure the music will still be here 10 years from now. Otherwise, what will be the thing to carry us through? Cell phones?"

Oki will perform at Ebisu SPAZIO2, July 16, from 5:30 p.m. He will tour Hokkaido cities, including Niseko, Asahikawa, Sapporo and Obihiro, late June-early July and appear at WOMAD in England in late July. For reservations and inquiries, call Chikar Studio at

(03) 5459-3323 or see www.tonkori.com

Tomoko OTAKE is a feature writer for The Japan Times. This article appeared in The Japan Times on June 22, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus July 8, 2005.