

Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan

by David W. Hughes

David W. Hughes is an American ethnomusicologist specializing in Japanese music. He was in Japan from 1977-81, during the recent "folk song boom," conducting research for his doctoral dissertation. He was recently appointed Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

"Folk song is the heart's hometown" (*min'yo wa kokoro no furusato*) is an expression one hears or reads frequently in discussions of folk song in Japan. To a Japanese, the *furusato*—the home community or "native place," as it is sometimes translated—is a continual source of identity, a constant in a shifting world, a comfort amidst the ills of urban life. Even Tokyo-born Japanese may well identify their *furusato* as the rural village or country town where their grandparents were raised, where their second cousins may still live, where they may return once a year for the ancestral *Bon* festival dance. For those who have no *furusato* aside from the big city, folk song can help them imagine one, because Japanese folk song has now come to the city.

As in the West, there is debate in Japan as to exactly what constitutes a "folk song." Today's standard term, *min'yo*, is a literal translation of the German *Volkslied* (folk song) and has been in use since around 1890. Under the influence of European Romanticism, Japanese scholars and poets gradually adopted this term and came to view *min'yo* as a distinct song category with great cultural significance. The "folk" themselves, however, like their counterparts in the West, saw little reason to draw such artificial boundaries: a song was just a song—an *uta*—whatever its origins. Even today, with the term *min'yo* in general currency, one occasionally encounters a contradiction in its usage: urban enthusiasts may use the word to refer to the most "naive" or "unpolished" local folk performances, while elderly villagers ironically reserve the term for nationally known versions of rural songs arranged and performed by professionals. Indeed, it is almost exclusively the latter type that are heard in recordings, on television, and in *min'yo* bars, where patrons take turns singing to the accompaniment of the house musicians. *Min'yo*, in its "purest" form, survives less publicly in the countryside, as we shall see.

Despite the lingering debate over the boundaries of the category, *min'yo* is today an established genre of music, on a par with such traditional "art music" genres as *koto* music, court music and *noh* theater music. Aided by rapid urbanization and the increase in expenditures for leisure activities, *min'yo* has moved to the cities and become professionalized. Until recently, the more Western-oriented Japanese often viewed folk song as an embarrassing relic of their country's peasant past, with its frankly bawdy lyrics and raucous behavior to match them. That image has now largely been eliminated, as professional *min'yo* performers and teachers have earned for their art the same dignity accorded the more classical musics mentioned above.

As a means of increasing both the acceptance and profitability of *min'yo*, most teachers have adopted from the classical arts the

iemoto (“househead”) system. The *iemoto* is the artistic and administrative head of a school which, like a family or household, may consist simultaneously of several generations — in this case, of teachers and students. The kinship analogy extends to the practice of giving one’s top students “art names” which identify them with their teacher’s. Thus the renowned master from Akita, Asano Umewaka, who is performing at this year’s Smithsonian Festival, has bestowed his family name upon such outstanding students as Asano Kazuko and Asano Chizuko. (Family names are always given first in East Asia.)

Rural song traditions have survived — indeed, now flourish as possibly never before — only by adapting to the cultural patterns of modern Japan. After a century of music education devoted almost exclusively to Western art music and Japanese imitations of it, it is not surprising that a given *min’yo* is increasingly considered to have a “correct” form which can be studied and learned over time, often with the help of musical notation — just as one learns a song by Schubert or Brahms. Still, true *min’yo* enthusiasts take pride in the impossibility of reproducing in Western notation the incredibly intricate vocal ornaments (*kobushi*) of Japanese folk song.

Another adaptation has been the actual composition of “new folk songs” (*shin-min’yo*) with more contemporary lyrics, optimistic and internationalist in tone. The melodies are usually pentatonic with five-tone scales, like traditional *min’yo*, but they are set predominantly to Western major harmonic accompaniment. Although harmony in the Western sense is nonexistent in traditional Japanese music, the major mode is now considered to have a particularly optimistic and modern sound. Such *shin-min’yo* are recorded using traditional Japanese musical instruments, such as the *shamisen* (three-stringed lute), together with Western ones, such as violins. The recordings are then played for group dancing. Such songs, however, are considered by most *min’yo* fans to be unworthy of study or singing.

This, then, characterizes the urban *min’yo* world, with its professional teachers and performers, fee-paying amateur students, and record-buying consumers. The countryside, meanwhile, harbors a very different folk song world. Although rural mechanization and the disruptions of war contributed to the rapid demise of many local work and dance songs in the second quarter of the century, recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in preserving such songs and dances. National and local governments now give designations such as “Important Intangible Cultural Property” to many performance traditions, encouraging the formation of Preservation Societies (*bozonkai*) by local residents to facilitate the “correct” transmission of these traditions to the next generation of villagers. Even on the edge of Tokyo, elderly residents of several communities have formed *bozonkai* to preserve their local barley-threshing songs from the pre-war years; in one community, the members periodically perform in public — complete with flails and barley!

Although work songs are often preserved in this fashion, it is the lively songs and dances of the ancestral *Bon* festival that attract the most support from villagers. The *Bon* dance — still a viable institution in most communities — is the occasion when former residents return to dance and to honor ancestors. Certain villages and towns,



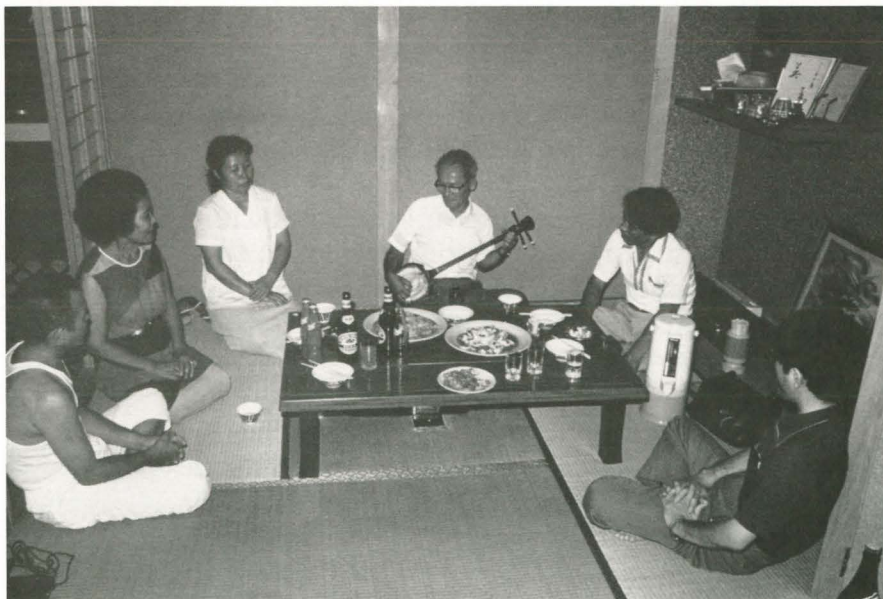
Although increasingly an urban activity, *min'yo* retains its ability to symbolize traditional rural lifeways. Here a Tokyo television crew has posed a group of urban, semi-professional musicians somewhat incongruously in front of a barn. (Note the artificial daffodils in the foreground.) Photos by David W. Hughes

In Yanagawa Village, Iwate Prefecture (northern Japan), the pounding of ceremonial rice cakes is accompanied by song, the pestles providing the rhythm. Such work songs are now rarely heard in their original contexts, surviving mainly through the efforts of preservation societies and performed occasionally in arranged versions by professionals.

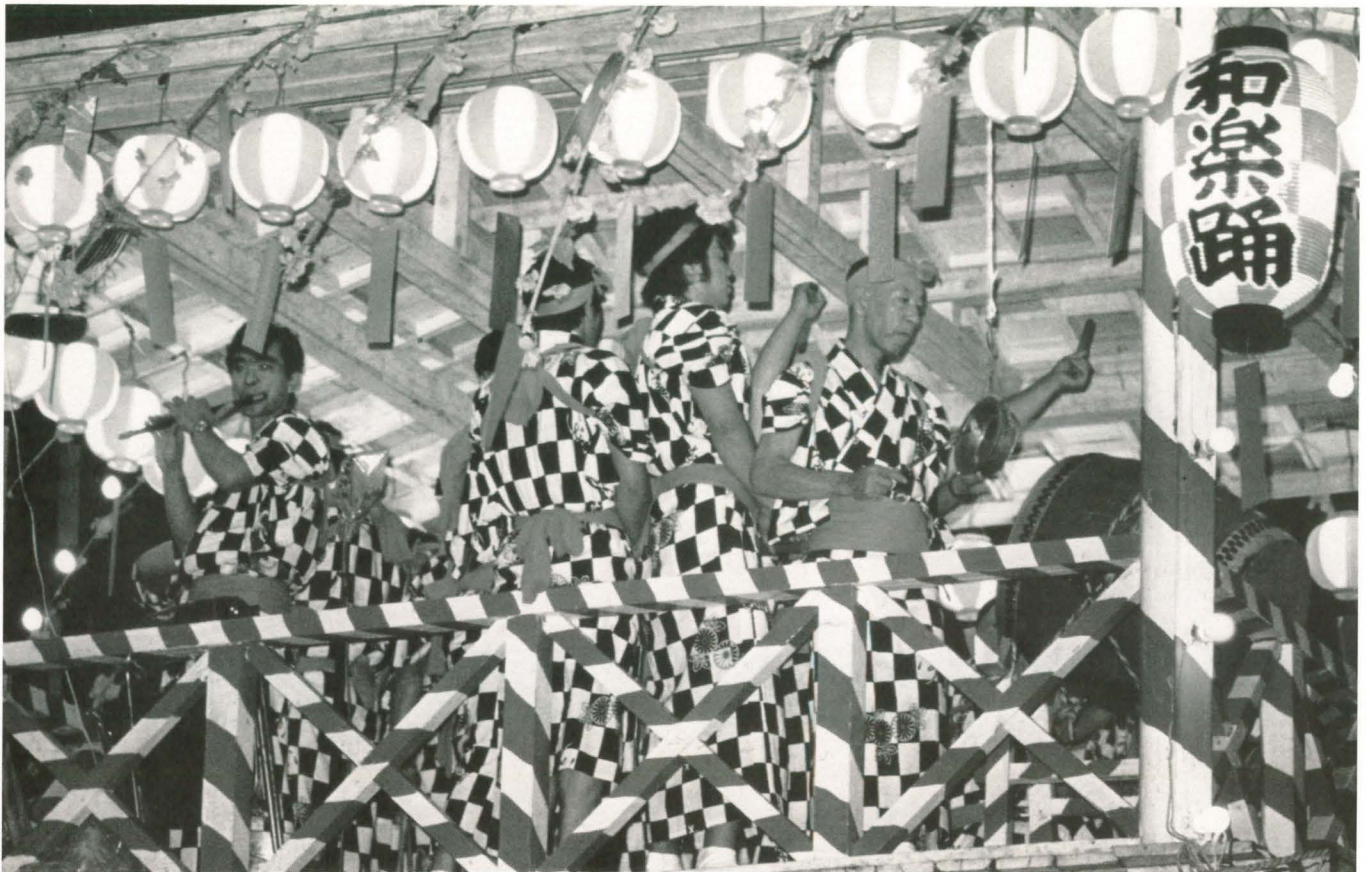




At the folk song bar "Hideko" in Tokyo, customers take turns, performing their favorite songs to the accompaniment of the resident musicians. At this particular bar customers can watch videotapes of their performance.



A songfest (*uta-asobi*) at the restaurant-bar "Mankoi" in Nase City, Amami Oshima. Those present take turns singing and playing the 3-stringed *sanshin*.



Lanterns light the musicians' tower at the *Bon* dance in the east-central mountain town of Nikko, beneath which dancers circle to the sound of drums, flutes, and gongs, joining in on the chorus as they dance.

Suggested reading

Berger, Donald P. *Folk Songs of Japan*. New York: Oak Publications, 1972. [musical notation with English texts]

Hattori, Ryutaro. *Traditional Folk Songs of Japan*. Tokyo: Ongaku no Tomo Sha, 1966. [musical notation with English texts]

Hughes, David W. "The Heart's Home Town: Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1985.

Isaku, Patia. *Mountain Storm, Pine Breeze: Folk Song in Japan*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981.

Suggested recordings

Traditional Folk Songs of Japan, 2 discs (Folkways FE4534).

Japan, the Ryukyus, Formosa and Korea. Vol. 11 in *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*. Music Institute of Tokyo (Columbia KL214).

Seicho Min'yo: Furusato No Uta, 12 discs (NHK Service Center JK3161-3172, Tokyo). [wide-ranging mix of performances by professionals and local amateurs]

motivated by both local pride and a desire for income, have made the dance a focus for attracting tourists.

Regional stylistic differences in Japanese folk music still survive. The lively Tsugaru *shamisen* style has influenced the playing of Asano Umewaka in Akita Prefecture. The islands south of Kyushu also preserve a distinct tradition. In Amami Oshima (represented in this year's Festival), the *shamisen* is constructed with a membrane of snakeskin rather than cat- or dogskin as found on mainland Japan versions of the instrument. Amami also preserves much of the spontaneity, the improvisation and individual stylistic differences that are presumed to have characterized all Japanese folk song at one time.

Amid such diversity in styles, in performance contexts, and in attitudes toward the transmission of music, *min'yo* continues to flourish. Despite modernization, one thing at least has not changed: folk song is still the heart's hometown.