The Last Natori: Ikuko Nichols Transmitting Japanese and Okinawan Music, Dance, and Culture in Postwar Chicago

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After World War II, many Japanese Americans relocated to Chicago from the incarceration camps, resulting in the substantial Japanese and Japanese American population in the city today.[1] According to Setsuko Nishi (1963), an activist and researcher on the life of Japanese Americans in Chicago, the Illinois census recorded 462 Japanese individuals in 1940. By 1946/47, this number exceeded twenty thousand, as many Japanese Americans settled in Chicago after being released from incarceration camps. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, forcing people of Japanese descent in the western United States into incarceration camps to prevent them from allying with Japan against the United States. This racial injustice uprooted approximately 120,000 people, two thirds of whom were American citizens. Chicago represented a new start for many of them after the war because it did not have the "pattern of behavior or attitudes toward Japanese" that existed on the West Coast (Nishi 1963, 14).

Referred to as "resettlers" (Brooks 2000, 1655), the Japanese and Japanese Americans who moved to Chicago were *issei* (first-generation Japanese who immigrated to the United States) and *nisei* (second-generation Japanese American born in the United States), mainly from the West Coast. Life in the incarceration camps did not diminish the role of music and culture in their lives. Indeed, Waseda Minako asserts, "While the internment had grave and lasting consequences for the lives of the incarcerated Japanese Americans, the bearing

it had on music practice in the Japanese American community can be characterized as constructive and even positive" (2005, 172). Traditional Japanese music was performed. Lessons were offered in *Kabuki*, Japanese classical dance, *koto* (Japanese zither), *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute), and *yōkoku* (Noh chanting). Other musical forms were taught in different camps and were very popular (Waseda 2005, 183). Many performing arts that had been popular before the war became so much more popular in the camps that teachers were inundated with students. According to Waseda, "Bandō Misa, a Nisei teacher, taught a group of about 140 students, mostly between the ages of eight and ten but with a range that extended from a three-year-old Sansei (third-generation) to a senior Issei" (2005, 184). As they relocated to Chicago—temporarily or permanently—they brought a new and virtually unknown culture with them.

By the 1960s, numerous active groups were dedicated to Japanese music and performing arts, including prefectural associations and religious organizations. This lively arts scene was devotedly covered by the *Chicago Shimpo*, a Japanese language newspaper founded in 1945 by Fujii Ryōichi.[2] And yet much remains unknown about this rich musical heritage. In this essay, I draw long-overdue attention to this vibrant history through close study of a figure at its epicenter: Ikuko Nichols ニコラス郁子, the last *natori* 名取 and *shihan* 師範 of the Wakayagi school of Japanese classical dance under the tutelage of Master Wakayagi Shiyū 若柳司友 (1926–2023).[3]

To elucidate the stunning postwar cultural contributions of Japanese Americans, I consider how Ikuko used her skills in Japanese classical dance to bring the Japanese, Japanese American, Okinawan, and American communities together, especially at the annual Obon お盆 (bon) festival at Mitsuwa Marketplace. Specifically, I discuss her background, and her life and community work in Chicago. I explore her use of dance techniques and her Okinawan background to transmit the Japanese language and culture to the students at Langston Hughes Elementary School, a public elementary school on the South

Side of Chicago, where she taught from 1994 to 2004 and had an enormous impact on her students as a teacher and a cultural ambassador. I also discuss Ikuko's other work as a dance teacher and her role as a Uchinā Goodwill Ambassador from 2003 to 2023, for which she was appointed by Okinawa Prefecture to spread awareness of Okinawa and Japan through cultural events, food, music, and dance. Finally, I discuss the distinguished awards Ikuko has received for her impressive contributions and dedication.

This essay's focus on Ikuko is also an effort to redress the gap in scholarship on how Japanese music fosters connections among Japanese, Japanese American, Okinawan, and non-Japanese communities. This story shows the outsized role music can play in community life, cultural identity, and cohesion. Indeed, as the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino asserts, "The performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance" (2008, 2). Through shared cultural practices and experiences, individuals express a collective identity, fostering strong bonds within the community that, in turn, support its preservation. Individuals like Ikuko who possess a deep connection to their heritage are uniquely positioned to transmit cultural knowledge through events and professional roles. Ikuko presents a compelling case study whose uniqueness and consistency of experience among other Japanese and Japanese Americans yields meaningful insights into the expansiveness that comes out of productively merging cultural expression.

Ikuko, a woman of Okinawan descent, moved with her American husband to his hometown, Chicago. Though her story is distinct from those of Japanese and Japanese Americans who relocated to Chicago after World War II incarceration camps, she too was seeking belonging in a new environment. In "Why Do People Move?" Sumiko Ogawa observes that "Human migration has

always brought [humans] into contact with the people of the destination country, resulting in the merging of their own culture with that of other cultures, coexistence, or a relationship of domination and subjugation of people" (2015, 261).[4] Ikuko arrived just as a "relationship of domination" was coming to an end (Ogawa 2015, 261). The war was over. The Japanese had been released from the incarceration camps. Japanese and Japanese Americans of all backgrounds had come to Chicago to coexist.

Even as migration brought Ikuko into contact with a different culture—the American culture of Chicago—she maintained her strong Okinawan identity. She adapted and thrived in this transnational context. With a fearless spirit, grounded in Christian faith, Ikuko overcame many challenges and forged a profound and transformative connection with the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai.

Methodology

This study examines the music, theater, and dance activities of the Japanese, Japanese Americans, and Okinawans in Chicago, with a particular focus on the Kenjinkai (Prefectural Associations). Primary documents available through the University of Chicago library database, such as the *Chicago Shimpo*, yielded abundant material. Archives and databases from the Japanese American Service Committee (JASC) Legacy Center—formerly known as the Chicago Resettlers Committee (CRC)—filled out the history of group performances and activities. Secondary sources from performers and teachers of traditional Japanese music and dance contributed to this study.

Interviews played a significant role in this research, as oral histories are vital to documenting the activities and lives of the Japanese, Japanese Americans, and Okinawans in Chicago. These individuals have laid the foundation for a flourishing community. This article seeks to honor their legacy by highlighting Ikuko's life, her relocation to Chicago to join her family, and her contributions to the community.

I conducted interviews with Ikuko on five occasions: (1) August 30, 2021, via Zoom; (2) August 25, 2022, at Mitsuwa Market Place in Arlington Heights, Illinois; (3) August 23, 2023, at the 2022 location; (4) August 21, 2024, at Panera Bread on West Touhy Avenue in Skokie, Illinois, and (5) December 30, 2024, at the August 2024 location. All interviews were conducted in Japanese; therefore, the translations into English are the responsibility of the author. I also conducted an interview with Linda Asato, the current president of Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai, on March 22, 2024, at Panera Bread on Skokie Boulevard in Skokie, Illinois. Additional interviews were conducted with Japanese Americans in Chicago. To get a sense of the post–World War II period in which Ikuko moved to Chicago from Okinawa, I collected literature and other material from the JASC.

A literature review on the history of Japanese Americans in Chicago after their resettlement from the incarceration camps was also conducted. The literature on Japanese American experiences is steadily growing, particularly due to oral history projects documenting their experiences in the camps, among other academic and popular research.[5] This literature provides a broader understanding of the discrimination faced by Japanese Americans in Chicago, which, while significant, was reportedly less severe than the bigotry this population faced on the West Coast. Charlotte Brooks describes how Japanese Americans in Chicago occupied a space of "inbetweenness," positioned socially between "white" and "black" (2000, 1656–57). However, "[t]his inbetweenness, along with interactions among the Nisei, resettlement agencies, and Chicagoans in general, shaped the evolution of the Japanese American community in the city" (Brooks 2000, 1657).

To gain insights into Okinawan history in Chicago, I interviewed Linda Asato, the president of the Okinawa Kenjinkai. I also reviewed the organization's online newsletters and the seminal book *History of the Okinawans in North America* (Okinawa Club of America 1988), which refers to

Asato's uncle, Tokujin Asato 安里徳仁, as the founder of the first Okinawa Kenjinkai in 1966.[6] However, this book devotes only three short pages to this subject. Originally called *Okinawa Kyōyūkai* 沖縄郷友会, literally translated as "Okinawa Hometown Friends Association," Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai adopted its current name in 1998.[7]

Background on Chicago's Japanese Performing Arts Groups

Many of these Japanese performing arts groups are affiliated with or part of religious organizations, likely because Japanese Americans were not allowed to congregate after leaving the incarceration camps. Instead, they were encouraged to "assimilate into white society" and "basically be unseen."[8] However, they could gather at Buddhist temples and attend Christian churches, where Japanese Americans continue to assemble today. The goal of the government's directives against Japanese Americans congregating was to get the "Japanese-Americans into more middle-class and whiter housing,"[9] and thus compel them to assimilate into the dominant culture. But because of the formation of Japanese music groups and cultural groups and their associated community events, this directive, which could have estranged people from their culture, in fact strengthened both individuals' sense of identity and the Japanese community as a whole.

In Chicago, which lacks the equivalent of "Little Tokyo" in Los Angeles or "Japantown" in San Francisco and San Jose, the Japanese and Japanese American community continues to celebrate its culture at the annual *obon* dance, which is held at the Midwest Buddhist Temple or at the supermarket Mitsuwa Marketplace. This dance is connected with the Obon Festival, when people honor their ancestors. Although some of the festival's religious connotations have dissipated, these communal events help individuals find their identity through music and musical experiences. As ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes explains, "music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because

it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (1994, 5). These community events encourage the Japanese diaspora to contemplate their heritage—including the World War II incarceration camps, where *obon* dance also took place—as well as customs, values, and respect for their parents and elders.[10]

Unfortunately, no written records exist of Japanese music or the performing arts in Chicago prior to World War II. But Takako Day, an independent researcher in Chicago who focuses on the history of Japanese and Japanese Americans in Chicago before World War II, found an 1880 Illinois census record of three Japanese individuals including Michitaro Ongawa. Performances by Ongawa and his wife, Clara, were documented in "the popular media between 1908 and the 1930s."[11]

Today, Chicago has many traditional Japanese music groups as well as contemporary and hybrid groups that fuse Western jazz with Japanese *min'yō* (folk songs) and traditional Japanese instruments, such as the *shamisen* (three-stringed lute) and *taiko* (Japanese drums). There are five *taiko* groups: (1) Tsukasa-taiko 司太鼓, which emerged from Wakayagi Shiyū's 若柳司友 traditional Japanese dance studio; (2) Hō-etsu taiko 法悦太鼓, affiliated with the Midwest Buddhist Temple; (3) Kokyō 湖響, stemming from the Buddhist Temple of Chicago; (4) the Midwest Buddhist Temple *taiko* group; and (5) Okinawa-taiko, sponsored by the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai. Other prominent Japanese music and performing arts groups include Toyoaki Shamisen, Sanshin group, Koto group, and two schools of *nihon-buyō* (Japanese classical dance): Wakayagi 若柳 and Fujima 藤間. Tsukasa-taiko and the Fujima School are quite active with performances in Chicago. The Chicago Koto Group regularly performs at Japanese festivals in Chicago and the surrounding region. Most of these groups were formed by members of the Japanese community who came to Chicago after World War II, but some were also created by their descendants. Many groups continue to perform.

In addition to the *taiko* and Japanese dance groups, a new dance group, Miko-ren 美湖連, emerged in 2015.[12] Members dance *Awa odori* 阿波踊り, which originated in Tokushima Prefecture in Japan. This communal dance has drawn Japanese and non-Japanese people together, fostering transnational and cross-cultural communication. The group dances to traditional *Awa odori* songs as well as contemporary Japanese songs and American neo soul songs. *Awa odori* is versatile and adaptable in its *kata* (dance patterns), allowing individuals to experiment while staying true to the basic form.

As the Japanese diaspora in Chicago seeks and finds community and identity through traditional Japanese music, its members extend the traditional forms, fusing them with elements of other traditions to create something new, yet still uniquely Japanese. A fusion of jazz and Japanese music has formed in Chicago and the Midwest region, led by Tatsu Aoki, a jazz musician who immigrated to Chicago from Tokyo in 1977.[13] He started playing the Japanese *shamisen* and *taiko* at age three and learned jazz bass in Japan. With the inception of the Miyumi Project over twenty years ago, he began merging jazz with traditional Japanese music, playing the *shamisen*. He has also included *taiko* and *kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum) to create a new soundscape and a layering of sounds. Aoki currently leads Tsukasa-taiko, is the founder and artistic director of the annual Chicago Asian American Jazz Festival, and is the executive director of Asian ImprovaRts Midwest.[14]

Another leading figure is Yoko Noge, a blues musician originally from Osaka, Japan, who moved to Chicago in 1984 to "check it out" (Roberts 2016, 63–64). Seeking the blues within the Black community, she frequented blues clubs and began singing in them, later learning the piano to accompany herself. She has created two groups: (1) Yoko Noge and the Jazz Me Blues, in which she sings some of her own pieces in Japanese; and (2) Yoko Noge and Japanesque, in which she sings *min'yō* in Japanese. In both groups, Noge explores her Japanese heritage, but in Japanesque, she looks inward and

explores an entirely new form (*min'yō*).

Both Aoki and Noge negotiate the boundaries between traditional, contemporary, and hybrid forms by looking inward. Looking introspectively at their heritage allows them, as well as others, to find their "voice." Regardless of their years in the United States, or even their place of birth, they remain Japanese at their core.

While Japanese music in California and Hawai'i have drawn rather extensive interest, research on traditional Japanese music and performing arts in Chicago remains scant. In "Asian American Improvisation in Chicago," an article on Japanese music in Chicago, Deborah Wong features bassist Tatsu Aoki and the *taiko* group he leads, Tsukasa-taiko (Wong 2006). A book by Tamara Roberts features a chapter that considers the music and activities of Yoko Noge (Roberts 2016, 59–88). Exploring the intersections of Western classical and popular music with Japanese traditions has been "a hallmark of contemporary Japanese musical practice since the post-Meiji 1930s" (Roberts 2016, 65).

Background on Ikuko Nichols

Ikuko Nichols was born on December 3, 1938, in Ukuda 宇久田, Nakagami-gun 中上郡 Okinawa, before it became a U.S. military base.[15] Her father, a medical doctor, inspired her early ambition to pursue a career in medicine. She excelled academically, especially in high school, but ultimately chose to study clinical psychology at Nihon University on the Japanese mainland, where she completed a four-year program and one year of graduate school.

Although Ikuko had hoped to complete graduate school, she was discouraged from doing so due to societal expectations placed on women. Upon returning to Okinawa, she was hired by Dr. Tasaki Kunio 田崎邦男 at Tasaki Hospital in Naha as a psychologist and counselor. Tasaki, who had completed

his PhD in the United States, was known for his forward-thinking approach; he was establishing a psychiatry department and was eager to hire counselors. For five years, Ikuko worked primarily with clients in international marriages who were facing significant personal challenges.

While working at the hospital in 1965, Ikuko met her future husband. He was a photographer for the U.S. military invited to document Tasaki Hospital. They started a language exchange—she taught him Japanese while he taught her English—which gradually developed into a romantic relationship. Although Ikuko's father initially opposed their marriage, as international marriages were often viewed unfavorably, he eventually came around to accept and support their decision.

Brokered between Japan and the United States in the 1950s, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security permitted an ongoing U.S. military presence in Okinawa.[16] Both Ikuko and her family were firmly opposed to this continued military occupation. Ikuko even participated in protests against the U.S. military. She would not have expected to find herself married to an American man in 1967.[17]

Life and Work in Chicago

Ikuko recalled moving to Chicago in 1968 with her husband and her infant daughter. She was impressed when she first saw rice and soy sauce in their apartment after her husband brought them home, and was also surprised to find other Japanese people living in the city. As a third-generation Christian, Ikuko was also pleased to find Christian churches where Japanese was spoken.[18] Her maternal grandmother and mother were Christians, and she herself was deeply committed to her faith. Ikuko began her weekly attendance at the Church of Christ Presbyterian in the 1960s.

Ikuko and her husband welcomed their second child, and she worked to support her family even as she was learning English. With two young children

in school, she chose to work in the school lunchroom so she could enjoy the long summer vacations with her children. When both daughters graduated from eighth grade, Ikuko felt it was time for her to "step up" as well.

Ikuko next worked as a social worker for the Japanese American Service Committee (JASC) for two to three years. Formerly known as the Chicago Resettler's Committee, JASC was established to help Japanese Americans resettle after leaving the incarceration camps.[19] Today, it remains active in community services, cultural programs, and the legacy center.[20] At JASC, Ikuko worked primarily with Japanese and Japanese American residents in Heiwa Terrace,[21] a facility initially developed by the Japanese American Service Committee Housing Corporation (JASCHC) to support the Japanese Americans and their families who had relocated to the Midwest after World War II. She spent countless hours assisting with hospital visits, mediating family disputes, resolving inheritance issues, and facilitating communication with lawyers in Japan. Her counseling skills, honed through her university education and experience at Tasaki Hospital in Okinawa, proved invaluable.

Japanese Language and Culture Teacher at Langston Hughes Elementary School

In a life of enormous impact, Ikuko's time at Langston Hughes Elementary School—from 1994 to 2004—left an indelible mark through Japanese and Okinawan music and culture. Ikuko taught Japanese language and culture using traditional Japanese dance and Okinawan *paranku* (drums). Langston Hughes is a public PK–8 school on the South Side of Chicago; 92.3% of students there identify as Black or African American.[22] Ikuko worked with students at both the elementary and middle-school levels.

In 1992, Dr. Jones served as the principal of the school and the creator of the Japanese program. Moved by her experiences during a visit to Japan, where she was deeply impressed by the politeness and respectfulness of the Japanese

people and greatly admired their cultural values, she developed a new program at her school.[23] According to *The Chicago Shimpo,* the Japanese program, launched in 1992, aimed to instill greater self-respect and self-discipline in students, achieving notable success (Figure 1).[24] Jones wanted to do more than add a new language. She wanted to help her students cultivate dignity, self-discipline, and respect for others. For these reasons, she hired Mitsuko Rokuhira to teach the Japanese language, and soon after invited Ikuko to teach culture as well as language. Together, they created more than a typical language program. Later, Earl Ware became the principal and, like Jones, was very supportive of the program.

Ikuko found that the key to engaging young students with a new language was to involve their bodies in their learning. She explained: "In one class, there were around thirty-five to thirty-six students, and it was difficult to control them. I would turn on some music and have them sit silently and close their eyes. I could tell if someone had their eyes open because I had my eyes open. With silence, they gradually calmed themselves down." After they calmed down, they began dancing together. She explained, "I would instruct students to

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The Impact of Visiting Japan on Life and the Future

African-American Students Discuss on Their Experience

Former students of the Langston Hughes Elementary School and participants of Kakehashi Project spoke about their experience in Japan at an event "Bridge the Future of Chicago's Youth", which was held on April 29 at the Japan Information Center of the Consulate General of Japan in Chicago.

Consul General Naoki Ito welcomed the students and families from Langston Hughes and spoke about the development of "The Dream Project for the 21th Century."

In November 1999, then Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi first visited Chicago, and many students from Langston Hughes welcomed him. Impressed by their Japanese

Japan, took over his mission and annually invited 15 to 20 students to Japan starting from 2000. About 260 students visited Japan through the program until the end came in 2013 along with the termination of the Japanese program in the elementary school. Some of the school graduates continued to study Japanese to adulthood.

Consul General Ito said that the interest in the Japanese language has been increasing in Chicago and the Midwest while the number of teachers available to teach Japanese has been decreasing. "I hope some of you consider becoming Japanese teachers, so that you can share the impact that Japanese study

In the back row from left: Brandon Stuart, Leah Castleberry, Consul Toshihisa Kato, Ikuko Nichols, Consul General Naoki Ito, Mitsuko Rokuhira, former Principal Earl Ware, Xian Franzinger-Barrett, Erionna Tucker, Chante Wilborn, Principal Kimbreana Goode, and Donald Walker

Figure 1. Langston Hughes Elementary School's Japanese Program. (Source: *The Chicago Shimpo*, May 5, 2017, 3.)

move their right hands, left hand, and then the left foot. From there, students memorized words, and that's when we could start to have a conversation."[25] Ikuko taught language by encouraging students to move their bodies first, and then to incorporate new words into what they were doing with their bodies.

When Ikuko realized that her students were eager to learn using their bodies and drums, she returned to Okinawa to learn Okinawan *taiko*. She also learned Okinawan karate, realizing that this martial art would teach Japanese etiquette such as respect toward others and protection of oneself—aims of the program, as envisioned by Jones. Ikuko taught what karate she could and eventually brought the Okinawan *sanshin* (three-stringed lute) to her lessons. The core principles of Ikuko's teaching and transmission methods are finding pieces appropriate for each student, being flexible in her pedagogy, and bringing joy into learning. She explained, "The students became interested when they were able to use their bodies. That's why I taught them [Okinawan] *taiko*. That's all I could do. What was advantageous for me was *nihon-buyō*. I studied Japanese culture and Okinawan culture. That was a great weapon (asset) for me."[26] She incorporated Okinawan *taiko*, karate, and *sanshin* into her Japanese language and culture teaching and presented students with options that might help them engage through their bodies.

In my interviews, Ikuko described how the students memorized patterns and movements quickly and adapted them to their liking. Ikuko recalled:

> The students memorized [dances and the *taiko*] so quickly! I taught them the basic patterns and gave them freedom from there. In dance, there are *kata* (patterns). In karate, there are *katachi* (patterns). In *sanshin*, there are basic scales, but initially I tell them these are *katachi* (patterns). Then, the students ask me if they can change things here and there, and I tell them it is fine, they change things freely. They are so quick to memorize! I was very surprised![27]

Ikuko recognized the students' ability to learn and memorize the patterns in

these traditional forms as a way of developing their focus and concentration, but each student could change these forms to suit their own learning needs. As she praised and encouraged her students to explore, they developed better ideas and consulted with her about these changes. Ikuko always looked for ways that her students could enjoy learning.

Another special feature of the program at Langston Hughes was the "Dream Project," which sponsored fifteen to twenty students to visit Japan annually. The project ran from 2000–2013, during which time 260 students made the trip.[28] They were also given the chance to perform Japanese dances and songs, in both Chicago and Japan.[29] According to *The Chicago Shimpo*, the Japanese prime minister Obuchi Keizō 小渕恵三 proposed the idea when he visited Chicago in November 1999.[30] He was so impressed by the students of Langston Hughes and their Japanese language skills that he invited them to Japan. Unfortunately, Obuchi passed away, but Ozawa Ichirō 小沢一郎, a House Representative of Japan member, followed through with this project.

In order to participate in this project, be part of the Japan club, and visit Japan, students had to master three goals: read and write hiragana, read and write katakana, and count to one hundred in Japanese.[31] Serious students studied intensely. The prospect of visiting Japan was a keen motivator for them to study Japanese. In Japan, they visited the Ueno Zoo, Tokyo Disneyland, the Meiji Shrine, and an elementary school.[32] They visited the Diet and met Ichiro Ozawa, for whom they also had the opportunity to perform. They even caught the attention of the media.[33] Back in Chicago, they performed their dances at the Consulate-General of Japan in Chicago and at Daley Plaza, and participated in the Japanese Speech Contest held by the consulate under the direction of Consul-General Yabunaka Mitoji 藪中三十二. Consul-General Yabunaka, impressed by their language abilities, provided the students with multiple platforms to demonstrate their cultural and linguistic skills, inspiring them to further their studies in Japanese language and culture. Ikuko continues to

express her gratitude to Consul-General Yabunaka and the Chicago Consulate for their long-standing support.

Many of these students won the Japanese Speech Contest and received other awards. After this program ended, many also continued studying Japanese, decided to major in Japanese in college, and/or joined the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program to teach English in Japan. The program had a large impact on its students. One student, Erionna Tucker, spoke of transferring to Langston Hughes to be part of the program, which she described as "the best experience in my life."[34] In a 2017 interview, she was a student at DePaul University in Chicago majoring in graphic design and minoring in Japanese. She recalled that "after she returned to the U.S. [from her Japan trip with Ikuko in the seventh grade], she recognized that she was bowing when she met people."[35] Learning about Japanese language and culture made bowing a natural behavior for her, which she associated with showing respect or thanking others. These convergences emerge in all of Ikuko's work.

For Ikuko, teaching at Langston Hughes was "the happiest memory."[36] In interviews, Ikuko frequently emphasized this period of her career, as it represented the synthesis of her teaching philosophy and methods. On a visit to the elementary school while she was teaching, I saw the influence of her unique approach firsthand.

The success of the Japanese language and culture program at Langston Hughes was largely due to Ikuko's innovative approach, which integrated traditional Japanese and Okinawan music, dance, and cultural practices into her language instruction. Her unique pedagogy enlisted music and dance to teach the Okinawan and Japanese culture, allowing her students to flourish and disseminating knowledge of her cultural heritage. In these efforts, she was a cultural ambassador. Her educational philosophy, which emphasized creative freedom, complemented her students' eagerness to explore and express themselves, allowing the program to thrive. Through teaching, Ikuko sought to

plant the seeds of Japanese language and culture in her students, believing that, with time, their abilities and appreciation for the culture would flourish.[37]

Teacher of Nihon Buyō

Even before Ikuko started teaching at Langston Hughes, she had been studying the Japanese classical dance *nihon-buyō* 日本舞踊 with Wakayagi Shiyū,[38] a master of the Wakayagi school in Chicago. Ikuko was introduced to *nihon-buyō* when she was young. A friend in Saitama Prefecture invited her to a dance recital, where she was first exposed to this art form. She holds fond memories of the performance. "It was a long piece but very active," Ikuko recalled. "When I saw it, a part of me felt drawn to dance, leaving a lasting imprint on my mind."[39]

After arriving in the United States, Ikuko learned about Shiyū's Japanese classical dance school, Shiyūkai, which Shiyū had founded in 1962 to spread Japanese classical dance and cultural values among Japanese Americans. Ikuko began taking lessons with Shiyū and studied with her for over twenty years. In 1992, Ikuko attained *natori* status (a professional stage name awarded upon passing the school's exam) and received the name Wakayagi Ikuyū 若柳郁友 (Figure 2).[40] She performed her debut dances "Wakayagi" and "Urashima-tarō,"

Figure 2. Wakayagi Ikuyū 若柳郁友 (Ikuko Nichols), Wakayagi Shiyū's thirty-seventh and last *natori* (and sixth *shihan*). (Courtesy of Ikuko Nichols. Program Notes, 37th Wakayagi Shiyū Kai 1999, 2.)

both long and difficult traditional pieces, as a *natori* on June 20, 1992, at the Skokie Public Library Auditorium. Ikuko was Shiyū's thirty-seventh and last *natori* and eventually earned her *shihan* certification, which licensed her to teach the art form. As Shiyū's final *natori*, Ikuko maintained a close relationship with her master until Shiyū's passing in 2023.

Ikuko used her *nihon-buyō* skills to pass on the dance form to around ten disciples. She also integrated her dance skills into her Japanese language and culture classes at Langston Hughes, and at the Japanese summer Obon festivals at Mitsuwa Marketplace in Arlington Heights, Illinois, where she collaborated with Shiyū for many years.

In a 2024 speech,[41] Ikuko shared that she had taught *bon-odori* (a dance for the Obon festival, also known as "bon dance" in English) at Mitsuwa Marketplace to over four thousand people, where she arranged twelve folk songs (Figure 3). *Bon-odori* is performed during the summer Obon festival,

Figure 3. *Bon-odori* (Bon dance) at Mitsuwa Marketplace in Arlington Heights, Illinois, August 1, 2015. Ikuyū and Shiyū pictured in front with white yukata. Ikuko is standing at the front of the line. (Photograph courtesy of Ikuko Nichols.)

when people gather to dance in remembrance of their ancestors. Although *bon-odori* is not a form of *nihon-buyō*, it was taught at this festival by trained disciples of Shiyū's school. Ikuko trained her disciples to teach *bon-odori* to the participants.[42] Although the festival continues to this day, it has been led by a different dance troupe since Shiyū retired and closed her school. The decline in the Japanese and Japanese American population in the Chicagoland area has led to a smaller attendance.

As a teacher of *nihon-buyō*, Ikuko transmitted this traditional form from her master, Shiyū. As an instructor of *bon-odori* at the Obon festival, she shared the tradition with thousands in the larger community, demonstrating how instructors can connect people from diverse backgrounds through traditional dance and music and passing along her cultural heritage.

Uchinā Minkan Taishi (Okinawan Goodwill Ambassador)

Over the years, Ikuko has dedicated herself to the Chicagoland community through her work, church involvement, and efforts to share Japanese and Okinawan culture. However, her contributions in recent years, which have received significant attention from the press and media, have been through her role as an Uchinā Minkan Taishi ウチナー民間大使, commonly referred to as an Uchinā Goodwill Ambassador. Appointed by the Okinawan Prefecture, Ikuko actively promoted Okinawan culture within her community for twenty years as a Minkan Taishi.[43, 44] She has resigned from her position as a Minkan Taishi but continues to volunteer her time, expertise, and resources, as she has done over the past twenty years, both independently and through the Okinawa Kenjinkai. Continuing her dedication, she remains committed to strengthening her ties with Okinawa, continuously updating her knowledge to keep it relevant and vibrant.

As a Goodwill Ambassador, Ikuko is tasked with "creat[ing] and strengthen[ing] person-to-person networks between Okinawa and each

ambassador's home country or region."[45] This program includes specific qualifications and responsibilities, such as being a native (or the descendant of a native) of Okinawa Prefecture, and each ambassador must submit an annual report detailing their cultural activities and contributions. Although it is a volunteer position, becoming an ambassador involves a rigorous selection process and requires a strong dedication to promoting Okinawan heritage. This dedication comes from a deep love for Okinawa, which makes the role both an honor and a personal mission for those who serve.

Goodwill Ambassadors volunteer their time, energy, and resources to promote Okinawan cultural events, often covering a portion of expenses personally. While some activities are eligible for partial subsidies from the Okinawan government,[46] ambassadors typically submit grant proposals to receive such support. Ikuko has been fortunate to have the backing of the Okinawa Kenjinkai but has also personally funded many of her activities.

Today, over one hundred active Uchinā Goodwill Ambassadors operate across twenty-nine countries and three regions.[47] Despite the challenges—organizing events, recruiting volunteers—the opportunity to educate her community about Okinawan culture motivates Ikuko to continue. Over the years, she has led numerous cultural activities, including teaching Okinawan *taiko* drumming, hosting Okinawan food stalls at Japanese festivals, and participating in annual community events.

One of Ikuko's proudest achievements was bringing a pair of male and female *shīsā* シーサー, auspicious lions recognized as protectors in Okinawan culture, from Okinawa to the United States, along with four banners that she personally designed.[48] These lions are believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune, often appearing in festivals to offer blessings. Ikuko calls them "a mass of love" 愛のかたまり, emphasizing that she could not have purchased or transported them without the support and love of others.[49] Each *shīsā* is large (approximately human-sized and operated by humans) and difficult to transport,

as they are bulky, with a pair costing nearly $10,000.[50] When Ikuko proposed purchasing a pair of *shīsā* for the community, she faced significant challenges and opposition in both the United States and Japan. Many questioned whether she could successfully transport them to the United States and doubted her ability to raise sufficient funds.

To overcome these obstacles, Ikuko organized a charity fundraiser in Okinawa on October 4, 2014. On the day of the event, a tornado struck Okinawa, causing the cancellation of many other events, which led to a larger-than-expected crowd at her fundraiser. As a result, she was able to raise more funds than anticipated. Additionally, with substantial donations from her former employer Tasaki, her personal savings, and financial support from the Okinawan government, Ikuko succeeded in bringing these *shīsā* to Chicago. This event was documented by *Chicago Shimpo* in November 2014 under the headline "Protectorate God Shi-Sa Arrives at Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai."[51] Furthermore, Honjō Misako of Japan Airlines graciously offered to transport the *shisā* to the United States, a gesture for which Ikuko remains deeply grateful.[52] The *shīsā* remain a centerpiece in the Okinawa Kenjinkai's activities, drawing community members together to celebrate and honor Okinawan culture.

Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival

The Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival 世界のウチナーンチュ大会, the foundation for the Goodwill Ambassador program, began in 1990 and is organized by the Okinawan Prefectural government (Arakaki 2002, 139).[53] This week-long event, held every five years, was created to bring together Okinawans living abroad, fostering connections and strengthening family ties across generations.[54]

According to Arakaki, the Worldwide Uchinānchu Festival was hosted by the Okinawan Prefectural government with the aim of gathering Okinawans

living abroad to "develop a network with and among overseas *Uchinanchu*" (2002, 139). It allowed individuals of Okinawan descent to meet with their relatives and strengthen their familial ties, similar to the leadership programs in 1980 and 1993. Linda Asato, president of the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai, recalled her experiences at the first Uchinānchu Taikai she attended as president of the Okinawa Kenjinkai, where she connected with people who were helped by her uncle, Tokujin Asato, the first president of the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai.[55] Upon seeing her nametag, which read "Asato from Chicago," attendees asked if she was related to Nobuko and Tokujin Asato. After learning she was their niece, many expressed their gratitude for the Asatos' hospitality.[56] This Okinawan generosity is consistent with Ogawa's discussion of Okinawans in Canada, who warmly welcome others into their homes as family members (Ogawa 2015, 267).

Out of this festival grew the Worldwide Uchinānchu Network Project, which includes the Uchinā Goodwill Ambassador program (Arakaki 2002, 139). The success of this program is evident in the network of Goodwill Ambassadors, the range of Okinawan cultural events worldwide, and the recognition ambassadors like Ikuko have received.

Ikuko's Goodwill Ambassador Event

I was very fortunate to attend one of Ikuko's Goodwill Ambassador events, held at the Church of Christ Presbyterian in Chicago on August 28, 2021. This event was a demonstration of how to make Okinawan cuisine (Figure 4). The chefs demonstrated how to make *oni-mochi* (a type of soft mochi), *buta no kakuni* (stewed cubed pork), *gōya* (bitter gourd), and other delicious dishes. A reporter from *The Chicago Shimpo* covered the event, and employees from the Consulate-General of Japan attended, as the consulate also provided some financial support.[57] This event was led primarily by Ikuko and volunteers from the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai, along with volunteers from other Midwestern

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沖縄伝統料理実演会
鬼餅、豚の角煮、ゴーヤー料理など垂涎の試食会も

沖縄伝統料理の実演会が8月28日、シカゴ市内にあるプレスビテリアン・クリスト教会で開催された。これはシカゴ沖縄県人会と沖縄民間大使を務める都子・ニコルス氏による民間大使活動の一環で、月桃の葉で包んだ餅、豚の角煮、ゴーヤー（ニガウリ）を使った料理2種の実演が行われた。

実際の料理には時間がかかるため、紹介された料理は既に調理されており、実演では実際の材料を使いながら材料の扱い方や下ごしらえのコツなどの説明が行われた。

実演後には出席者に料理が配られ、料理の手順を思い出しながら沖縄伝統料理を味わった。

ムーチー（鬼餅）

沖縄は中国から多くの影響を受けており、東南アジアの国々からもいろいろな影響を受けた。琉球王国時代には上流階級の人達のみが美味しい食べ物にアクセスする事ができたという。

ムーチー（鬼餅）は旧暦の12月8日に作り、仏壇や台所の祭壇に供えて健勝を祈る。鬼餅と言われる所以は、夜な夜な鬼になって人畜を襲う兄を憂いた妹が、兄に鉄釘入りのムーチーを食べさせ、兄が弱ったところで海に蹶落として鬼退治をしたという伝説によるもの。

ムーチーの実演は、インディアナ沖縄県人会から来てくれたチヨ・メンツェル氏によって行われた。

作り方：

和気あいあいと沖縄料理実演・試食を楽しむ参加者たち

ゴーヤーの佃煮を作ってくれたノブコ・ゴンザレスさん

鬼餅を月桃の葉に包むチヨ・メンツェルさん

「豚の角煮には醤油を3回に分けて入れるのがコツ」とリンダ・安里さん

Figure 4. Okinawan traditional cuisine demonstration on August 28, 2021, at Church of Christ Presbyterian in Chicago. (Source: *The Chicago Shimpo*, September 24, 2021, 19.)

states. It is a rare treat for Chicagoans and for those in the United States more generally to attend Okinawan food demonstrations, or any Okinawan cultural or musical events at all.

In a 2022 interview, Ikuko shared her goals, both personally and as a Goodwill Ambassador: “If I were to talk about future goals, it would be transmitting [knowledge] to the younger generation. Humans have limits. We can only do so much. Even though we may be able to do certain things, we can’t do it with the same enthusiasm as the beginning. Therefore, I want to pass it down to the younger generation. Humans age. We need energy.”[58] Acting as a bridge between Okinawa and the United States, Ikuko continues to pass down her knowledge of the Okinawan culture to her community and to the younger

generation, bringing people from different backgrounds together through traditional cultural forms.

Recognition and Awards

Ikuko's significant contributions were formally recognized in a commendation from the Okinawan Prefectural Governor in 2022. In recognition of her dedicated work, on October 31, 2022, Ikuko received the "Award for Distinguished Contributors from Overseas" 海外功労者表彰 and medal at the Seventh Worldwide Uchināncu Festival in Okinawa.[59] This award, presented by Governor Denny Tamaki,[60] was a surprise honor for Ikuko and is the highest accolade an overseas Okinawan can receive (Figure 5). In 2024, Ikuko received the distinguished Foreign Minister's Commendation 外務大臣表彰 from the Consul-General of Japan in Chicago, Jun Yanagi (Figure 6). On February 22, 2025, Ikuko received the "Exemplary Community Service Award" at the Asian American Coalition of Chicago's 42nd Annual Lunar New Year Celebration, for her selfless service to the community. Taken together, these honors underscore

Figure 5. Ikuko Nichols receives the "Distinguished Contributors from Overseas" award and medal from Okinawan governor Denny Tamaki in 2022. (Source: *Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai* Newsletter, Spring 2023, 9.)

Figure 6. Ikuko Nichols receives foreign minister's commendation from the Consul-General of Japan in Chicago Jun Yanagi. (Source: *Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai* Newsletter, Autumn 2024, 2.)

the profound impact of her tireless efforts to preserve and transmit Okinawan traditions within a diasporic context, inspiring those around her and cultivating intercultural connections.

Conclusion

As her many awards suggest, Ikuko has played a pivotal role in advancing appreciation of Okinawan culture in Chicago. A central aspect of her cultural work is her enduring presence at Okinawa Kenjinkai events. The annual Flea Market held at Mitsuwa Marketplace on the Saturday preceding Labor Day is hosted by the Chicago Japanese Club, which is mainly composed of Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans. But Ikuko and the Okinawa Kenjinkai have consistently brought a distinct Okinawan presence. Their booth, featuring traditional items and culinary goods as well as fresh produce from her personal garden, serves as a focal point for attendees seeking to engage with Okinawan culture. Prepared in large quantities by Ikuko and her husband, *sātā andagī*

(Okinawan fried dough balls) have become an anticipated highlight of the event, invariably selling out quickly.

Ikuko's life exemplifies the resilience and adaptability required to navigate the complexities of transnational identity. Her efforts to maintain and disseminate Okinawan culture are complemented by her dedication to continuous personal and artistic development. Through these endeavors, she not only enriches her own cultural knowledge but also maintains Okinawan traditions within the diaspora, reinforcing connections between Okinawa and her community. Her contributions stand as a testament to the capacity of individuals to sustain cultural identities and cultivate transnational connections, leaving a lasting legacy in their communities.

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Program Notes

Program Notes. "Wakayagi Shiyu Kai Classical Japanese Dance & Drums Recital." Skokie Public Library Auditorium, June 20, 1992.

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3 *Natori* 名取 is a professional stage name issued upon completing the school's exam. *Shihan* 師範 is a teacher who is permitted to teach the art form.

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supported by Yokota, who observes that in Peru, "many Okinawans found themselves the targets of discrimination from some of their Naichijin (non-Okinawan Japanese) peers, due to assumptions of racial superiority imported from colonial Japan" (2012, 430). Segregation thus persisted beyond Japan, extending to the United States, Peru, and possibly within the incarceration camps as well.

See Seiichi Higashide's autobiography, *Adios to Tears: The Memoirs of a Japanese-Peruvian Internee in U.S. Concentration Camps* (University of Washington Press, 2000), to learn about his heart-wrenching and traumatic experience of being torn from his family in Peru and forcibly sent to concentration camps in the United States.

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