

# ‘Sōran Bushi’: the many lives of a Japanese folk song

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*This paper traces a single Japanese folk song, the herring-fishing song ‘Sōran Bushi’, as it survives the loss of its original function to flourish in versions suited to a number of different contexts and musical genres. No longer a functioning work song, it can instead be found: in nearly its traditional unaccompanied form as performed by ‘preservation societies’; in professional folk song stage arrangements with traditional instruments added; in versions accompanied by Western instruments, whether jazz, rock or classical; in quotations in the enka genre of popular song as a symbol of traditional lifeways; and in yet other guises.*

With modernization, the folk songs of the world have often moved out of their original contexts to provide material for other musical genres – often indeed surviving only in such new forms and contexts. In China, *shan’ge* ‘mountain songs’, the folk songs of Shaanxi and many others have served as grist for composers and arrangers in Chinese and Western classical modes, for pop singers such as Cui Jian, for government ideologues who felt the need to ‘improve’ the songs and their messages, for professional quasi-traditional stage arrangements, and so forth. In the English-speaking world, parallel phenomena link names as diverse as Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Steeleye Span and the Pogues. Many folk songs have made their way to other countries as well: Scotland’s ‘Auld Lang Syne’, with new lyrics, was at one time the Korean national anthem and is still one of Japan’s best-loved songs (thought to be of native origin by many Japanese).

Not all such manifestations would merit the designation ‘folk song’ in scholars’ eyes, of course, but this is not the place to rehash on-going struggles to define that term. Suffice to say that, in most countries that have adopted a version of the original German term and concept *Volkslied*, it has come in general usage to embrace not only the mostly anonymous, orally transmitted, amateur, continually varied songs of rural life but a whole range of phenomena derived from this starting point.<sup>1</sup> Because the evolution of rural song into such new forms was rarely abrupt, in many cases the original designation ‘folk song’ (translated, of course) is still employed to refer to these derived products, albeit sometimes with a qualifying word such as ‘new’ or ‘classical’.

<sup>1</sup> From an abundant literature, let me arbitrarily cite only Tuohy 1999, Schimmelpenninck 1997, Howard 1999, Boyes 1993.

This phenomenon itself is very well known, but examining it in action in a given culture can throw into relief various social and musical trends. This paper traces the developmental path followed by one particularly well-known and widely loved folk song in Japan.

From the late 19th century, Japan went from highly rural to frighteningly urban and from isolationist to international in a few dizzying decades. At the same time, the European Romantic concept of 'folk song' took hold and gradually spread, directly translated as *min'yō*.<sup>2</sup> Hereafter I use the English word 'folk song' simply to translate that Japanese term, applying it as most Japanese would, rather than in a narrow scholarly sense.

These changes had relatively predictable impacts on local song. Rural songs often became by definition urban as the host community urbanized; many songs lost their workplace function as mechanization replaced manual labour; advances in transportation brought live performances of local songs to new audiences; the birth of the recording and broadcast industries led to familiar results; importation of foreign musical styles provided models for adaptation; and – perhaps less predictably – the professional folk singer (*min'yō kashu*) was born, along with other features implied by professionalization, including a formal, certificate-based teaching system. The global era of World Music has simply added impetus to most of these trends but occasionally resisted them.

In the 1970s, 44% of Japanese claimed to enjoy listening to *min'yō*, with 24% naming it as their favourite genre of music (Hughes in prep.: ch. 4). Only the hybrid popular song genre *enka* (discussed below) ranked higher; Western-style popular and classical musics lagged far behind. But taste was and is sensitive to variables such as age, residence, education and income. Today's young urban Japanese have a vastly lower appreciation of folk song in any of its forms, but as we shall see, there are some forms that appeal to them more than others.

### 'Sōran Bushi' as a work song

'Sōran Bushi' is one of the few folk songs familiar to virtually all Japanese. Most can sing its chorus, perhaps one verse as well, possibly tell you that it comes from the large northern island Hokkaidō, that it is connected with herring fishing. But few people will have heard 'Sōran Bushi' in its original context: by 1945 at the latest, the song had been rendered redundant by mechanization.

Until then, for nearly a century herring fishing had brought thousands of migrant workers to Hokkaidō's west coast each spring. (Information in this section derives largely from a September 1988 interview with Fujiya Kisaburō of Gokatte village, Esashi (b. 1909), who worked the boats for four years from 1925 and whose father was a crew captain, and from NHK 1980: 511ff.) A team of 25 to 30 men worked several specialized boats and nets together. The first weeks of March were spent in onshore preparation. The herring would arrive suddenly in late March or early April, coming inshore to spawn; as they would vanish in less than two weeks, labour was most intensive during this period. Processing the catch followed until mid-May. Then the workers moved on to other migrant jobs, or returned home to do farm work.

Most herring come into the nets in the evening, so the crews would go out in late afternoon and work for several hours – all night long if the nets were particularly full.

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<sup>2</sup> On Japanese folk song in general, see Koizumi and Hughes 2000, works by Hughes in the Bibliography, or the notes to recording D5. All trends and topics discussed are treated in detail in Hughes (in prep.).

Singing would continue throughout (in contrast to many Japanese 'work songs' actually sung during interludes in the labour).

There were specific songs for each stage of the process: rowing, hauling up the large set net, dumping the fish from this net into another one attached to a large sea-going boat, transferring the catch from that net to smaller taxi-boats for rowing to shore, beating the fish roe off the nets, and so forth. Some songs consisted primarily of vocables. Although the choice of song for each stage was largely fixed, the lyrics could be selected, altered or improvised freely. True improvisation of full verses was a rarity, however. Lyrics of the various songs were sometimes chosen or created for specific functions. Thus when the herring seemed disinclined to enter the nets, a verse would be sung which called on numerous deities for help. And bawdy and comical verses were particularly valuable for keeping men awake and alert when they had to work through the night.

'Sōran Bushi' was sung while transferring the herring to the smaller boats using what looked like giant butterfly nets. Each net (*ōtamo*) was over a metre across and much greater in depth. Two or three men would deal with a single net whose handle could be up to 6 metres long. 'Sōran Bushi' originated in a song for loading freight onto boats in Noheji, eastern Aomori in the north of Japan's main island. The netting technology was developed there as well and passed to Hokkaidō in the year 1850; the migrant workers who taught Hokkaidō fishermen how to use the nets must have also introduced that song, 'Niage Kiyari', for the similar function of loading fish into a boat (NHK 1980: 514). Over time the melody and lyrics evolved into a distinct Hokkaidō style though with many local variants. Example 1 (p. 34) shows five verses from three different performances, by groups including members with workplace experience, which are intended to capture the style of the originals. (No recordings exist of the song being sung during the actual work.)

The name 'Sōran Bushi' comes from the song's primary repeated vocable, *sōran*; *bushi* means 'melody' and is found in many folk song titles. An alternative title drawn from the song's original function is 'Okiage Ondo', 'rhythmic song (*ondo*) for lifting [the fish] out of the sea'. Both naming patterns are common in Japanese folk songs.

The metre is a steady duple. Verse structure is as follows, with minor local variation in vocables: 1) solo vocable introduction: (ē) *yāren sōran sōran sōran sōran sōran* (with fewer *sōran* in some cases), ending with a shouted unison *hai hai(-do)*; 2) solo meaningful verse in the most common folk poetic metre, 26 syllables in 4 lines (7-7-7-5); 3) unison vocable refrain: *yasa ēn ya(n) sa (no) dokkoisho*; 4) non-melodic (shouted) unison vocable refrain: ā *dokkoisho dokkoisho*.

As one man sang the vocable introduction, the netmen would swish the *ōtamo* back and forth to scoop up fish from the larger net; the steady rhythm helped them coordinate their movements. (The initial ē on the upbeat of most versions helps prepare for the start of the coordinated net-swishing (Sasaki Motoharu, pers. comm. 9/88).) During the meaningful lyrics, they might rest a bit or continue swishing. At the start of the vocable refrain, they began to haul up their load. On the final shouted *dokkoisho dokkoisho*, they raised the *ōtamo* in two final motions to dump the fish into the smaller boat, repeating the shout until the nets were empty. The workers took turns at this strenuous labour; those not working did most of the singing and kept the rhythm by pounding the gunwales with sticks. The song's happy feeling reflects its partly celebratory nature: if there are fish to scoop, the evening's catch has been a success.

**Example 1.** Verses from three versions of 'Sōran Bushi' by local amateurs (D6, 'Hokkaidō II', tracks 10, 12, 13). M1 is from Mikuni, T1 and 3 from Tairo, F1 and 2 from Furuhira. Verse lyrics are omitted. Originals were sung a minor 7th to a major 9th lower.

The musical score consists of three systems of five staves each, representing different performers (M1, T1, T3, F1, F2). The notation is as follows:

- System 1 (Measures 1-5):**
  - M1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 84. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: e ya-ren so ran so ran so ran so ran [hai hai].
  - T1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 104. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: ya a ren so ran so ran so ran so ran [hai haido].
  - T3: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 104. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: ya a a ren so ran so ran so ran so ranto [hai haido].
  - F1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 108. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: e ya-ren so ran so ran so ran so ran [hai haido].
  - F2: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 108. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: e ya-ren so ran so ran so ran so ran [hai haido].
- System 2 (Measures 9-13):**
  - M1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 13. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns.
  - T1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 13. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns.
  - T3: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 13. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns.
  - F1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 13. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns.
  - F2: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 13. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns.
- System 3 (Measures 17-21):**
  - M1: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 17. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: choi [yasa e (n) ya (n) sa no dok koi sho (h)a dokkoi sho dokkoi sho.
  - T1,3: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 17. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: choi [yasa e (n) ya (n) sa no dok koi sho (h)a dokkoi sho dokkoi sho.
  - F1,2: Treble clef, 2/4 time, tempo 17. Notes are mostly eighth notes with some sixteenth-note patterns. Lyrics: choi [yasa e (n) ya (n) sa no dok koi sho (h)a dokkoi sho dokkoi sho.

Fujiya recalls that once when he and other veterans sang 'Sōran Bushi' on national television, the announcer exclaimed, 'Here's the *seichō* [the correct, authentic tune]' sung by real herring fishers. But Fujiya stressed that there was no 'authentic tune' because 'everyone sang it differently'. Moreover, anyone could start the next verse, choosing from pre-existing lyrics or improvising a new text. The variations shown in Example 1 are not strictly speaking local: similar differences can occur within one group, as Fujiya confirmed. The tune can begin high or low, as can the second half of the texted melody.

Typical verses (the less bawdy ones!), starting with the best-known: 'If you ask the seagull, "Have the herring come?", [he replies] "I'm just a migrating bird; ask the waves". // Yoichi's a fine place – come and visit sometime: flames of gold [i.e., the herring] shoot up from the waves. // Tonight, for one night I sleep on a damask pillow; tomorrow, on shipboard, the waves are my pillow. // That girl is pretty, like an apple blossom. Every night I think of her more. // What seems to be there, then doesn't, seems to be but isn't, is the bone in a penis. // Even a Buddhist priest withdrawn from lay life, seeing the slit in a fish-gong, remembers.'

'Sōran Bushi' had a relatively short life as a functioning Hokkaidō work song. But just as its life did not begin in the herring fisheries, neither did it end there.

### Preservation Society versions

Fading aspects of traditional culture are sometimes kept alive by groups of primarily older Japanese, often adopting the name Preservation Society (*hozonkai*; Hughes in prep.: section 5.4). Especially since the 1950s, such societies (with or without the name) have emerged to preserve certain cherished local songs, for reasons ranging from nostalgia to education to competition with nearby villages to the desire to retain control of the song in the face of its alteration by professional singers. With the death of the manual version of the herring industry, local groups formed to preserve the entire suite of fishery songs. Thus there is the Esashi [Town] Okiage Ondo Preservation Society (to which Fujiya belonged), while Mikuni Town has the Herring Fishery Ondo Preservation Society (Nishinba Ondo Hozonkai).

Though no extant recordings were made 'on the job', it is clear that performances by such *hozonkai* are musically close to the originals, eschewing accompaniment except by rhythm sticks to replicate the gunwale-pounding. But Fujiya opined in 1988 that since only two of the fifteen members of his group had done manual fishing, 'the feeling wasn't there' (*kanji ga denē*) in their singing. My experience with other work song examples suggests that the main changes might be a tendency to sing more quietly and at a lower pitch. Other changes relate to the new physical context, usually a stage with an audience: order of singers is fixed; the shouted *dokkoisho* is sung exactly two times; bawdy verses are suppressed; and the songs that precede and follow 'Sōran Bushi' in the sequence, though originally separated from it by time and space, are run together with it. Occasionally a group might try to imitate parts of the work movements, but this is obviously difficult given the varied range of tasks.

Scholars debate the value and challenge the authenticity of *hozonkai* performances, but to their members these organizations are important and self-affirming. And their versions are certainly closer to the originals, in music and ethos, than the professional ones described next.

### Professional stage versions

In 1934, when a group including Fujiya's brother rendered 'Sōran Bushi' at a scholarly folkloric concert in Tokyo, they were told by the other performers (from various parts of Japan) that this was the first time they had heard the song. It was soon to become much more widely known, though, in arrangements with instrumental accompaniment.

Various developments (recording industry by 1910, radio in 1926, railroads easing domestic travel, etc.) helped spawn the professional folk singer and the travelling troupes that performed what are now called *sutēji* (stage) *min'yō*. Formerly unaccompanied local songs would be sung with various combinations of traditional instruments, primarily *shamisen* three-stringed lute, *shakuhachi* end-blown bamboo flute, *shinobue* transverse bamboo flute, *taiko* stick drums and other percussion. This continues to be the primary, 'classic' mode of *min'yō* performance today.

Hokkaidō's Ofune Shigesaburō made the first commercial recording of 'Sōran Bushi' around 1930 (re-issued on D2, whose notes provide the following information). Since it had no fixed title then, he called it 'Nishin no Okiage Uta' – 'Herring-netting Song'. It differed from the original(s) in various ways: sung solo (which meant that the shouted *hai hai* was omitted, as was *yasa* – presumably to allow him to catch a breath), in a rather smoother voice, accompanied by *shakuhachi*, and with no rhythmic gunwale-pounding. He did include one bawdy final verse, in the spirit of the fisheries: 'From between the clouds, a woman sticks out her bottom and shakes the world below with a fart.' But from about this time on, even such mildly licentious lyrics were almost never recorded or sung in public, as professional singers strove hard to overcome their reputation as wastrels. (Talk of farts is otherwise rife in public Japan.) Ofune also kept some of the flexibility of the originals; thus on different verses he sang *sōran* either three or four times, a license that today's folk singers would never take. But Ofune's version made little impact.

Imai Kōzan (1902–83), some time after 1935, brought 'Sōran Bushi' to a form closer to the modern standard version (see Ex. 2a and Fujikura 2000: ch. 5). He called his version 'Hokkai Sōran Bushi', to specify that it was from Hokkaidō; he added the same prefix to his 'stage' arrangements of several other little-known local songs. As *min'yō* became a specific commercial genre in the 20th century, with local songs becoming known countrywide, it

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**Example 2a/b.** Stage versions of 'Sōran Bushi': a) Imai's version as shown in NHK 1980: 462, sung a major 6th lower; b) modern standard version based on author's experience, modified slightly from D5, track 7. Verse lyrics are omitted, as are details of ornamentation.

proved necessary to add such place-name prefixes to titles to distinguish variants (and assert local 'ownership'). Thus 'Oyadomari Okesa' and 'Ogi Okesa' are different local versions of a song which within each community was just called 'Okesa'. But in our case, later singers have reverted to the name 'Sōran Bushi', presumably because no similarly titled song existed outside of Hokkaidō, and whatever variation occurs within that island is not local *per se*.

Imai showed no desire to 'preserve' the original style or mood of 'Sōran Bushi', telling one friend in 1977, 'I'm the one who brought that sea song onto dry land' (Fujikura 2000: 187). He added accompaniment on *shamisen*, whose sharp plucked attack facilitated a bit of vocal syncopation that seems at odds with the song's original rhythm-keeping function (Ex. 2a, bars 2–3).

Still, it was only after 1951, during a postwar *min'yō* 'boom', and ironically only after its original function had lapsed, that 'Sōran Bushi' became widely popular (Fujikura 200: 183f.). It is now so much a part of every professional's repertoire that Dezaki Tayo II (b. 1915) sang me this verse reflecting its stage function: 'I learned "Sōran Bushi" for fun, but now it puts rice in my mouth.' Dezaki is a woman, which points up another difference between fishery and stage versions: women would never have been allowed on the herring boats.

Various other musical steps take us to the modern standard stage version as heard on D5, track 7 (Ex. 2b). Comparing with the fishery versions as a whole, we find today: omission of the initial ē; a preference for beginning with the high variant (though the low one still is heard) and drawing out the first syllable (which would have disrupted the rhythm on the fishing grounds); exactly five *sōran*; restricting syncopation to the third *sōran*; a female chorus, again in violation of the fisheries ethos; accompaniment on *shamisen*, *shakuhachi*, *taiko* and hand gong; a *shamisen* interlude punctuated by two shouts of ā *dokkoi*; and use of the low-starting variant of the second half of the verse (bar 13) for variety, a choice also made in stage versions of many other folk songs. (Our song may also be followed in a medley by an arrangement of 'Iyasaka Ondo', the song for knocking fish roe from the nets, though at the fisheries this song and task occurred at a different time and place.) Watching a stage performance today – carefully controlled, with elegant costumes and rigid etiquette – one would get no sense of the mood of the fisheries.

This standard version has become so ingrained that a student to whom I had taught one of the fishery versions was told at a Hokkaidō folk song bar that his version was simply wrong. Most Japanese today are familiar (at best) only with the highly arranged stage versions of *min'yō* – the ones which some observers would prefer to call *koten* (classical) *min'yō* or not *min'yō* at all.<sup>3</sup>

### **Evolved professional versions: Takio**

For several decades *min'yō* have been most often heard in one of two styles: the normal professional 'stage' versions, or ones in which the traditional instruments are replaced or supplemented by a small dance orchestra while retaining the professional vocal style. The

<sup>3</sup> Sasaki Motoharu, tradition-conscious Hokkaidō singer, recorded a track called 'Okiage Sōran Bushi' (D3, track 18) which antiques the stage version somewhat. It starts with unaccompanied vocables suitable for rowing, and adds a few more likely vocables between 'Sōran Bushi' and 'Iyasaka Ondo'. On D16, track 1, he sings 'Sōran Bushi' with the initial ē, omits the syncopation on the third *sōran* and chooses a melodic variant closer to the fisheries than the stage. But the chorus on both CDs is sung by women as well as men, and the instrumental accompaniment is as usual.

latter is often thought to hold greater appeal for an increasingly Westernized audience. But continuing developments in Japanese musical tastes have led to further initiatives in the past twenty years. One fairly unique approach has been taken by Itō Takio, who performs under his given name only – Takio.

Born in Hokkaidō in 1950, he was exposed to folk song before he could walk, particularly via his father. In the notes to his 1988 ‘crossover’ album, *Takio* (D11), he explained: ‘When I was small, the first song I sang, I am told, was “Sōran Bushi”, familiar from my dad’s chorus of *sōran sōran sōran* ... When dad drank, the first thing to come out was this “Sōran Bushi”’ (p. 4). By 1970 Takio had begun a career as a typical *min’yō* singer. But as with most Japanese of his generation, he had also absorbed a taste for ‘modern’, ‘Western’ music, both pop and jazz. In the mid-1980s he organised the Takio Band to provide versions of *min’yō* that could draw together the disparate parts of his – and modern young Japan’s – musical world. His 1988 album came emblazoned with the following slogan: ‘exciting the blood of the [Japanese] nation/race, that’s TAKIO!’ (*minzoku no chi no sawagi, kore ga TAKIO da!*). The nine tracks on the album are all traditional folk songs. And yet, in World Music parlance, this would be a ‘roots’ album, not a ‘traditional’ one. In his 4-page statement of philosophy, he states: ‘On this album, I have tried to confront head-on (*butsukeru*), without reserve, the songs I’ve hitherto been singing in the environment in which I was born (*ima made umareta kankyō no naka de utatte kita*).’

‘Hitherto’ is a key word here: he now wants to bring these songs into new environments and interpret them afresh. In many ways Takio has hewn fairly close to traditional style on this album: he sings in a standard *min’yō* voice, the modes and ornaments are traditional, Western harmony is not employed, and accompaniments use the standard instruments of modern ‘stage’ *min’yō*. However, his singing explores dynamic extremes, including a unique near-whispering style,<sup>4</sup> whereas a traditional *min’yō* is sung throughout at one dynamic level. And the arrangement is not quite as ‘standard’ as the list of instruments would suggest: the primary *shamisen* used are a pair of vigorous, powerful *Tsugaru-jamisen*, which sometimes play independently of each other; two *shakuhachi* sometimes also seem to improvise independently of one another, which is never done traditionally; and the percussion is primarily of the *wadaiko* style popularized by the group Kodō, using gigantic deep-voiced barrel drums not heard in the standard *min’yō* ensemble, and with an occasional Western ride cymbal. Some accompanying parts also violate traditional modality briefly. Finally, some tracks also employ electronic drum-pads or keyboards. The result is a thickening of texture and volume, an extension of the range, a couple of unusual rhythms in the accompaniment, overall a hard-driving, up-tempo sound – but in the final analysis no major deviation from the timbres and forms of traditional folk song.

All of this is true of his 1988 version of ‘Sōran Bushi’. However, he does tamper further in various ways. He begins very slowly, quietly, almost wistfully, for several minutes, somehow making me think of his father relaxing with his *saké* in the bath. He also sings much of the melody on a single note – unheard-of in traditional *min’yō*. Then we suddenly explode into a hard-driving, wailing version that fully evokes the chaos and energy of the herring fisheries. A particularly clever addition is a long section of yell-and-response between Takio and his chorus: *a dokkoisho dokkoisho (a dokkoisho dokkoisho) a sōran sōran (a sōran sōran)*, repeated ad infinitum.

<sup>4</sup> His 1987 album *Takio Jinc* (CBS Sony 32DH544) had him singing throughout in a remarkably expressive near-whisper, accompanied solely by sparse jazz piano and percussion.

Over the years, 'Sōran Bushi' has become Takio's only 'hit'. In 1997, on *Ondo* (D7; also on D13), he renamed it 'Takio's Sōran Bushi'. To his 1988 ensemble he now added an entire rock band, and he dropped the long, slow introductory section. The lyrics contain innovations relating to this version's intended dance function and to the singer himself. (Likewise, on track 7, 'Yagi Bushi', he replaced the traditional lyrics with the tale of his own career: childhood in a snowy Hokkaidō fishing village, to Tokyo in pursuit of a folk song career, success followed by disillusionment with the professional *min'yō* world.)

In 1998–9 many of my professional *min'yō* friends felt that Takio's impact on the *min'yō* world had been minimal, with few people being drawn into (or away from) the world of folk song through his recordings. This may be true. When I took one popular music scholar on his first-ever visit to a *min'yō sakaba* – a bar/restaurant where customers and staff perform live 'stage' *min'yō* – he announced to the assembled aficionados that he knew *min'yō* only through his beloved Takio CDs. This priming, as my friends had predicted, did not trigger a sudden lust for traditional *min'yō* upon this exposure to live neo-traditional performance. It is fair to say that Takio's arrangements suit Takio's fans. In major Japanese record stores, his CDs are as likely to appear in the World Music section as the *min'yō* one. Indeed, 'Takio's Sōran Bushi' is the only Japanese *min'yō* included on the CD *The Rough Guide to the music of Japan* (D13). The distance from *min'yō* to World Music is still considerable in Japan.

### Folk-rock versions

This distance is reflected, in a way, in the two different equivalents of the English term 'folk song' in Japanese: *min'yō* and *fōku songu*. The 'folk boom' of the 1950s and after in the United States impacted on Japan as well, generating the genre called *fōku songu*. At first this involved singing in English to the accompaniment of guitars, banjos and so forth, but eventually new songs were written in Japanese but in a similar, Western style. Thus the English term 'folk song' is rendered by both the direct translation *min'yō*, referring to traditional Japanese song and its spin-offs, and the transliterated loan word *fōku songu* to indicate modern Western-style folk song (Hughes in prep.: section 1.7). Surprisingly, these two genres have had remarkably little impact on one another: they tend to appeal to people from very different backgrounds. But the occasional *min'yō* manages to attract the interest of the *fōku* crowd.

Japan's rock and folk musicians, generally those of the 'alternative' or 'indie' persuasion, may draw on folk material for a variety of reasons: a belated search for their lost Japanese identity; novelty; 'orientalism'; the impact of the World Music phenomenon and outside interest, often related to their self-perception as members of the global community. (The more dominant teen-oriented pop tradition ignores *min'yō* altogether.)

Kina Shōkichi (b. 1948; known in the West as Shoukichi Kina) is from Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture, whose islands harbour a culture and a music tradition related to but distinct from that of the main islands to the north. Son of a traditional Okinawan *min'yō* performer, from the 1970s he gained fame among younger Okinawans for his hippie life style and his adding of Western-style rock accompaniment to Okinawan-style songs. His band, Champloose, combines rock instruments with the Okinawan 'national instrument', the *sanshin* lute (ancestor of the *shamisen*).

Many of his songs express his keen empathy with the occasional oppression and prejudice suffered by the Okinawans and Japan's other cultural minorities, such as the

indigenous Ainu to the far north or the Korean immigrants of the early 20th century; he also shares musical and political platforms with Tibetans, Native Americans, Taiwanese aborigines and others.

Kina's version of 'Sōran Bushi' first appeared on the 1993 album *Rainbow Movement* (D8; re-issued on D12). He kept the original melody (the version with the low-pitch beginning) but re-fashioned the lyrics into a protest song against the modern, mono-ethnic image of Japan. His accompaniment is a typical rock band but including the *sanshin*.

His choice of this particular song was doubtless triggered by various factors: it is both well known and vigorous; it comes from Hokkaidō, home of the Ainu; and there is a felicitous homophony between its title and a word meaning 'chaos'. Writing the title with the characters for the latter, he makes this the 'Chaos Song'.

The lyrics as printed show the last *sōran* of the chorus as changing to *sōdan*, 'consult, converse, agree'; the two words are virtually homophonous in Okinawa where *r* and *d* are often not distinguished. By adding a verb to the end of the chorus, he converted its meaning to a plea for worldwide harmony: 'Let's talk/agree'.<sup>5</sup>

All but a few words are in standard Japanese. Of numerous verses recorded or performed by Kina, these recur most often:

(chorus:) *yaren sōran sōran sōran let's talk together [sōdan]*

1. Ainu to the north, Okinawa to the south – well, where's the dead centre ?  
*Yasa ēn yā*, it's worthless rubbish. [pun on name of ancient Korean state of Paekche]
2. China to the west, America to the east – where is Japan going ?  
*Yasa ēn yā*, I haven't got a clue ...
3. Yayoi Ondo, Jōmon Ondo – well, let's dance together in good spirits ! ...

Yayoi and Jōmon (verse 3) are two early archaeological cultures in Japan. He explained this verse (pers. comm. 9/00) as reflecting his belief that all the peoples of the Japanese islands today are united in these early cultures. Thus the song is a plea for mutual understanding within Japan leading to a secure sense of identity. The pun in verse 1 recognizes that Korea and Japan were closely linked in the days of the Paekche state; this reads as a plea for mutual tolerance and understanding today as well.

These messages have nothing to do with the original 'Sōran Bushi'; a felicitous pun on the title, plus a love for the song's driving rhythm and energy, were enough to trigger Kina's creativity. The song's message and rock arrangement has garnered it followers elsewhere in Japan's leftist rock community, for example the Osaka band Soul Flower Union (D9).

'Sōran Bushi' also caught the attention of Japan's 'god of folk', Okabayashi Nobuyasu (b.1946), a Western-style guitar-plucking folk singer.<sup>6</sup> On overseas concert tours in the mid-1980s, he was challenged by members of the Korean neo-traditional percussion ensemble Samulnori and various musicians in England to produce something more Japanese. He decided the answer must lie in *min'yō*, which had never interested him until then.

<sup>5</sup> Recording D9 has a stirring rendition by the socially conscious Osaka-based rock-cum-folk band Soul Flower Union, who also perform Ainu, Korean and even Irish revolutionary songs.

<sup>6</sup> Sources: Nagira 1995: 35, 53-4, and the television special 'Kankoku: tamashi no rizumu o motomete' (NHK BS2, ca. 1997; tape supplied by Takahashi Miki).

He thought of two widely-known work songs that should brim with the requisite energy: 'Sōran Bushi' and the boat-rowing song 'Saitara Bushi'. But mechanization meant that the original work rhythms survived, barely, only in versions by preservation societies, which were however 'old-fashioned' (*mukashi no mon*): he was seeking the living rhythms of today's daily life. He rejected the idea of singing 'Sōran Bushi' as it was: since it is not used now for catching herring, 'we' (*bokutachi*) are unable to 'put our hearts' (*kokoro o komete*) into singing or dancing such music.

So he decided to try to compose 'music for now' (*ima no ongaku*) using tradition as a base. He created a style of *fōku songu* he called 'En'yadotto' after the vocable of 'Saitara Bushi' originally chanted by the rowers. These were strongly rhythmic folk-rock tunes which often had a chorus of *min'yō*-like vocables. But he never quoted passages of music or text directly from existing *min'yō*. To me, it is difficult to see how the rhythms of his own songs are linked to 'today's daily life' any more than are those of 'Sōran Bushi', but never mind. To him, 'Sōran Bushi' was a dead song.

### **Enka versions**

Unlike Western folk songs in general, each Japanese *min'yō* tends to be very closely identified with its home community, its *furusato*. As noted above, this is usually expressed by using a place name as the first word of the title. It is ironic that, although it is among the minority of well-known *min'yō* that do not so identify their homes, 'Sōran Bushi' is nonetheless particularly strongly linked with Hokkaidō in the popular mind, and often with the lonely, frontier image that adheres to that island. This makes it suitable for referencing in the popular song genre *enka*,<sup>7</sup> which in many ways parallels early Country and Western: songs of and for urban migrants lonely in the big city, songs of *saké*, women, Mother, loneliness, homesickness, travelling on. Many *enka* take advantage of various *min'yō* to evoke particular places and the moods associated with them.

Here are only three of the many examples of *enka* that reference 'Sōran Bushi'. These are sung as solos throughout (as standard in *enka*), accompanied by a Western dance band.

**'Sōran Wataridori'** ('Sōran Migratory Bird')  
(ca. 1965; lyrics: Ishimoto Miyuki; music: Endō Minoru)

1. I've crossed the Tsugaru Straits,  
An orphaned swallow without a roost.  
I love Esashi, I love the herring fisheries;  
When the *shamisen* plays, I join in with feeling:  
CH.: *Yāren sōran sōran sōran*, singing 'Sōran'; oh, I'm a migrating bird.
  
2. Although I miss my home harbour,  
My dreams can't reach that far, to the northern skies.  
I hide my suffering behind a winsome smile.  
How many mountains and rivers have I crossed in this world? (CH.)

Here 'Sōran Bushi' evokes and symbolizes the singer's beloved, distant home, Hokkaidō, which is not actually mentioned. The first line of the chorus is an abbreviated version of the low-starting variant of the original melody. The song is sung in the 'pentatonic major' (see Hughes 1991), a version of the traditional *yō* mode (in which 'Sōran Bushi' and a majority

<sup>7</sup> On *enka*, see Fujie 2000 and her bibliography.

of *min'yō* are sung) with the tonic re-positioned to allow Western-style major harmonization. The choice of a major tonality indicates that the protagonist is resigned to, indeed happily wedded to, his endless travels and his homesickness; the pentatonicism is one of the neo-traditional features (along with vocal ornamentation and others) that help *enka* serve as a bridge between past and present, city and country.

**'Sōran Jingi'** ('Sōran Self-Introduction')  
(1964; lyrics: Handa Kōkichi; music: Narita Takeo)

1. I was born in Hokkaidō,  
Famous as the home of 'Sōran Bushi'.  
Strolling past the bars on the back streets,  
In this man's self-introduction are imbued  
Pride and stubbornness, hard work and suffering. ...
3. I was born and raised in the fisheries,  
Salt spray in my face, among the silver scales of the herring.  
That woman I loved, surely she won't have waited for me –  
Rumour has it she's married another man.  
Right, I'll forget her and get on with my life.

Kitajima Saburō's original version of 'Sōran Jingi' from 1964–5 is re-issued on recording D4. Notice that Hokkaidō is made famous only by 'Sōran Bushi', recalling again the importance of folk songs in symbolizing locality. 'Sōran Bushi' also has the ability to evoke instantly the herring fisheries and the migrant workers who find their way to them, then vanish to who knows where. One can imagine the protagonist having to leave his Hokkaidō home as the fisheries collapsed, to seek work elsewhere. He can't go home to his *furusato*: surely his woman hasn't waited for him. Those who could not find work might fall into gambling or join a *yakuza* gang in desperation. A *jingi* is a stylized self-introduction, a personal history which one gambler or *yakuza* performs before another on first meeting. Unlike the previous song, this one does not quote the melody of the original folk song. But it too uses the pentatonic major, and for similar reasons: 'pride and stubbornness' require a macho heartiness (hence the major mode) in the face of suffering. Although Kitajima does include a few *min'yō* in his repertoire, there is no trace of folk song melody or style in his performance of this song.

**'Sōran Koiuta'** ('Sōran Love Song')  
(1996; lyrics: Sakai Tomoo; music: Yamaguchi Hiroshi)

1. The coastal train line stretches northward;  
Through the train's window, the fishing fires [to attract fish for night fishing],  
Distant, sad, along the way;  
A face is reflected [in the window], then is gone.  
As if to cut off the lingering flame of love,  
Breaking the waves, heard from afar:  
*Yaren sōran yaren sōran sōran*,  
The seagull's lonely journey.
2. The lonely steam whistle pierces my body,  
At the desolate harbour I step down from the train.  
Today I'll stroll along the seashore  
And let the wind blow me clean.  
Nameless fishing boats here and there,

Chasing a vanished past, a destiny:  
*Yaren sōran yaren sōran sōran,*  
 The seagull's tearful journey.

'Sōran Koiuta' (D10) quotes the lyrics to the chorus of 'Sōran Bushi', but not the melody, nor is the song itself directly referred to, nor even any specific places. The seagull recalls the most famous verse of 'Sōran Bushi' (see above). This elusive, impressionistic lyric uses its *min'yō* connection to call up certain motifs: nostalgia for fading rural lifeways, the *furusato* – anyone's *furusato* – as a comforting place to go to nurse a broken heart. The singer who popularized this song, Kagawa Noriko, is also a skilled *min'yō* singer.

Thus a well-known folk song can trigger images of place or mood via even the slightest reference: the title, a snatch of melody, a few words of the chorus. 'Sōran Bushi' is among the most frequent of many *min'yō* that are evoked in *enka*.

### The Yosakoi Sōran Festival

If a *min'yō* can take us instantly to a particular *furusato*, then what are we to make of 'Yosakoi Sōran Rock' by the pop trio Konatsu & Hyottoko? 'Yosakoi Bushi' is a well-known folk song from Kōchi Prefecture on the island of Shikoku in western Japan, far from Hokkaidō. How has it got mixed up with 'Sōran Bushi'?

Since the 1980s Kōchi has held a Yosakoi Festival (*Matsuri*) each August, whose main feature is the competition among hundreds of teams of young dancers. One of the few rules is that all dancers must carry the wooden clappers called *naruko* used in the local folk dance 'Yosakoi Naruko Odori'; otherwise each team is free to create its own costumes, choreography and music.

The event captures the liberation and license of earlier *matsuri*, often toned down in modern versions. This was so appealing to young Japan that over 40 clones have sprung up around the country. In June 1993 the Yosakoi Sōran Matsuri began in Sapporo, Hokkaidō's main city.<sup>8</sup> The idea came from a few local students, who hit upon 'Sōran Bushi' as the most instantly identifiable musical symbol of Hokkaidō. By 2000, 380 teams and 38,000 performers were taking part, including many from outside Hokkaidō and guest teams from the Yosakoi Festival. The main rule here is that each team's music must include the vocable *sōran*. At the festival's end, professional folk singers perform the standard 'Sōran Bushi'.

Many teams devise their own musical accompaniments, which tend to feature a synthesized disco feel, with plenty of *min'yō*-like shouts from the dancers (ten examples on recording D15). Other teams will choose from suitable pre-existing recordings, which is where Konatsu & Hyottoko come in. In 1997 the trio released their CD *Utaeru! Odoreru! Min'yō roku!* (You can sing! You can dance! *Min'yō* rock!) (D14), containing rock versions of ten *min'yō* suitable for lively dancing. Two tracks – 'Yosakoi Sōran Rock' and 'Konatsu's Sōran Bushi' – are versions of our song. A synthesizer provides imitations of *Tsugaru-jamisen*, *shinobue* bamboo flute and Japanese drums, as well as the usual disco sound. Konatsu sings lead, and the two lads who are Hyottoko act as her chorus, adding simple harmonies at times. (The group appeared as guests at the 1998 festival.)

Musically, both songs are clearly derived from Takio's arrangement. His distinctive shouted call-and-response chorus is repeated frequently in both: *dokkoisho dokkoisho (dokkoisho dokkoisho) sōran sōran (sōran sōran)*. Otherwise, both are melodically and

<sup>8</sup> Details from Mori 1999 and from Fukazawa Yuri, pers. comm. 12/99.

structurally identical to the stage version that Takio also followed, with the usual vocables at both ends of each verse: *yāren sōran* etc. But Konatsu has written new lyrics for the two songs. ‘Yosakoi Sōran Rock’, as its name reveals, is specifically linked to the Festival, and its lyrics touch all the key images that make this so popular with young Japanese: festival, youth, groups of friends, vigour. An injection of English – ‘dance to dance dance’ [sic] – adds to the attraction for today’s MTV generation. But we are also reminded that ‘It’s a *northern* festival’: place still has some residual importance to the young folks who flock to Sapporo from far and wide.

1. Come on, rise up for ‘Yosakoi Sōran’,  
It’s a northern festival; [in English:] dance to dance dance.
2. Everyone get together, ‘Yosakoi Sōran’,  
Bursting with youth, [in English:] dance dance dance dance.
3. Particularly when times are tough, ‘Yosakoi Sōran’,  
With your friends, [in English:] dance to dance dance.
4. Everyone keep trying, ‘Yosakoi Sōran’,  
With sweat and skill, [in English:] dance dance dance dance.

‘Konatsu no Sōran Bushi’, though musically nearly identical, is more on a par with the other tracks on the album in that it is not specifically linked to any event, but suitable for frenetic dancing by youth craving a blend of their Japanese and Western identities. The lyrics mix two traditional verses with two new but traditional-flavoured ones.

So does this festival represent a breakdown of regional identity, merging Kōchi and Hokkaidō with gay abandon, or a musical assertion of it through the requirement of the inclusion of part of ‘Sōran Bushi’? Or is it simply post-modern Japan at full speed? Space does not allow further analysis. But these days most sizeable urban-based local festivals include elements from all over: even Iwate’s Michinoku Geinō Matsuri (Northern Japan Performing Arts Festival), founded in the 1970s as a gathering of traditional folk dance groups from all over northern Japan, has been starting its opening parade with a Tokyo-based Brazilian samba team.

## Conclusion

As one of Japan’s best-known folk songs, ‘Sōran Bushi’ will continue to be heard in various forms, appealing to Japanese from a wide spectrum of musical and social backgrounds who then often bend it to their musical will.

In Okinawa, at the opposite end of Japan, ‘Sōran Bushi’ is well known and appreciated not only in Kina Shōkichi’s ‘chaos’ version but more or less in its original guise. The Ayame Band, one of the many groups now combining Okinawan folk song style with Western rock, have included our song on a 1994 CD (D1), in an unjustified medley with another familiar Japanese folk song, ‘Kiso Bushi’. (The rest of the album is totally Okinawan in lyrics content.) They seem to have taken as their model the standard stage version rather than either Kina’s or Takio’s re-workings or the Hozonkai style. The rock-band accompaniment, otherwise reminiscent of The Doors, includes also the Okinawan *sanshin* lute as well as the distinctive Okinawan *kakegōe* shouts (*ha! ha! ...*). There is some attempt, it appears, to sing in a mainland folk vocal style rather than an Okinawan one.

Western-style classical composers may also draw on it as fodder for inspiration. Less creatively, often the standard stage version is arranged to be played by a Western-style orchestra or concert band, with or without a singer, possibly with a traditional instrument or two thrown in; Western-style harmonies will be added. A relatively imaginative version is 'Sōran Rhumba', a jaunty piece from around 1950 by the King [Records] Orchestra (78rpm, King 332). The melody is passed from instrument to instrument. Finally a vocal chorus adds the first line of the original song, in two-part harmony, with one traditional-sounding ornament thrown in, and with the word *yāren* replaced by yet another *sōran*. No further lyrics are attempted. Modulation is rife. Jazz renditions of *min'yō* are not uncommon.

There are those in Japan who claim that all the 'real' *min'yō* – by which they often mean the work songs in particular – are dead, that a Hozonkai or professional stage or rock or jazz performance is not a folk song in any meaningful sense. But such people are in the minority. In any case, 'Sōran Bushi' has shown an impressive ability to adapt or be adapted to any Japanese taste and to move with the changes in Japanese culture. From functioning work song, to preserved one, to stage *min'yō*, to symbol of traditional lifeways when quoted in popular song, to disco favourite – whatever we call it, whatever guises it takes, let's finish on an upbeat note: 'Sōran Bushi' will never die.<sup>9</sup>

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## SELECTED GLOSSARY

bushi	節	Okabayashi Nobuyasu	岡林信康
enka	演歌	Okiage Ondo	沖上音頭
furusato	古郷	Okinawa	沖縄
Hokkaidō	北海道	sanshin	三線
hozonkai	保存会	shakuhachi	尺八
Itō Takio	伊藤多喜雄	shamisen	三味線
Kina Shōkichi	喜納昌吉	shinobue	篠笛
Konatsu	小貢	sōdan	相談
koten	古典	sōran [chaos]	騒乱
matsuri	祭	taiko	太鼓
min'yō	民謡	Tsugaru-jamisen	津輕三味線
min'yō kashu	民謡歌主	wadaiko	和太鼓