

Island Life: Shimauta and Sanshin

Shimauta is the traditional folk music of Amami Oshima. It is written with the characters for *shima* (island) and *uta* (song), but in the Amami dialect, *shima* also means a community, and many people refer to *shimauta* as the music of their particular village. The songs are sung in the local dialect in a falsetto voice by a man or woman, and the singer is often answered by a backup singer. The singing is accompanied by a three-stringed instrument called the Amami *sanshin*, and is based on the Japanese musical scale. The body of the Amami version of the *sanshin* is the same as its Okinawan cousin. The Amami *sanshin*, however, uses thinner strings tuned to a higher pitch to match the vocal range of the singers, and is played with a bamboo pick rather than one made of buffalo horn. Some songs include rhythmic accompaniment by a small drum called *chijin* along with high-pitched whistling known as *yubibue*.

Origins and Development of the Songs

The origins of *shimauta* are unclear, though it has similarities to Okinawan music, including the song structure and the use of the *sanshin*. Some music historians believe Amami's particular style emerged during the years of colonial domination by the Satsuma domain, when the people of Amami Oshima were forced to work on sugarcane plantations. The songs were used to express their struggles and dreams. As the villages were isolated from one another by the mountainous interior, different styles and songs developed in the various communities. Even today, people can tell, for example, if a song is from the north (a gentler tempo) or from the south (more rhythmical).

Island Stories

The themes of *shimauta* songs are varied. Some are religious in nature, and many are moral lessons for children. Others focus on the pain of manual labor, separation, and longing, and there are humorous topics as well. The songs were traditionally sung around a table by family and friends—a practice called *uta ashibi* (song play). People would take turns singing the various verses, and improvisation was encouraged and appreciated. While *uta ashibi* has declined, *shimauta* remains an interactive form of

musical entertainment for the people of Amami Oshima.

Island of Song

In recent years, interest in local dialects and the music of the island has increased, and a number of local radio stations broadcast a lineup focused on local musicians and *shimauta*. Visitors interested in the island's music can catch performances in local restaurants and bars, and at live music events.