

Nuchi-gusui

Sustenance and Nourishment for Living

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Almost any Okinawan musician or dancer on O‘ahu has at some point performed for the Okinawa Nenchosha Club at the Lanakila Multi-Purpose Senior Center in Kalihi. For almost six decades, the club has been providing a weekly space for kūpuna to share each other’s company and engage in Okinawan cultural activities. Over that time, this club of super seniors has hosted every major Okinawan performing group on O‘ahu, and almost every visiting performing artist from Okinawa.

When I first started performing at Lanakila as a young, up-and-coming musician, Kay Adaniya was the president and community face of the club. Without fail, after every music or dance performance, Mrs. Adaniya would thank the performers and utter the words “*mī-gusui, mimi-gusui, nuchi-gusui.*” At first, I did not know what those words meant, but once I learned their meaning and significance, I started to see my role as a performing artist in an entirely different way.

In the Okinawan language, *mī-gusui, mimi-gusui* can be translated as “sustenance or healing for the eyes and the ears”—a metaphor for dance and music. *Nuchi-gusui* translates to “nourishment to sustain life,” and is an acknowledgment of how satisfied and invigorated one feels after being treated to something special. *Mī-gusui, mimi-gusui, nuchi-gusui* is an expression of gratitude for enriching and supporting one’s life in almost the same way as providing a healthy and delicious meal.

I have never experienced the healing and unifying power of Okinawan songs quite like I have on that stage at Lanakila. I have seen the confused, troubled faces of dementia victims ease into smiles and laughter once the music starts. I have seen men and women who have been hardened by a lifetime of adversity reduced to tears when they reminisce about the past. I have seen folks who struggle to walk, or even stand ditch their wheelchairs or walkers because the urge to dance is simply uncontrollable. In those moments, I am reminded that the healing power of Okinawan music comes from its ability to reach people on a deep level.

Okinawan songs rely heavily on communal understandings of history, folklore, and environment to paint a complete picture. The lyrics act as triggers to memories associated with certain places or stories, and help reaffirm ties between people with shared backgrounds. The lyrics are also open-ended enough to allow

each listener to tie in their own personal story. In this way, the significance of the songs evolves over time with one's experiences and perspectives.

For those who do not understand the language or have no ties to the stories behind the songs, the music can help them access fond memories of people or moments close to them. Whether it be about community or family gatherings, relatives or friends who used to play and sing, or memories of a younger self, the music has a way of transporting people to another mind space. In essence, we as performers help create a deeply personal experience for each listener that allows them to access memories that may otherwise be buried.

Realizing the unique value of Okinawan cultural arts has allowed me to link up with like-minded Okinawan performing artists to form a nonprofit organization called Ukwanshin Kabudan. With a family of volunteers and supporters, we hold performances, classes, and forums with the purpose of sharing ancestral knowledge to develop an understanding and appreciation of our Okinawan heritage. Through this sharing, we hope to bring people together by creating common points of reference and common spaces where intersections can turn into lasting relationships.

As one of the main things our culture stresses is respect and care for our elders, we are committed to making spaces that are welcoming and engaging for our kūpuna. Our programs not only provide content that allows our elderly participants to reconnect to their pasts, but they also provide a gathering place where friends and relatives can reconnect. Many of our elderly participants express how thankful they are for these spaces to connect on so many different levels, especially when they have so few events to look forward to. These spaces also help to bridge intergenerational gaps within families. We have been told several times how our events have helped kūpuna reveal stories they were previously reluctant to share, or how younger family members have become inspired to spend more time with their kūpuna to listen and learn, or even how a thread of knowledge helped to ease misunderstandings or misconceptions between two generations. Though what we share is largely the voices of our ancestors, it is the creation of spaces to share them that is our main function.

Of course, COVID-19 has severely curtailed our programs and events, because we no longer have access to spaces to gather. On the flip side, it has forced us to redefine "space" and how we use it. Concerned for our kūpuna who are homebound, we created a semi-weekly online classroom space to bring our programs to them. While there is so much we miss from face-to-face contact, virtual spaces overcome physical barriers to make our programs more accessible than ever. People can now participate from the comfort of their own homes without having to commute, which is helpful to those with limited mobility. Best of all, we can now interact with people from around the world, who can share unique experiences and perspectives.

Probably one of the most convenient features of the online platform is that in one click a listener can become a presenter. Sometimes, an audience member will share a personal experience that just completely contextualizes the presentation or shifts the conversation in a new direction. We especially encourage our kūpuna to

share memories or insights, as some of them have lived through the historical events we discuss. We have these hidden gems of knowledge within our families and communities that just need to be coaxed out. The online format can make it easier to “forget” the presence of an audience, and allow our presenters to create more of a one-on-one conversation with kūpuna, which the rest of the audience is simply “overhearing.” While we all benefit from this type of sharing, we also hope our kūpuna feel empowered in knowing what they may dismiss as “boring stories” can be someone else’s *mimi-gusui*.

One of the ironies of online events is that in some ways, they can help build more relationships than the physical events. Whereas family members would drop off their kūpuna at our event locations, some will now join them online and engage in conversations because of that. In places where there normally are no Okinawan events, some younger participants will get together with their kūpuna just to share the presentations on their laptops or tablets. While the biggest obstacle for our kūpuna is often navigating the technology, this has also resulted in younger family or community members reaching out to help. One of our participants calls one of our kūpuna before each session to help with log on. She is usually the only person our kupuna has spoken to all week.

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, our organization’s contributions cannot compare to those of healthcare workers and caregivers. We are dedicated, however, to providing our unique service to our niche community. Our ancestors’ history reminds us how music and dance have always had a powerful presence in the face of hardship. During World War II, when over one-third of the civilian population perished, and entire towns and villages were flattened to the ground in the Battle of Okinawa, people still made ad hoc instruments and dance implements to keep their spirits up in grossly overcrowded and under-supplied relocation camps. In the face of bitter discrimination here in Hawai‘i, our ancestors perpetuated songs and dances to reaffirm their identity and pass it on to the next generation. By sharing these stories and by providing *mī-gusui* and *mimi-gusui* to our community today, we hope to inspire and empower people to face the very uncertain times ahead.

As I write this essay, I suddenly remember that I won’t be playing at the Nenchosha Club’s annual bon dance this year because the center is still closed due to COVID-19. It is a small, but painful reminder that things will never be the same. But I also remember Mrs. Adaniya, and all of the incredible people I have encountered over the years who have dedicated their lives to providing *nuchi-gusui* to others. It is because of the uncertainty our world faces that my friends and I are needed more than ever. And we are ready.

Born, raised, and living in Honolulu, **Norman Kaneshiro** is the grandson of Okinawan immigrants on both sides of his family. He is co-founder and co-director of Ukwanshin Kabudan Ryukyu Performing Arts Troupe, a volunteer Okinawan music instructor, and a lecturer at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Ethnomusicology Program.