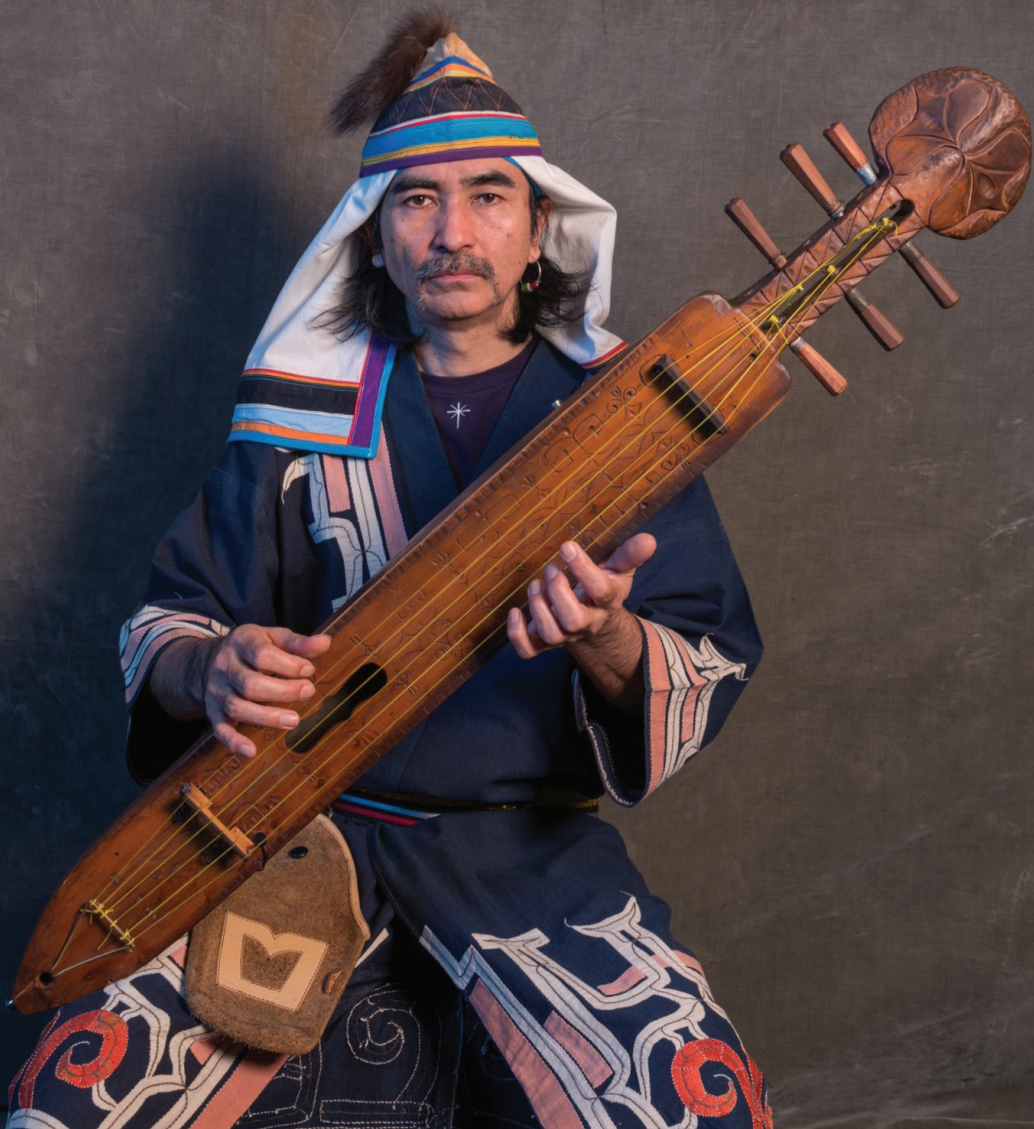




Performing Arts

Spring Season 2022





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Japan Society presents

OKI: Music of the Ainu

Fri., May 6 at 7:30 pm

—Followed by a *MetLife Meet-the-Artist Reception*

OKI: Music of the Ainu is supported, in part, by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan through the Japan Arts Council, and Doug and Teresa Peterson.



2021—2022 Performing Arts Season Support

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The season is made possible, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.



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ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S NOTE

As the locked-down, pandemic-ruled world slowly opens up, human mobility is returning. Needless to say, Japan Society's Performing Arts Program has relished this transition. In March, we presented traditional dance and music from Japan's southernmost prefecture, Okinawa; tonight, we offer the music from the opposite side of Japan—the northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido.

Japan is often considered a homogeneous country, but that is absolutely incorrect. The Ainu, Japan's indigenous people, now live mainly in Hokkaido. They used to live even further north on the island of Sakhalin (which is now a part of Russia) and other northern islands. Like many other indigenous people on this planet, the Ainu were also oppressed by Japanese rule for many years, resulting in their traditional lifestyle, religion and language being endangered. Yet, they are not extinct.

Although Japan voted in favor of the UN General Assembly's adaptation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, it was only in 2019 that the Japanese government finally passed a bill to officially recognize the Ainu of Hokkaido as an indigenous people of Japan. The bill also included some measures to bring more visibility to Ainu culture.

OKI's music activities to preserve and develop Ainu music through the *tonkori* began many years earlier than the passing of this bill. Even before the Japanese government finally took action, OKI's *tonkori* music—sometimes with vocalists, sometimes with reggae and dub fusion—had already reached an international audience and made him an icon of Japan's more inclusive society. So, we are delighted to conclude our spring 2022 season with OKI and his band members during this year's AAIP Heritage Month.



Yoko Shioya
Artistic Director

OKI: MUSIC OF THE AINU

Tonkori/vocals: OKI

Vocals/*tonkori*/dance: Reppo

Bass: Takashi Nakajo

Sound engineer: Naoyuki Uchida

Drums/*tonkori*/vocals: Manaw Kano

Manager: Yoshiko Oki

ARTIST'S NOTE

I'd like to talk about my grandfather. His name was Ichitaro Sunazawa, and his Ainu name was Tuakanno. In the spring, when the snow was hard and crusty, he used to start searching for a bear in his usual hunting grounds—a mountain in the town of Aibetsu—where, all by himself, he would face down a bear that had just come out of hibernation. When he was lucky enough to take down a bear, he would send a telegram to Chikabumi Village from the post office in Aibetsu. Then, joined by the villagers who would rush there by train to help him, my grandfather would go back to the mountain to process the bear meat. If there was a bear cub—since bear cubs are considered sacred visitors sent by the gods—he would put it, alive, in his backpack and head down the mountain. As soon as they returned home, the villagers would hold a feast to send prayers of gratitude to the *kamuy*, or spirit-deities.

When he was happily drunk, Tuakanno often sang the communist anthem, *The Internationale*, very loudly. Since it was dangerous if the Special Higher Police¹ heard him, my grandmother Beramonkor would put a futon blanket over his mouth to muffle his voice. Beramonkor was a Christian and used to sing hymns in a high voice. When their Ainu land was about to be taken away from them, Tuakanno and Beramonkor went to Tokyo to lobby the National Diet. As their money ran out, they sold carved wooden bear sculptures (a traditional Ainu

¹A police unit existed in Japan from 1911 to 1945 to control political thought and expression.

folk art) at Ueno Station to survive. When the island of Sakhalin was still Japanese territory and called Karafuto, Tuakanno used to run a business selling Ainu folk art near the Poronay River. My uncle Kazuo told me all of these stories.

The time when the Ainu people used to jump on trains carrying bear cubs and fresh bear meat along with their hunting rifles is long gone. The Ainu peoples' way of living has faded away. In the process of considering what part of myself I identify with as truly Ainu, I encountered the *tonkori*—a stringed instrument unique to the Ainu in Karafuto. Since then, I have believed that performing the *tonkori* is a mission given to me by my ancestors.

We came to the United States to deliver the music of the Ainu. Initially, I thought we should perform on NYC subway platforms; however, somehow, we landed on Japan Society's stage. I am sure the music that we make here, with Takashi, Naoyuki, Rekpo and Manaw, will be much better than in a noisy subway station. As they say, "Music makes the world go round."

—OKI (April 2022)

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

OKI (*tonkori*/vocals), born to a Japanese mother and an Ainu father, is a *tonkori* performer, bassist and visual artist. After graduating from the Department of Crafts at Tokyo University of the Arts, he moved to New York in 1987, where he worked as a special effects artist on film productions. Upon his return to Japan in 1992, he first encountered the *tonkori*—a traditional stringed instrument developed by the native Ainu people of Karafuto, an island now known as Sakhalin located to the north of Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido. Those days, the instrument was known as an unusual object that was displayed in museums but not actually played, as virtually no performers had inherited the traditional instrumentation skills. OKI developed a technique to play this forgotten instrument, and soon began to create his own music. In 1996, he released his first album *Kamuy Kor Nupurpe*. Shortly thereafter, he established Chikar Studio to encourage and support Ainu artists, and to promote Ainu music

around the world. Chikar Studio has since released 23 albums, including titles by the traditional Ainu singer Umeko Ando and the all-female vocal ensemble Marewrew, which sings traditional dance songs called *upopo* with a modern sensibility. Built upon recordings from around the 1940s and '50s collected by ethnomusicologists, OKI's album *Tonkori* (2005) brought back the instrument's sound for modern-day audiences. While valuing both traditional Ainu music and cultural identity, OKI's albums like *OKI DUB AINU BAND* (2006) and *Sakhalin Rock* (2010) achieve a genre-fluid music expression that infuses blues, reggae, dub and more. Oki Dub Ainu Band features the *tonkori* in a band setting with drums, bass, keyboard and dub mixing board. They often perform at music festivals in Japan and overseas, including Africa, Europe and Asia. In 2019, OKI produced the albums *mikemike nociw* by Marewrew and Amamiaynu, a collaboration project between Ainu musicians and musicians from Amami—a small island located between Japan's southernmost prefectures Kagoshima and Okinawa. Most recently, in January 2022, OKI's first compilation album *Tonkori in the Moonlight* was released from a UK label, Mais Um Discos, on both CD and LP. Immediately after its release, the album rose high on world music charts in Europe and has received significant international media attention.

Since his debut album, OKI has continued to feature Ainu lyrics and language in his works. In addition to traditional songs handed down to today, OKI has released original songs in the Ainu language, created with Tatsujiro Kuzuno (1910-2002), a respected and prominent figure in the Ainu community. Further, songs such as "Oroso Omap" and "Tawki" in *Sakhalin Rock* feature original Ainu lyrics written by the children of the Asahikawa Ainu Language School in Hokkaido. Additionally, OKI's third album, *No One's Land* (2002), mixes voice recordings from the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (whose 15th session he attended in 1997) with indigenous guest artists such as singers from Chukchi (the northeastern most part of Siberia) and poets from East Timorese (Malayo-Polynesian and Papuan region). OKI received the Hokkaido Cultural Encouragement Award in 2008. The New York performance of this three-city tour produced by Japan Society marks his first appearance in NYC since 2003.

Rekpo (vocals/*tonkori*/dance) is the leader of Marewrew, a female vocal ensemble, whose mission is to revive and preserve traditional Ainu songs called *upopo*. Since the release of their first mini-album *Marewrew* in 2010, their activities have grown rapidly. In 2011, the group began producing a festival series titled “Marewrew Festival—Let’s get 1 million people to sing *Upopo* together!” Guests artists who have participated in past festivals include many well-known musicians such as UA, Kicell, Oorutaichi, Haruomi Hosono and Masafumi Goto (ASIAN KUNG-FU GENERATION). Rekpo has performed in Japan and Europe, including the UK’s WOMAD Festival, a leading world music festival. She and Marewrew have joined Oki Dub Ainu Band’s concerts in Japan and their international tour.

Takashi Nakajo (bass) was born in 1965 in Kanagawa, Japan. Drawn to American and British rock music around the age of 13, Nakajo started playing music himself. By 16, he had formed his first band with school friends, playing blues rock, R&B and blues. After performing with several bands, Takashi became a bassist for the funk rock band Theatre Brook in 1995. He joined Oki Dub Ainu Band in 2007 for its European tour and has been active in the band since then. His other music activities include the band blues.the-butcher-590213.

Naoyuki Uchida (sound engineer) has worked as a recording studio assistant since learning recording techniques as a teenager. In 1995, he joined Dry & Heavy, Japan’s pioneer band of roots rock reggae music, as a dub engineer. The band’s unique debut featured dub versions of popular ’70s tunes. Their successful debut opened the door to worldwide performances in Europe and Oceania, and subsequent album releases from BSI Records (predecessor of ZamZam Sounds) in the U.S. and the UK. After leaving the band, Naoyuki has remained active in making dub music, working for several Japanese dub bands, including Little Tempo and Oki Dub Ainu Band.

Manaw Kano (drums/*tonkori*/vocals) is a drummer who has joined OKI as a backup band member for WOMADelaide 2017, followed by Taiwan’s PASIWALI Festival in 2019. His own band, ASOUND, released its debut album *Feel It* in August 2021.

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