SOUNDING THE ISLAND

Representing Chikubu Island in Japanese traditional performing arts

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ABSTRACT: The uninhabited yet socially active and culturally important Japanese island of Chikubu (Chikubu-shima) is situated towards the northern end of Lake Biwa in the Kansai region of Japan’s largest island of Honshū. Chikubu Island is linked to Shintō and Buddhist ritualistic culture and hosts tens of thousands of day-tripper pilgrims who travel there each year. But its cultural significance is also carried beyond its aquatic margins through multimodal signification in Japanese traditional performing arts where meaning connected with the island is portrayed through visual and sonic media. Extending discourse on islands and performing arts, this article shows how one culturally noteworthy Japanese island is imagined within creative practices and how island meaning is embodied in settings that are far removed from the island’s physical or lake environment. Expanding the scope of Island Studies, select creative works are discussed in terms of how they represent Chikubu Island through sound and symbol.

KEYWORDS: Chikubu Island, islandness, performance, performing arts, representation, ritual

Introduction

Long before I first visited Chikubu Island (Chikubu-shima) I had heard much about it within Japanese medieval literature and the traditional performing arts. The small island’s name is the title of a section in the 13th Century literary work, Heike monogatari (‘The Tale of the Heike’), a nō (noh) play, a piece of music for shamisen (3-string lute), and a piece for koto (13-string zither). I had also heard about the island in connection with the ritualistic pilgrimage that many Japanese make to its sacred sites, and especially relating to the Japanese syncretic deity within Shintō (Japan’s indigenous religion) and Buddhism, Benzaiten (also called Benten), who is associated with water and often depicted holding a biwa (4-string lute transmitted to Japan from China and localised by at least the Nara period, 710–794).

While my own familiarity with Chikubu Island started by experiencing knowledge about it beyond its physical geography, I visited the island in 2017 not only to learn about its cultural significance but also to comprehend it “on its own terms” (McCall, 1994, p. 1). Setting off from the lakeside port of Nagahama in the northeast of the 671 km² Lake Biwa in early February, I boarded a small, high-speed boat along with a handful of other visitors.
for our 30-minute crossing to Chikubu Island. Outside of winter, the company operating the boat had ten departure and return times daily, which showed the touristic importance of the island for day-trippers (usually for just a few hours, and not overnight), although during the winter months there were just two boats departing from and returning to Nagahama each day. Soon after departing Nagahama, Chikubu Island appeared as a speck on the lake with more detail of its protuberant shape, buildings, and deep green forest landscape slowly becoming more visible as the boat drew closer (Figure 1). On reaching Chikubu Island, a small islet called Kojima (Small Island) could be seen to the right. Just one other boat was at the island’s tiny port, but others would soon come from different parts of Lake Biwa carrying other day-trippers. The passengers who arrived on the boat with me soon disembarked and made their way on foot past the port’s touristic and souvenir shops and up the island’s steep hill through an extensive ritualistic landscape of Buddhist and Shintō architecture.

![Chikubu Island](image)

Figure 1 - Chikubu Island as seen on the boat returning to Nagahama port (author’s photo, 2017).

Drawing on the semiotics of music performance (Barthes, 1977; van Leeuwen, 1999), this article examines Chikubu Island in connection with how it is represented within the creative imaginary of Japanese traditional performing arts (Castoriadis, [1975] 1987; Ivy, 1995; Taylor, 2004). This idea is applied because of the various instances where Chikubu Island is depicted in sound and symbol, therefore creating culture that represents this island and consolidating that culture within performing arts traditions. That is, within such arts, notions of Chikubu Island are assimilated into the performance repertoire of diverse musical and theatrical traditions as part of a broader comprehension and representation of historical literature and ritualistic culture.

Literature and the performing arts have featured much in Island Studies, which usually explores them as windows into island epistemology (e.g. Baldacchino, 2011; Dawe, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2014; Goodall, 2016; Heo & Lee, 2018; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017; MacKinnon, 2020; Mezzana et al., 2012). *Shima*, for example, has featured such research, covering music and the visual arts of various island cultures, including Japan (e.g. 2017; Johnson & Kuwahara, 2013, 2017; Qu, 2020; Suwa, 2020). Further, Chikubu Island has featured in the journal in a recent article by Suwa (2018), which explores island space in connection with religious
folklore associated with the island, where the lake’s waters “serve as an agent for animating otherwise isolated items into an aquapelagic assemblage” (p. 71). However, in my study, focus is given to comprehending Chikubu Island’s cultural significance beyond such aquatic margins in terms of how it has been represented through sound and symbol in creative practice. Extending the scope of Island Studies by contributing to a discourse on islands and their characterisation in the performing arts, the first main part of the discussion explores Chikubu Island in geocultural, ritual, and touristic context; and the second part studies the island’s mythico-religious symbolism and how it has been represented within the traditional performing arts. Underpinning both parts is discourse on how this uninhabited freshwater island constructs culture both within and outside its physical and lake setting.

Notwithstanding island aesthetics (Baldacchino, 2010, 2012), where Chikubu Island exhibits itself with a protuberant small island form in what might be deemed a visually appealing lake setting, it is held in high cultural esteem as a destination that has ritual at its core. The island is connected with short-term religious pilgrimage, much in the same way as some other islands with similar spiritual foundations, such as Mont Saint-Michel (France), St Michael’s Mount (UK), and Lindisfarne (UK). In Japan, there are many other such small islands where religious tourism is especially prevalent (Matsui, 2014), including Itsukushima (also known as Miyajima) (Shintō), Kudaka-jima (Ryūkyūan), and the Gotō islands (Christian), and Chikubu Island contributes to the comprehension of island significance in Japanese Studies more broadly. While some of the island traits suggested by Baldacchino (2012) may relate to Japan (especially in sub-tropical Okinawa prefecture), for many of the nation’s smaller islands there is an attraction that is entwined in the geocultural presence of the islands themselves. After all, as depicted through accounts of the nation’s history in ancient texts such as the Kojiki (712) and Nihon Shoki (720), the connection between the Japanese archipelago and religion has its roots in the mythological origins of the nation where a lineage of Shintō gods were connected inherently with the birth of the island nation (Aston, [1896] 1956; Philippi, 1969).

A study of Chikubu Island on its own terms must necessarily consider not only the physicality of the island itself, that is, its terrestrial and aquatic assemblages of islandness, but also how it is represented and imagined beyond these margins. While the island is depicted in art, literature, and other media, where meaning about the island is signified in diverse ways, for the purpose of this discussion, Chikubu Island is foregrounded in connection with Japanese traditional performing arts. Within this field of creativity, the island has a direct association with Benzaiten as a water deity and the patron of music, but also where sound and symbol can evoke multivalent meaning in dynamic ways that extend island relationships and relevance. Just as Anderson (1983) noted the imagined communities formed through political discourse, so too can islands create shared meanings beyond their physical location. With such an approach, the article builds on some recent studies in the field of Island Studies by drawing on the “relational turn in island geographies” (Pugh, 2016) and “moving away from rigid geo-topographical reference points” (Hayward, 2016, p. 4).

Geocultural, Ritual, and Touristic Context

Chikubu Island is located in the Kansai region of Japan’s largest island of Honshū. It is situated towards the north end of Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture at 35°25′24″ N, 136°8′37″ E
Johnson: Sounding the Island: Chikubu

(Figures 2–3). The steep granite-based small island has a circumference of about 2 km, an area of 0.14 km², a high point of 197 m, and is 1.9 km to the closest point of its lakeside mainland. Chikubu Island has a main peak to the east and a slightly lower peak to the west. The island is mostly covered with trees and bamboo, and on its south side are a number of Buddhist and Shintō structures, touristic shops, and facilities catering for visiting day-trippers.

Lake Biwa has three main islands, Oki, Chikubu and Takei, as well as several large rocks (e.g. Oki no Shira Ishi), estuary islands (e.g. in the Ado River delta), and artificial islands (e.g. Yabasekihantō). Chikubu Island is uninhabited, unlike Oki Island, which is the largest island in Lake Biwa with a population of around 300. Administratively, Chikubu Island, together with a part of the Lake Biwa shoreline region to the east (not the closest point to the island), was until 1956 a part of Chikubu Village in Shiga Prefecture, but is now within Hayazaki Village in Nagahama City. Chikubu Island occupies a position that is highly visible and accessible from its mainland. In wider geographic context, Lake Biwa is relatively close to Kyōto (prefecture and city), Japan’s former capital and residence of the emperors from 794 to 1868, with Chikubu Island lying about 55 km from the Kyōto Imperial Palace.

Figure 2 - Map of Lake Biwa showing Chikubu Island in the north (red marker) and Kyōto to the southwest (Google Maps, 2021).
Figure 3 - Map of Chikubu Island. The island’s small port is to the south. Kojima (Small Island) is just off Chikubu Island’s northeast coast (Google Maps satellite image, 2021).

While its very small size and lake location in the broader region may deter a permanent resident population, Chikubu Island does, however, have an important ritual culture that has been created and imagined through the presence of tens of thousands of short-term visitors and pilgrims who travel to the island each year. But, as discussed below, its cultural significance is also carried beyond Lake Biwa through multimodal signification in the traditional performing arts. Travel to Chikubu Island is primarily part of a ritual pilgrimage, or at least a short day-trip for sightseeing visitors; and the island can be reached by boat from several ports around Lake Biwa, including Nagahama, Hikone, and Imazu. There are options of travelling directly to the island, cruising parts of Lake Biwa and landing on the island, and viewing the island as part of a lake cruise.

The significance of short-term travel to the island as part of a touristic gaze is found in the marketing media of one of the cruise companies that visits the island on a daily basis. The
boat company, Biwa-ko Kisen, for example, offers various options for visiting Chikubu Island, with trips from Nagahama and Imazu. As well as lake cruises more broadly, Chikubu Island stands out as one of the company’s main destinations, and on its website it provides much background information about the island as well as photographs and maps (Biwa-ko Kisen, n.d.) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Biwa-ko Kisen boat ticket to Chikubu Island (2017), which depicts Hōgon-ji (temple) in the centre with Benzaiten-dō (Benzaiten Hall) and Tsukubusuma-jinja (shrine) to the lower right.

Biwa-ko Kisen promotes its excursions to Chikubu Island in English with the phrase: “Explore the island of legends and mystical energy.” Here, Chikubu Island is presented as a location steeped in ritual, with visitors leaving a lakeside port and moving through a liminal and aquatic space before reaching the island. The promotional information notes that the island “is known as a place of mystical energy with a mysterious atmosphere, [and] many visitors come to claim their own share of that energy.” In Japanese, this “mystical energy” is described with the term “power spot” (pawā supotto), which is often found in touristic publicity about the island. This contemporary notion is linked to the island’s ancient religious connections, but placed in a modern-day trend that has been popularised by, for example, Kiyota Masuaki (1991), who used the term “to indicate a location where one can feel a strong, invisible spiritual power” (Horie, 2017, p. 192; see also Hughes, 2010; Kotera, 2011; and Suga, 2010).¹ The term pawā supotto was especially promoted in popular media in 2009/2010 (Horie, 2017, p. 192). Commenting on Kiyota’s viewpoint, Carter stresses that, “the landscape of Japan... was abundant with such places: they included Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and some sites located in natural settings” (2018, p. 150). Shintō locations are often perceived as power spots, and islands frequently feature as important natural locations that embody such power (Kotera, 2011, p. 96). Regarding the spiritual connection of power spots, “it is believed that the body and mind can be healed when someone visits them” (Horie, 2017, p. 192). Hence, visiting Chikubu Island manifests multiple objectives, including tourism, worship, and healing, each of which is heightened

¹ An early connection between power spots and Benzaiten was in the mid-1980s at Tenkawa Village’s Daibenzaiten Shrine (Horie, 2017, p. 193).
with the process of accessing the island on Lake Biwa and passing through the lake’s liminal, aquatic space.

The name Chikubu-shima is written with three kanji (Japanese characters) that mean “bamboo, life, island,” implying that the island is “born from bamboo” (Tyler, 1992, p. 65), although the words are possibly phonetic (Tyler, 1992, p. 61). Chikubu Island might not have a permanent population, but it does have a highly active and significant local and national culture that is steeped in ritual symbolism and cultural representation. The island is entrenched in Japanese mythology, religion, and ritual. As noted in its official history, Chikubu Island has mythological origins that are believed to date from the year 82 when it appeared in Lake Biwa (Papinot, [1910] 1972, p. 55). When there was an earthquake “the waters of the lake burst into flames, and the island emerged in a single night, spouting fire” (Tyler, 1992, p. 58). There is much cultural importance given to the island’s geocultural heritage, as there is on some other Japanese sanctuary islands (Suwa, 2018, p. 66), in that its various places of worship have a history intertwining Buddhism and Shintō, although these practices were formally separated on the island in 1871 as part of a period of Japanese nation building (Watsky, 2004, p. 42).

Entwined in cultural meaning as a result of intersecting points of reference (religion, myth, and ritual), Chikubu Island has two principal sites of religious significance: Hōgon-ji (Buddhist temple) and Tsukubusuma-jinja (Shintō shrine) (also called Chikubu Island Shrine). Both have a connection with the deity Benzaiten, who is also connected historically to the Hindu goddess, Saraswati (Tyler, 1992, p. 59). Hōgon-ji is the 30th temple on the pilgrimage to 33 Buddhist temples in western Japan on a route known as the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage (Usui, 1990, p. 318–325), with each temple representing a different incarnation of Kannon (goddess of mercy). Indeed:

To be a Buddhist in Japan is hardly separate from occasionally (or often) undertaking a pilgrimage. This may be to a sacred mountain such as Fuji, to a string of temples sacred to a particular deity (for instance the 33 sanctuaries of Kannon), to the holy places of a particular sect (such as the 25 temples of the Pure Land School of the 100 temples of the Nichiren school), or to a series of sanctuaries located in a sacred place, like the 88 shrines on Shikoku [Island] or the 1,000 temples in the Higashiyama section of Kyoto. (Coleman and Elsner, 1995, p. 185–186)

In this context, Chikubu Island has been a sacred location for those living on Lake Biwa’s shoreline who believed the deceased would go there (Usui, 1990, p. 318), as well as a setting that has been important as a location of Tendai sect Buddhist training (Okawara, 2007).

Represented in both Buddhism and in Shintō (here known as Ichikishima Hime no Mikoto, or “the woman who resides on the island” [Suwa, 2017, p. 6]), temples and shrines dedicated to Benzaiten are often found on small islands in Japan’s sacred archipelagic geography (including Enoshima in Kanagawa prefecture and Itsukushima in Hiroshima prefecture). There is even a small-scale and bridged replica of Chikubu Island in Tōkyō in Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park. On Chikubu Island, both Hōgon-ji and Tsukubusuma-jinja are sacred sites dedicated to Benzaiten (Figures 5–7). There are figures of Benzaiten at each location, with the latter including iconography of Benzaiten playing a biwa and thereby linking the island and this syncretic deity to music and the performing arts. However, in the Benzaiten Hall at Hōgon-ji, Benzaiten is depicted without a biwa, but instead with a
weapon held in each of her eight hands, thus showing one of several of her forms as found in Japan (Schumacher, 2012a, 2012b).

Figure 5 - Benzaiten Hall, Hōgon-ji (author’s photo 2017).

Figure 6 - Inside Benzaiten Hall, Hōgon-ji (author’s photo 2017).
Johnson: Sounding the Island: Chikubu

Chikubu Island in the creative imaginary

The uninhabited yet socially active and culturally important Chikubu Island exists in a geographically insular location (i.e. within a lake), but it has evoked a distinct creative imagination more broadly in Japanese traditional performing arts. While not an exotic island destination for sunshine tourism, beach culture, or resort living, albeit “rising majestically out of the water [and] covered with lush greenery” (Doore, 2012, p. 21), it is, however, a transformative place with a ritualistic attraction that extends beyond its lake setting. Tyler links Chikubu Island to the mythological Chinese P'eng-lai (Japanese: Hōrai), “the mountain island of the immortals” (Tyler, 1987, p. 25), thereby connecting its geocultural existence with broader spheres of island meaning in East Asian cultures.

As a way of extending the place of Chikubu Island's ritual significance, and beyond its aquapelagic space (Hayward, 2012; Suwa, 2018), I now examine the island's mythological
associations as depicted within the performing arts where, as symbolic resources, visual and sonic culture help represent the island. These settings are physically distant to the island, yet draw on its place in Japanese ritual practice. Focus is given to two key elements within the works that show how Chikubu Island is memorialised within creative practices. The first of these is oral expression, where sounding the island is verbalised through song and narration with a historical account relating to its religious significance. The second aspect discussed is musical symbolism, which offers examples that show how musical sound – arbitrary, but forming a musical grammar about the island – is used to express ideas about Chikubu Island itself. As found in each work, there are multimodal signifiers of islandness, which are represented through a number of semiotic devices (van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 140). These polysemic symbols enhance the island’s mythological story as portrayed through oral expression, either as musical accompaniment to a text or with independent musical meaning.

Chikubu Island has an important place in medieval Japanese literature and several genres of classical performing arts. In these works, the island features as an established theme that is laced with religious and mythical meaning, and thereby intersecting the island with Buddhism, Shintō, and the Imperial Court. In literature, and inherently related to a style of narrative performance, Heike monogatari (‘The Tale of the Heike’, dating from the 13th Century) is an account of the 12th Century warring Taira (Heike) and Minamoto clans, and it portrays Chikubu Island in one of its sections. The story, or one relating closely to it, has been consolidated and transformed in the repertoire of some classical performing arts, including heikyoku (narrations of the Heike monogatari with biwa accompaniment – also known as heike-biwa), nō, narrative and lyrical styles of shamisen performance (i.e. itchū-bushi, tokiwazu-bushi, and nagauta), jiuta (shamisen), and in the Yamada tradition of koto performance. With an established place in these performing arts, and often varying between performance traditions within the same genre, the island’s symbolism is consolidated and represented through creative practice in locations far removed from the island itself.

Heike monogatari and heikyoku

Heike monogatari has been culturally influential in terms of not only its historical story about the struggle between the Taira and Minamoto clans, but also regarding its connection with the narrative style (katarimono) of heikyoku performance, which was the primary function of the work (Komoda, 2008). Heike monogatari was used as a text narrated by blind male biwa performers (biwa-hōshi), and Tyler has claimed that

\[
\text{no work of Japan’s classical literature influenced more pervasively the art, literature, and drama of later centuries. Heike is a seminal masterpiece of Japanese culture (2012, n.p.).}\]

The work, which was compiled from different texts and exists in several different versions (Butler, 1966), is important to this discussion because the section about Chikubu Island, or

\[2\] The piece is also known in ensemble for koto, shamisen, and shakuhachi (end-blown bamboo flute) or kokyū (3- or 4-string upright fiddle).

\[3\] Chikubu Island is also represented in two engi (official histories) of the island from 931 and 1415, and a collection of poetry (waka) from the Heian period (794–1185) entitled Šūishū (Collection of Gleanings) (also known as Šūishū).
Johnson: Sounding the Island: Chikubu

a similar story about this island, has been reproduced in several traditional performing arts to offer a representation of the island through drama, voice, and music. In the succinct section of the work that refers to Chikubu Island, the warrior and musician, Taira no Tsunemasa (d. 1184), on visiting the island, prays to the deity, Benzaiten:

Then the priest who lived there, knowing Tsunemasa’s skill in music, brought him a biwa, and he played and sang the melodies called Jogen and Sekijo, so that the liquid notes rang clear through the silent shrine. So exquisite it was that the Myojin [Benzaiten] could not restrain her emotion, but appeared over the shoulder of Tsunemasa as he played, in the form of a white dragon. (Sadler, 1921, p. 23)

In the story, the biwa is important not only as an instrument associated with Tsunemasa and Benzaiten, hence often being depicted with the instrument (Figure 7), but its name is also signified by the name of the lake in which Chikubu Island is located, sharing the same kanji. A further connection between the instrument and the lake is that the lake’s shape is thought to resemble the shape of this musical instrument, therefore reinforcing the association (Kumura, 2011). Further, as Yoshikami (2020, p. 188) has mentioned, “in the past there were hundreds of [musical instrument] string factories along Lake Biwa but now there are less than five.”

Performances of the ‘Chikubu-shima’ section of the text are chanted within heikyoku (and sometimes in other biwa performance traditions) with biwa accompaniment, which typically consists of short formulaic melodic patterns or sonic punctuation at phrase endings (Arao, 2007; Tokita, 2000, p. 106–107). There are just several places where the biwa plays a slightly longer interlude. The biwa’s musical elements enhance the oral aspects of performance (Mayeda, 1979). McCullough has identified that:

For each section (ku) – that is, each titled subdivision of a chapter (maki) – there was a prescribed katari, or narrative, pattern, designed both to suit the context and to provide the variety and drama necessary to capture and hold an audience’s attention. (1988, p. 10).

In this genre, the vocal style is foregrounded and is highly expressive, sometimes closer to speech than to song and with a wide tessitura. To achieve such an expressive performance style, in both voice and instrument, there are many contrasting dynamics and tone qualities executed, and the biwa frequently juxtaposes melodic notes with intense strumming across the instrument’s four strings. As a narrative genre, the text signifies Chikubu Island through direct verbal referencing of the island by its name and also by association to the lake setting (e.g. island, boat, water). In Arao’s (2007) performance of this section of Heike monogatari, for example, oral and instrumental techniques are used to heighten a representation of islandness through performance. This is especially evident in the first four minutes of the 25-minute piece. The island is mentioned three times by name throughout the piece, and soon after its first mention, the tempo slows down suddenly and is partnered with an intensified style of chanting. The island is then referred to again by name, along with other Lake Biwa references, including a boat and the lake’s water. This is followed by a short instrumental interlude that begins with an abrupt strum across the biwa’s four strings, which signifies a change of scene. In the interlude, repeated strumming along with single-note melodic repetition dominate the sonic texture, with the overall passage signifying the liminal boat passage across the lake’s tempestuous seascape to the island. The irregular instrumental strumming along with alternating and repeated high-

Shima Advanced publication 2021 - xi -
and low-pitch tones produce a sonic image of a somewhat turbulent sea crossing, the performance of which adds a level of non-verbal meaning as an extension of the text it follows.

Nō

Another performance setting that portrays a story about Chikubu Island is in the nō play entitled Chikubu-shima, which may have been written by Konparu Zenchiku (1404-1468) (fdr hx, 2018; Johnson, 1987, p. 219; Kimura, 2011; Lombard, 1928; Tyler, 1992). In the story, Emperor Daigo (885–930) travels on his first pilgrimage to Chikubu Island, which is understood spiritually as “wonderfully endowed with sacred power” (Tyler, 1992, p. 61) and “a paradise on earth” (p. 63), to pray at its shrine that is dedicated to Benzaiten. On his way, the Emperor meets an old fisherman and a young woman (representing the dragon deity and Benzaiten respectively) and they travel together to the island. On the island, the Emperor views the shrine’s treasures and while doing so Benzaiten appears, followed by the dragon deity who materialises from the lake. The play ends with Benzaiten returning to the shrine and the dragon deity to the lake. The dragon features because the official history of the island records a festival whereby a model of the island was submerged in the lake as an offering to this deity. Further, the dragon deity has a counterpart, a giant catfish (namazu), the coils of which wrap around the island (Tyler, 1992, p. 59). Such mythical symbolism helps emphasise Chikubu Island’s size and setting, and “its characterisation... as a sacred place where Benzaiten dwells and manifests her wondrous benefits” (Watsky, 2004, p. 237).

In performances, which are multimodal in terms of having various signifiers of island meaning (e.g. written, visual, oral, and musical – Norris, 2012), the centre of the nō stage has a prop in the shape of a tall shrine. This prop also represents the boat the Emperor and his fellow travellers use to travel to the island. As a shrine, this is where Benzaiten resides and it is covered until the goddess appears from it later in the play. Overall, Benzaiten speaks just a few sentences, and, in one version of the play, when she appears from her abode she chants (in translation): “I am the Goddess Benzaiten. I make my dwelling upon this island to protect all sentient beings” (Tyler, 1992, p. 66). Just before this point, the chorus (jiutai) and musical accompaniment (hayashi) slow down and Benzaiten is revealed from the shrine. Such is the importance of this section of the play that Benzaiten subsequently dances extensively along with much dynamic and punctuating musical accompaniment. Islandness is symbolised by the visual appearance of Benzaiten taking central stage (i.e. her connection with the island), the slowing down of the narration that highlights the island, and Benzaiten’s extended dance.

As an “auspicious god play” (Johnson, 1987, p. 219), meaning is carried in the performance especially through the chanting of the story by the actors, with the text directly referencing the island by name (along with the term “island”), and mentioning tropes relevant to the lake setting (e.g. boat and water). The text mentions gaining access to a boat to visit the island, which offers the three perspectives of departure, travel, and arrival, each of which contributes to foregrounding Chikubu Island’s distance from its lakeside mainland and the liminal space occupied not only between the lake’s shore and landing on the island, but also on the island itself. Benzaiten is mentioned on several occasions, whose home is on the island, thus reinforcing the island theme throughout the work. In the play, music is

4 The play is part of the repertoire of each of the five nō schools, with some slight differences between each (Tyler, 1992, p. 60).
performed by a chorus and instrumentalists: nōkan (flute), nōdaiko (drum), kotsuzumi (small hourglass drum), and ōtsuzumi (large hourglass drum). Music is present throughout much of the play, but, as mentioned, it stops or slows down on occasion when the actors are chanting in order to highlight certain passages within the text. For example, in the first six minutes of the play, following an instrumental introduction, there is an opening chant with instrumental accompaniment. The music stops suddenly and the Emperor’s official chants (in translation):

You see before you an official in the service of our most holy sovereign, His Majesty of the present Engi age. Now, since the Divine Presence [i.e. Benzaiten] upon Chikubu-shima is wonderfully endowed with sacred power, I have obtained leave from His Majesty and am setting forth for the island without delay. (Tyler, 1992, p. 61)

Similar to the section when Benzaiten appears, such a device offers a way of foregrounding important points, which in this case include Chikubu Island, Benzaiten, and travel to the island, which is by boat.

Narrative and lyrical shamisen genres

In the shamisen performance genres of itchū-bushi, tokiwazu-bushi, and nagauta, which comprise a singer with shamisen accompanist, the lyrics are generally based on the story as portrayed in the nō play, and sometimes with direct quotes from it. In tokiwazu-bushi, for example, which is a narrative style of performance, the piece ‘Chikubu-shima’ was composed in 1897. About 25 minutes long (‘Chikubu-shima’, 2014), it has a text by Takeshiba Kisui (1847–1923) and music by Kishisawa Koshikibu V (1833–1898). The story of Chikubu Island and Benzaiten is told through song with many chanted sections that include heightened vocal expression that is similar to the narrations in heikyoku.

As with the other examples, this piece has a number of island signifiers relating to location (e.g. island, lake, boat, and Otsu – a port on Lake Biwa). In terms of indexing the island, or elements associated with the island’s aquatic setting, the most dramatic section is near the end of the piece, which consists of a highly expressive vocal part with dynamic instrumental accompaniment with the words “Chikubu-shima” by one singer and followed immediately by “Bezaiten” (an alternative pronunciation in this piece) by another singer. The first is sung and the second is in a narrative style, both without shamisen accommodation. Such heightened vocal expression and relative instrumental silence not only stress the theme of the piece by name, but also foreground the island and its deity (a similar device is heard early in the piece when the island is first mentioned by name). This is immediately followed by dramatic shamisen techniques consisting of tremolo and strumming, which add tension to the storyline and contrast with the relative instrumental silence that accompanies the earlier chanting. Overall, the piece includes numerous expressive parts with glissandi, changes in tempo and dynamics, and a mix of singing and chanting, which help symbolise the island’s lake setting with musical sounds seemingly imitating the elements.

In the lyrical-style nagauta composition entitled ‘Chikubu-shima’, which was composed for shamisen and voice by Kineya Rokuzaemon XI (1815–1877) and is around 20 minutes long, the song is an abridged version of the nō play’s text and ensemble performances may include some nō instruments (Okumura, 2015; Ōmiya, n.d.). The piece is in a narrated style
and includes some short instrumental interludes. The piece has a programmatic style that follows the story and frequently speeds up and slows down with the voice being particularly expressive. Chikubu Island is emphasised early in the piece when the island’s name is narrated in a short phrase with no instrumental accompaniment (as is typical in the other pieces discussed above), thus helping to stress the island’s importance in the story. As well as its vocal style following the story, an instrumental expression in the piece that imitates the island’s lake setting before the appearance of the dragon deity is when the words nami-kaze (wave and wind) has an intense bass sounding shamisen accompaniment, which offers a musical symbolism imitating the sonic environmental of the island and its mythological connection. As expressed in one translation: “The dark surface of the water suddenly shudders / And out of it surges the Dragon God who lives at the bottom of the Lake” (Okumura, 2015, p. 59).

Ikuta-ryū

The piece called ‘Chikubu-shima’ in the Ikuta-ryū (‘Ikuta performance tradition’) was composed for shamisen by Kikuoka Kengyō (1792–1847), and a koto part added (or played separately) by Yaeszaki Kengyō (1776–1848). The piece is about 16 minutes long. The lyrics have some similarities with the no play, recalling the island’s history and its connection to Benzaiten (Hirano, 2002, p. 168).

As in the pieces discussed above, in this piece there are several sections that are chanted with minimal instrumental accompaniment with the aim of highlighting certain words or phrases (Abe, 1993; Abe et al., 2002). The island is noted by name several times, the last of which is followed by a slowing of tempo and with a chanted text. This expressive technique highlights the island in the story. Several important terms in the text are accompanied by symbolic instrumental techniques that signify the island’s natural environment and lake setting. For example, in the shamisen part, along with the first mention of the word “Chikubu-shima”, about one minute into the piece, the player performs a right-hand plectrum stroke (sukui-bachi), which is an upward style of plucking, followed by the technique called otoishi, which consists of the player striking a string and immediately sliding a finger along the fingerboard to a higher pitch on the same string and then plucking the open string. This is a dramatic ornament that adds musical symbolism to an important concept, that is, the island. The island sound is arbitrary, although it becomes part of the musical grammar of the piece and is later reiterated. The text then names Benzaiten to the shamisen player executing a hajiki left-hand technique, which consists of a left-hand finger plucking a string, and in this case three times. Again, this arbitrary sound is established as an association with Benzaiten and links instrumental sound with verbal meaning. The pitch of the shamisen and vocal parts then move up a half-step to a tone not heard thus far in the piece, which is a further technique that adds contrast and therefore helping to highlight this part of the piece. While the piece uses such techniques throughout, and with increasing intensity, what is significant is that at this point key concepts about the island’s mythological story are introduced and accompanied by techniques that are then developed throughout.

At about midway through the piece, the vocal part mentions Chikubu Island for the second time, and again the lyrics are accompanied by the same techniques heard earlier, although

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5 In the Edo period (1600–1868), the term Kengyō was used as a title, which was bestowed upon esteemed koto, shamisen, and biwa players of the time by the Tōdō guild of blind, male professional performers.
pitched slightly differently. At this point, the earlier techniques that accompanied mention of Benzaiten are added to the “Chikubu-shima” phrase. In the piece’s koto part, Chikubu Island is highlighted when first mentioned with the right-hand waren plectrum technique, which comprises the player rapidly scraping the first two strings (lower pitch) with a quick movement of the right-hand middle-finger plectrum. This technique has been used traditionally in some koto music to symbolise waves (Tsuge, 1981, p. 114), and its use in this piece symbolises the island’s lake setting.

Yamada-ryū

‘Chikubu-shima’ is also the name of a piece of koto music in the Yamada performance tradition, Yamada-ryū (Huebner, 2009a, 2009b). Composed by Chiyoda Kengyō (?–1862), and based on the story of the no play of the same name, the piece is about 21 minutes long and has a text that portrays a visit to Chikubu Island by boat, along with Benzaiten and the dragon god (Hirano, 2002, p. 256–257). The piece is characterised by a vocal style that is melodic yet narrative on occasion, and some of the vocal lines are divided by short instrumental interludes. This version of ‘Chikubu-shima’ includes many ornamental koto techniques, which themselves have symbolic meaning that signify the island’s setting. On several occasions throughout the piece, the koto part includes a breaking of time (accelerando) on a single string, which imitates a similar sound found on percussion instruments in the religious practices of Buddhism and Shintō (also heard before the opening of a kabuki play). In the Ikuta-ryū piece for shamisen, there is just one occasion that uses this technique, at about 10 minutes into the piece. It is present in other ‘Chikubu-shima’ pieces too, including the nagauta composition.

In the Yamada piece, Chikubu Island is mentioned only once by name, and this is highlighted with symbolic musical elements (Nakanoshima et al., 2002). Mention of the island is immediately preceded by the koto technique called waren (as in the Ikuta-ryū) and then the technique uraren. In this performance tradition, uraren involves the plectra on the right-hand index and middle fingers producing a quick scraping sound on the highest string and then playing a glissando down the open strings (Read, 1975, p. 380–381). What connects this technique with Chikubu Island is that in traditional koto music the technique is associated with water. That is, “words related to water, such as rain, shower, dew drops, foam and even human tears, are also often symbolised by the techniques [hikiren and uraren]” (Tsuge, 1981, p. 115). In the lyrics, while this technique is also heard elsewhere, on this occasion it accompanies the words “while leaving the cove and rowing,” which links the instrumental sound to the image of water, and to travel across the lake on a boat. At this point in the piece (just over one third of the way through), the instrumentalist(s) stop playing and the singer narrates a short passage soon after the koto player sings the words “Chikubu-shima” to a syncopated phrase using octave displacement on the koto’s strings: “I heard that this island is forbidden for women.” This emphasising device is one appropriated from pieces about Chikubu Island in other performance genres and therefore is an important signifier of the island.

Near the end of the piece, the words nami-kaze (waves and wind) are sung with a symbolic koto plucking technique comprising scraping on the top two strings (chirashi-zume), glissando down the open strings (nagashi-zume: “flowing stroke”), and further scraping on the lowest two strings (chirashi-zume). The first and last techniques signify scattering, and the middle one “is another technique associated with water by virtue of the flowing

Shima Advanced publication 2021
- xv -
movement of the hand” (Tsuge, 1981, p. 116). These techniques are used to add sonic symbolism to accompany the lyrics, which note: “The wind and waves resonated vigorously and the dragon god of the undersea world appeared.” Such techniques help imbue the piece of music with island-inspired symbolism that is culturally associated with water-related concepts, thus helping to represent an idea of islandness in a piece entitled ‘Chikubu Island.’ As Tsuge has mentioned, “musical sounds are often symbolic representations of the sounds of nature. Nature and music are to be appreciated together, for music is considered a subset of nature” (1981, p. 109).

A version of ‘Chikubu-shima’ also exists that juxtaposes two musical traditions: itchū-bushi and Yamada-ryū (Hirano, 2002, p. 300–303; Nakanoshima et al., 2002; Takahashi et al., 2002). The Yamada-ryū drew much musical and vocal style from narrative shamisen performance, including itchū-bushi. Consisting of singers/narrators, shamisen, and koto, the piece includes some musical elements that help emphasise islandness, such as the piece slowing down for the first mention of the island by name, along with accelerando on the same note.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the framing of Chikubu Island beyond its physical and lake setting. Emphasis has been given to this island as a phenomenon in the ritual and creative imaginary where it contributes to the cultural assemblage of island meaning. In the performing arts, symbolic references to Chikubu Island and its setting through multimodal signification help reinforce the ritualistic importance of not only this island but also islands more broadly in Japanese culture. References to Chikubu Island in literature and the performing arts are testament to its cultural influence and the transformative ways it signifies creative settings.

Although unpopulated, Chikubu Island constructs culture both within and outside its aquatic margins. There is a culture of day-tripping pilgrims and sightseers visiting Chikubu Island as part of a ritual process and usually for just several hours; and there is also a culture signifying islandness within the traditional creative imaginary that has represented the underlying Chikubu Island mythology through performance. This reinforces the importance for Island Studies of comprehending island locations as sites of cultural construction both within and across diverse geographical spheres. The traditional performance pieces that depict Chikubu Island each have the name of the island in their title, as well as a text that portrays a story about this island that is comparable to the story as found in Heike monogatari, and more often in the no play. While the story described through musical works offers an oral description with verbal meaning, which also connects with Chikubu Island’s lake setting, each of the pieces also has accompanying music adding to the sonic symbolism of island space and place. The music varies in style in the different performance genres, and, in a related way to the oral expressions that are used, sometimes has extra-musical meaning, either arbitrary or within a grammar of idiomatic musical elements, which enhance the text and its performative style. While detailed musicological and semiotic analysis of each of the pieces is beyond the purpose of this article, as is a study of other Japanese islands symbolised in the arts, the examples of pieces discussed have helped exemplify this musical phenomenon and the importance for island research to broaden its scope for comprehending islands on their own terms, wherever the islands might be represented.
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Shima Advanced publication 2021
- xix -