

Globalization and the Cultural Politics of Tradition: Authenticating Reggae Music in Recessional Japan



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Geddes Hall Andrews Auditorium

Marvin D. Sterling, Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology
Indiana University, Bloomington

Abstract: For 60 years, the “sound system” has been the sonic heart of Jamaican dancehall culture. Sound systems are small groups of young men (and more rarely women) who play Jamaican music and banter in patois over high-powered audio systems before hundreds or thousands of audience members. In recent years, this subculture has reached international shores. In 1999, Japan-based Mighty Crown entered an otherwise all-Jamaican sound system competition in Brooklyn, New York, and to the surprise of many, won the event. Three years later, Junko Kudo, a dancer part of Japan’s burgeoning “reggae dance” scene, was similarly the only Japanese performer in Jamaica’s National Dancehall Queen Contest; she, too, won her event. Dancehall reggae has since become a sustained subcultural, and even in some measure, mainstream popular cultural phenomenon in Japan, attracting millions of fans and making the country one of the world’s most vital reggae markets. Despite continued attention to the Jamaican scene, Japanese practitioners have moved, consciously and otherwise, to make reggae into a “distinctively” Japanese music. In this presentation, I trace the roots of Japanese reggae from the early 1970s until the present, focusing on the musical productive strategies through which “J-reggae” has come into being. Among these strategies are incorporation of Japanese musical traditions; creative use of the Japanese language (as opposed to patois); and in the way of artistic self-representation, male dancehall performers’ referencing of the figure of the samurai. I argue that these strategies invoke discourses of the traditional that are deeply interlinked with those of modernity in Japan, a modernity shaped by the specter of Western domination that Japanese, like Jamaicans, have long had to negotiate. I focus, however, on the link between these discourses of the traditional and a contemporary ethos of cultural internationalism in recessionary Japan, in which Japanese reggae practitioners imagine global southern countries like Jamaica as simultaneously signs of these artists’ cultural and sociopolitical cosmopolitanism, but also as tradition-bound and thus instructive symbols of Japan’s own potential rebirth.