Folklife Today Podcast
May 2023: Asian Pacific American Heritage

Announcer 00:00
From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

00:05 [Herb Ohta Jr. Plays ‘ukulele music: “Ku’upua I Paokalani” by Queen Leiliukolani]

00:32 JOHN FENN : Welcome to the Folklife Today Podcast, I’m John Fenn, the head of research and programs at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, and I’m here with Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the center and the creator of the Folklife Today Blog.

00:44 STEPHEN WINICK: Thank you, John! You may have noticed that’s not our usual theme music. Since May is Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month, we replaced Bonaparte’s Retreat with some Ukulele music by Herb Ohta, Jr. As a Hawaiian with Japanese ancestry, we thought we should feature him right up front! The tune was just a snippet of Ku’upua I Paokalani, which was written by Queen Leiliukolani, the last reigning monarch of Hawai’i, who was a great songwriter in addition to other things. That was just a snippet, so visit Herb’s Homegrown Plus blog to hear the whole song and many more.

JOHN FENN: Thanks, Steve! On this episode we thought we might highlight some collections and blogs from people of Asian and Pacific heritage. So first up, we quite recently published a blog by Allina Migoni about a very interesting Korean collection and we’ve asked Allina to join us and talk about it. Welcome, Allina!

ALLINA MIGONI: Hi Steve! Hi John!

STEPHEN WINICK: Hi Allina!

JOHN FENN: Welcome, Allina! Why don’t you tell us a little about this Korean collection?

01:35 ALLINA MIGONI: Sure! The collection is a small group of rare recordings of traditional Korean songs, which were recorded by Alice Cunningham Fletcher on July 24, 1896. These cylinders contain the earliest known recordings of Korean music in the world, and predate the next documented recording of Korean song by 11 years.

STEPHEN WINICK: Wow! I guess we should hear one of these songs!

ALLINA MIGONI: Good idea! The is the Blooming Plum Tree Song:

02:11 [Song: “Blooming Plum Tree Song”]
ALLINA MIGONI: Alice Cunningham Fletcher was a well-known ethnographer. At the time, she was president of the Women’s Anthropological Society of America, an organization formed because women were not allowed to join many academic societies. As soon as the Washington Anthropological Society admitted women a few years later, she became president of that too. Her cylinder collections were made for the Bureau of American Ethnology, and ultimately came to the Library of Congress. Soon after the American Folklife Center was created in the 1970s, all those ethnographic cylinders became part of the Center. Most of Fletcher’s work was with Native American groups, and she was also one of the collectors behind our Omaha Indian Music presentation online.

JOHN FENN: Great! But how did they come to be made in the first place?

ALLINA MIGONI: The opportunity to record the Korean singers came about by chance, and Fletcher went ahead and seized the day. Exactly how it happened is too long a story for me to tell here, but luckily we have a lecture online by ethnomusicologist Rob Provine to tell the story. Let’s hear a teaser:

03:55 ROBERT PROVINE: On the surface, nearly everything about this recording event is incredible. In 1896, almost the only Koreans in Washington, D.C., were a handful of diplomats assigned to the Korean legation, and all those were highly educated gentleman with a strongly Confucian upbringing. That a group of such Korean gentry would enter the house of a single lady and sing a group of songs, including children’s songs, into a machine the likes of which they never imagined, is virtually inconceivable.

STEPHEN WINICK: So what was the solution to this conundrum—can you give just a tiny summary?

ALLINA MIGONI: Alice Fletcher had a friend who was also an ethnographer, Anna Tollman Smith. Smith was interested in Korean songs. In Washington at the time there was a Korean-born American citizen named Soh Quan Bun, who had worked in Washington for some time, and who was often a consultant on Korean culture for federal cultural institutions. He and Anna Tollman Smith knew each other through her interest in Korean songs and nursery rhymes. For a brief period, from February to September 1896, Soh Quan Bun was head of the Korean Legation in Washington. And I’ll let Dr. Provine take it from here...and just to explain, for part of the clip he’s reading from 1896 news clippings that are on his powerpoint screen, which explains the old-fashioned language.

05:30 ROBERT PROVINE: Seven Korean students studying in Japan decided they would rather study in the United States. They managed to escape and got as far as Vancouver before running out of money. They telegraphed the Korean minister, that's Soh Quan Bun. So Soh Quan Bun got the students installed at Howard University.
Social gatherings of the student took place on the night of their arrival and they attended in a body, solemn state and observing. In the course of the evening, they were surrounded by a dozen persuasive damsels who begged them to sing. One at last managed to signify that he could not sing in English, but they were assured that this did not matter and after more urging, the program of "Sewanee River" and like songs was diversified by specimens of real Korean melody. And from other sources we know the names of the students and sure enough they include Ahm Jong Sheik and Ehe Chull, whom we've encountered before. So although details are missing, the general background of the 1896 cylinder recordings should now be clear. A group of young Korean male students arriving in Washington, D.C., in 1896 were under the care of Soh Quan Bun, head of the Korean legation. And somehow this led through existing contacts with Anna Tollman Smith to Alice Fletcher and thence to the recordings.

06:58 JOHN FENN: Fascinating! And I imagine there’s even more to the story?

ALLINA MIGONI: Yes, there’s all kinds of intrigue, including a tale of international diplomacy, an 1884 failed coup d’état in Korea, an escape by political dissidents to the United States, and another pioneering Korean student at the University of Maryland—you have to hear the rest of the lecture to find out the whole story!

STEPHEN WINICK: Well, you can find that lecture easily in Allina’s blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife if you search for the term Korean. One last thing, Allina: It’s particularly interesting where the recordings were made, isn’t it?

ALLINA MIGONI: That’s right! These recordings were made in Alice Fletcher’s house, which may not seem that exciting. Except her house was 214 First St. SE, which is an address that’s not there anymore because it’s inside what is now the Madison Building of the Library of Congress.

STEPHEN WINICK: So with a First Street address, that means every time anyone walks from our Reading Room to Capitol South Metro, they’re making kind of a pilgrimage past the place where these recordings were made, and where a pioneering ethnographer lived and worked.

ALLINA MIGONI: Yes, it’s quite amazing!

JOHN FENN: Amazing indeed. Allina, thanks so much for being with us!

STEPHEN WINICK: Yes, thanks!

ALLINA MIGONI: Thanks for inviting me!

08:18 STEPHEN WINICK: Now we’re going to look at another of our collections with one of our processing archivists, Sara Ludewig. Sara, welcome to the podcast!

SARA LUDEWIG: Thanks for having me on!
JOHN FENN: Sara, the blog post you wrote celebrated the completion of a Finding Aid to the Linda LaMacchia collection. So first off, describe how you process a collection and how it leads to a Finding Aid.

SARA LUDEWIG: Processing a collection involves several steps with the end goal of enabling better access to and use of archival materials. When materials come to the archives from a donor, they usually have some existing order or system of organization. It’s my job to survey the collection to determine what this original order is and arrange the materials accordingly into series and subseries. The collections at the AFC are multi-format and include A/V, manuscripts, photographs, transparencies, and digital content so I also have to determine the specific housing and storage needs for each format. I tackle any preservation issues that come up and rehouse materials in acid-free boxes and folders as needed. The final step is the creation of the finding aid, which describes the collection material at the folder or item level and enables researchers to use the collection!

STEPHEN WINICK: That’s a lot of work, so thanks for doing it and for explaining it! Now in the blog you talk a little about how the work of processing a collection connects you to the collector.

SARA LUDEWIG: Yes. When I’m processing a collection, I get to read other people’s mail, rummage through their notes, and examine their photo albums. By the time archival processing is finished, I feel like I know the collection’s creator.

JOHN FENN: So who was Linda LaMacchia?

SARA LUDEWIG: Linda LaMacchia was a folklorist and ethnographer who documented the music and lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns, or jomos, in the Kinnaur district of northwestern India between 1985 and 2017. LaMacchia conducted fieldwork in Kinnaur for a period of fifteen months in 1995 and 1996 for her dissertation, while pursuing a PhD in South Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. During this period, she recorded the life stories, songs, and local religious practices of the jomos living in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh near the Tibetan border. These life stories represent three Buddhist sects: Drukpa Kagyu, Gelug, and Nyingma. The LaMacchia collection is a rich resource on women’s religious expression and the role of women in adapting Buddhism to local traditions. It includes 140 sound recordings of songs performed by the jomos, including Tibetan language songs (mgurma) and songs in the local Kinnauri language (githang). It includes over 1,500 photographs of jomos, lamas (monks), Buddhist religious ritual, and the scenery of the Himalayan Mountains. And it includes eleven of LaMacchia’s handwritten journals with detailed field notes documenting her fifteen months of dissertation research.

STEPHEN WINICK: It’s great when a collection has audio and photos and text to really build up a multidimensional look at a community and its traditions. Of course, folks will have to go to the blog to see the photos, but I wonder if we could hear one of the songs?
SARA LUDEWIG: Absolutely! This is “Song of Friends” a githang, or Kinnauri language song, performed by nuns in the village of Kanam.

11:46 [Song of Friends sung by Tibetan Jomos]

JOHN FENN: Wow, again a song from the Linda LaMacchia collection. So these sound recordings are incredibly valuable! But Sara, you also connected strongly to her photos, didn't you?

SARA LUDEWIG: That's right! I had the most fun exploring the photos Linda LaMacchia took during her personal travels in India.

After graduating from Swarthmore College in 1965, LaMacchia frequently traveled to India to visit a college friend. It was during her personal travels in India that her interest in Indian culture grew and she began her research with the jomos living in Kinnaur near the Tibetan border. Her collection documents these travels and includes photographs from tourist sites, time spent with friends, and travels across the Indian subcontinent. I found these photographs particularly exciting because of my own experiences traveling in India.

In 2016, I spent six months living and studying in Hyderabad, India. At the time, I was a college student who had never lived anywhere besides my home state of Minnesota. While in India, I enrolled in classes in Hindi, History, and Anthropology at the University of Hyderabad and lived with a local family. In my spare time I traveled, eager to see as many places as I could. My travels took me from south-central Hyderabad to the northern state of Rajasthan to visit Ambar Fort in Jaipur, to the ghats along the Ganges River in Varanasi, and to the Buddhist pilgrimage site in Sarnath.

As I arranged and rehoused photographs for this collection, I discovered that Linda LaMacchia and I had traveled to many of the same places, and we actually had very similar photos of the same locales and scenes. In the blog we've placed some of mine and some of hers together so people can see how close they are.

STEPHEN WINICK: Yes, there are some striking parallels. There are even some pictures of dogs in both your collections, aren't there?

SARA LUDEWIG: Yes! During her years of research in India, LaMacchia adopted a stray dog that she named Puppy Durga. Puppy Durga and other stray dogs featured in many of her photographs and journals, and at the time of her death she was writing a memoir about her travels with Puppy Durga. I also enjoyed taking photographs of stray dogs and my host brother and I even came up with names for the neighborhood strays.

JOHN FENN: So what do you think this all tells us about archival collections?

SARA LUDEWIG: The excitement I felt at seeing my own travels and experiences reflected in LaMacchia’s folklife documentation showed me that these archival
collections have something to offer all of us. These materials are not just for academic study, they also offer unexpected and unique opportunities to connect with people and places on a personal level.

STEPHEN WINICK: We couldn’t agree more, Sara. Thanks so much for being with us today.

JOHN FENN: Yes, thanks Sara!

15:50 SARA LUDEWIG: Any time, thanks for having me!

JOHN FENN: When we discuss Asian and Pacific Island programs and collections, really we have to discuss the Homegrown concert series.

STEPHEN WINICK: Yes, I agree! Now our producer for these concerts, Thea Austen, is off on vacation while we’re recording this, so you’re going to have to put up with me. But the good thing is, I often get to know the artists pretty well through doing an interview, which also becomes part of the series and the collection.

JOHN FENN: So in recent years, what have we offered in Asian and Pacific Island cultures?

STEPHEN WINICK: We’ve had quite a few. We already mentioned Herb Ohta Jr., who is Hawaiian of Japanese descent. We had Ann Yao, a Chinese-American guzheng or zither player, we’ve had Chao Tian, who plays Chinese Hammered Dulcimer, Chum Ngek from Cambodia, and going back before the pandemic we’ve had many Indian groups, Tuvan music with Alash ensemble, Lao music and dance, Korean music and dance, and much more. And our Pacific Islander offerings include Samoan dance and several different kinds of Hawaiian Music and dance. We try to have a few Asian and pacific Islander heritage offerings each year.

JOHN FENN: So did you bring one concert to share with us?

STEPHEN WINICK: I did! Just this month, I added to the Homegrown Plus blog series our 2021 concert with Tenzin Choegyal. He is from a Nomadic family in Tibet, but his family left due to the Chinese occupation, so he was raised in India in a refugee or exile community with the Dalai Lama as his political and spiritual leader. And while there, he learned several genres of traditional music and song from his nomadic background. And after he grew up, he moved to Australia where he lives now. So he’s not Asian American per se, but we think his music and experience are very relevant to Asian American communities. Tenzin performs all over the world, and one of his recent albums called “Songs of the Bardo,” on which he collaborated with Laurie Anderson and Jesse Paris Smith, was nominated for a Grammy award.

JOHN FENN: Yes, he’s a really inspiring performer, so let’s hear him. This is Tenzin Choegyal singing and playing the traditional 3-stringed lute or dranyen.
23:10 JOHN FENN: Tenzin Choegyal’s Little Bird. And the Homegrown Plus blogs also include an interview video, so what can you tell us about your interview with Tenzin?

STEPHEN WINICK: It was a fascinating conversation. This was the height of the Pandemic and he had been traveling, so when people got back to Australia they had to quarantine for about two weeks. So he was in a quarantine hotel. And he told me he was treating it like a meditation cave, and deciding what to do with his time in the cave. And he decided to use the time partly to study Tibetan mythology and folklore using online resources. So he told me one of the stories, about Milarepa, an important yogi and spiritual poet from the 11th and 12th centuries. So let’s hear some of that story!

24:00 TENZIN CHOEGYAL: There was one story that I read a couple of days ago and you know, Milarepa, you know when he was meditating in his caves, he used to make soup out of nettle, the stinging nettles, yeah? The big the tip of these -- the tip leaves of the stinging nettles, they make a really beautiful soup. And so as he one day as he was, you know, going to cook his soup, he needed to go out and collect firewood. He left his cave, and after a while, he came back and as he came back, he sees that his whole cave was taken over by demons. And as he saw all these demons and demonesses has taken over the cave, then he quickly rises to the occasion and says I need all these demons out of my cave, but how can I do that? So he starts teaching them about nature of things and about the experience of existence and non-existence and love and compassion and all this. So he sat on his meditating -- meditation cushion in the space that he normally meditates and starts giving teachings to them. As he started giving teachings to them about the non-existence and the nature of all phenomenon and all these, one by one, all these demons started disappearing and dissolve into the space, and as it dissolved into the space, there was one demon that with his fangs coming out and his nails like yeah, and all like super proudly stood steadfast in front of him, and not going to go anywhere. And so Milarepa thought, “I have done all the ways, whatever I can to shoo them away, but this particular demon is like steadfast. And the particular demon which has super boasting I written on him. So he stood steadfast, and then Milarepa just thought okay, there’s no way I can get rid of this guy, so how about I offer myself to this demon and maybe that’s the way maybe he will go away. So this -- so Milarepa just goes in front of his mouth, this, like with the fangs and his mouth, offers his himself his whole body in front of him, and says, eat me if you wish. And as soon as he offered himself to this giant of a demon, the demon disappeared and dissolved into the space. So in a way -- I think the story is about Milarepa dealing with his own demons.

STEPHEN WINICK: Sure.

TENZIN CHOEGYAL: Yeah, so it's kind of like I think it's a really nice like very beautifully woven story, but at the same time it, you know, like you could sing that whole story.

STEPHEN WINICK: Yeah.
TENZIN CHOEGYAL: Like could you hear a song with that? Like, I think you can sing that whole story.

STEPHEN WINICK: It sort of reminds me of you in your hotel room too, because you mentioned, you know, that you can decide what are you going to do with your time in your cave, you know? And that's sort of similar to what the decision that Milarepa has to make there, so wonderful. Thank you for the story.

27:56 JOHN FENN: Again, a story about Milarepa from Steve’s interview with Tenzin Choegyal, as we celebrate Asian Pacific American Heritage. And just like that concert, our whole Homegrown Plus series has the concert and the interview together in one blog post, along with links to other resources at the Library and beyond.

STEPHEN WINICK: So that was just a taste of our recent blogs on Asian Pacific topics, but you can find many more relevant blog posts on Folklife Today by going to blogs.loc.gov/folklife and using the Asian American History and Pacific Islander History categories.

28:32 JOHN FENN: That’s about all we have time for this time. We’re going to let Tenzin play us out on the bamboo flute, but before that let’s thank our guests Sara Ludewig and Allina Migoni.

STEPHEN WINICK: and we also thank our performers and lecturers Robert Provine, Herb Ohta, Jr., and Tenzin Choegyal. You can find the full video of their lectures and concerts on the blog.

JOHN: Let’s thank our engineer Jon Gold, and our friends throughout Library who help us produce and deploy this podcast.

STEPHEN WINICK: We’ll see you next time on Folklife Today...here’s Tenzin Choegyal with the flute piece Lotus Born.

29:07 [Flute Music: Tenzin Cheogyal plays “Lotus Born”]