

Objectives

The rich cultural heritage of Okinawa - an “Asian crossroads”, both historically and culturally - enjoys a unique identity even within Japan, and is receiving interest from all over the world. In the Okinawa International forum, we focused on *Utaki* (places considered to have a sacred atmosphere), festivals and traditional performing arts such as music and dances in Okinawa. These are all part of an intangible cultural heritage that is still alive today, amid everyday life all over Okinawa. We considered the significance of *Utaki* and traditional performing arts, which the people of Okinawa have handed down through the generations, and how they relate to other parts of Asia. Finally, together with overseas experts and community leaders attending the Forum, we examined what we should do to preserve these precious cultural heritages for future generations.

What is it that *Utaki* and traditional performing arts in Okinawa are attracting so much interest now? To begin with, they have an important characteristic that has been difficult to find anywhere else in Japan. *Utaki* and traditional performing arts in Okinawa are “living cultural heritage”. Still today, they are deeply entwined with the hearts and minds of people who live on the islands of Okinawa, and closely linked to the very roots of their existence. Such deep links between daily life and culture used to exist all over Japan, in a wealth of forms. However, owing to the urbanization of lifestyles and the impact of development, they have been lost in many places, without even being missed. In many parts of the country, people have come to reappraise the rich and precious nature of culture that has been lost. But it is not easy to revive lost culture in this way. Even in Okinawa, better endowed than anywhere in Japan in the richness of its folk culture, this has also become an issue. For it has been pointed out in recent years that, owing to development and changes through successive generations, traditional lifestyles that were once considered natural have been transformed. And now, people are trying to think what we can do to pass on the living culture and traditional performing arts, handed down by our ancestors, to the future generations. These people are engaged in various initiatives throughout the islands of Okinawa.

Meanwhile, turning our attention to other parts of Asia that share close historical and geographical links with Okinawa, we see other people engaged in similar efforts to pass on their unique cultural heritage to posterity. In the Philippines,

for example, the Ifugao people are attempting to preserve their unique living culture of rice cultivation. This is a comprehensive effort that includes both tangible and intangible aspects - not just rice cultivation as traditional agriculture, but also the preservation of song, dance and other traditional performing arts that have been nurtured amid agricultural work, and the beautiful landscapes of terraced paddy fields. Then there are the Akha and Hani ethnic people that inhabit mountainous regions straddling northern Thailand, the Yunnan province of China, Laos and Myanmar. These people are engaged in efforts to pass on to younger generations the wealth of folklore that has been orally handed down from their ancestors. The task of preserving intangible cultural heritage such as language, songs, and dances, nurtured and handed down amid daily life, presents different levels of difficulty to that of preserving tangible cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the experiences in Okinawa to tackle this difficult theme have several points in common with those of people in the Philippines, Thailand, and elsewhere, in terms of their problem awareness. It must surely be possible to learn lessons from each other's experiences.

Broadening the perspective further to the world as a whole, a "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris last autumn, and there is increasing concern over the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO has achieved much in preserving the important cultural heritage of humanity through its "world heritage" system, aimed at tangible cultural heritage, such as historical sites and buildings, and natural heritage. But the preservation and transmission of traditional performing arts, oral traditions and other forms of intangible cultural heritage could still be described as a new field. Traditional performing arts, festivals, and other intangible cultural heritage occupy a very important position in cultural heritage of Okinawa. On the islands of Okinawa, people have had the precious experience of protecting a rich intangible cultural heritage through their own efforts, and this is attracting interest in UNESCO and other bodies concerned with intangible cultural heritage.

In the Forum, we investigated ways of preserving this rich cultural heritage in future, together with participants from Asia and other parts of the world, by reappraising how the cultural heritage of Okinawa, including *Utaki* and traditional performing arts, have been passed down by the people of Okinawa. We hope to offer new ideas on preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, as a message from Okinawa.