

## 《Session 1》

## The Significance of *Utaki* as Cultural Heritage: Toward Integrated Preservation of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

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### Introduction

“*Utaki*” is a unique sacred spaces that is found on the islands of Okinawa. Many *Utaki* are small forests that are thick with subtropical vegetation, and they are places that have been protected as places for religious services for honoring the deities that guard villages. Ancestral deities and heroes of the islands, deities of nature (trees, cereals, animals, fire, water, the sea, etc.), as well as various divine spirits connected with human activity and ideas (travel, peace, etc.) are recognized as residing in the *Utaki*. There are also *Utaki* for worshipping faraway deities. It is thought that the *Utaki* have been places of security and inspiration for the Okinawan people since ancient times—perhaps for hundreds or even thousands of years. They were incorporated into the governing system during the Ryukyu Dynasty, and served as the spiritual foundation of the Dynasty. The “*Ryukyukoku Yuraiki?*” (Origin of the Ryukyu Nation) of the 18th Century mentions some 770 *Utaki*. This is the number of so-called “officially recognized *Utaki*”, and it is doubtless that the number of small *Utaki* in Okinawa’s villages reached several times this figure. However, many *Utaki* have been lost as the region was turned into a battlefield in the mid-20th Century, as areas were converted into military bases in the postwar years, and as urbanization has progressed. Despite the fact, there are still many *Utaki* forests on the Okinawa islands that have been protected and miraculously survive today. These areas are serving as bases where colorful festivals and the performing arts and tournaments that accompany them are held. A visitor to one of these festivals will likely be astonished that the world of the deities continues to survive, be amazed by the energy of village residents, and be captivated by the charm of the event. Indeed, I can count myself as an admirer of Okinawa’s festivals.

Given that Okinawa's sacred spaces—the *Utaki*—form the central theme of this Okinawa Forum, the primary topic we must address becomes the fleshing out of the characteristics of these spaces. Then, we must identify the significance that these spaces have as cultural heritage, while drawing comparisons with how countries in East Asia are making similar efforts to protect their “sacred spaces”, as a secondary topic. These points shall be covered in the First Session. The Second Session shall feature discussions on both protection of these sacred spaces and realistic policies toward town development amid depopulation and urbanization. The objective of these discussions shall be to discover hints for viewing similar cultural heritage in the world.

### **Mysterious experiences at *Utaki***

Before getting to the main points of my presentation, I would like to tell you about some fairly “mysterious experiences” that I have had at *Utaki*. For a visitor such as myself, *Utaki* are places that cannot be entered at will. There are some islands where *Utaki* are strictly off limits to outsiders (and particularly to men), and we must observe this rule. However, as is the case with Sefa *Utaki* on Okinawa's main island, which is registered as a World Heritage site, there are some forests where visitors are given limited permission to enter. On the Yaeyama Islands, located in the southwest of the chain, *Utaki* are referred to as “*on*” among other names. I would like to tell you about the first time I visited a quiet “*on*” that is normally absent of people. There was a pathway of white coral sand through the forest that led to a small inner garden. Behind the garden was a sacred space called an “*ibi*”. On this particular island, entry into the “*ibi*” is prohibited to all except women who lead religious ceremonies. However, I could peek into it from a stone gate at the worship area. I could see a narrow area surrounded by thick growths of Chinese fan palms (*kuba*), Formosa palms (*mani*), and other subtropical trees. While observing this space, I noticed a large fan-shaped Chinese palm leaf in the sunlight move as if bowing in my direction. This happened even though there was no wind. I thought it very spooky that only one leaf would move without any wind. At another *Utaki*, I saw the tip of a long and narrow Formosa palm leaf move as if beckoning me. This mysterious movement sent shivers down my spine. I also saw a large white butterfly (rice-paper butterfly) about the size of my palm float in the air as if there were no gravity. I felt as if I was witnessing a “spirit”. While I understand that these phenomena are probably everyday occurrences, for me they were sufficiently mysterious. At a ceremony

site of bare rock that is located at the very back of Sefa Utaki on the main island of Okinawa, some students of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and I saw small light - reminiscent of the spirit of a dead person - float into the air then disappear quickly. I assumed that I had probably seen a ray from the setting sun peeking through a hole in the thick forest, but even so, I was excited to think that I had witnessed a very special moment. So, even though nothing particularly extraordinary had occurred, the forest of the *Utaki* I visited still had sufficient atmosphere to make me feel a spiritual presence. In this way, a visitor to the *Ungami* of northern part of Okinawa Main Island, the *Tanadui* or *Puri* of the Yaeyama Islands, or other such ceremonies can get a real sense of how the *Utaki* continue to survive as important places of inspiration and security in the spiritual lives of local residents. Such visitors can also come to fully appreciate the mysterious ceremonies and disciplined and diverse performing arts that emanate from these sacred spaces.

### **Nature and culture in the *Utaki***

While “*Utaki*” is both the official and academic name for sacred spaces in Okinawa, they are also known by a variety of other names at the regional level, including, *Utaki*, *ugan*, *Gusuku*, *yama*, *on*, and *wa*. In this forum, we are engaged in a discussion that is based on the results of an excavation study on the historical relationship between *Gusuku* and *Utaki* that was conducted by Mr. ASATO Susumu. Of the some 300 places called “*Gusuku*”, there are large sites that are ruins of fortifications. With the exception of Shuri Castle, it is said that, since modern times, most of these sites have been *Utaki* of a religious nature that are typical of villages. Interpretation of the multilayered relationships of these kinds of ruins and sacred areas is a topic that will likely become significant for the Angkor ruins in Cambodia. Mr. ANG Choulean, who has been researching the religious lives of people who live within these great ruins, discusses the multilayered relationship between the various types of sacred areas and ruins that survive to this day. For example, he mentions the construction of a temple incorporating a giant rock that existed as a sacred place before construction, and today this giant rock, which is reminiscent of a phallus (*ringa*), has become exposed because the brick structure around it has partially collapses. The rock thus continues as a religious object. This is symbolic of the multilayered relationship between ruins and sacred places. Many of the *Utaki* of Okinawa are small forests located within villages or at the bases of hills situated behind villages. Perhaps another characteris-

tic of these sacred spaces is the fact that they are adjacent to residential areas. However, *Utaki* forests are not simply protected “small natural environments” that are similar to bird or animal sanctuaries. To some degree, they are cultural spaces that have been shaped based on a shared configuration. For example, they have a certain territory that is delineated by stone walls or trees. They have an entrance, an entrance path, and an inner garden that is used for religious ceremonies. And behind this garden is a particularly sacred area. Some contain rows of large stones or caves, and in many cases they are void of manmade items. In all cases, a minimum of manmade objects—such as stone walls to indicate boundaries or divisions; structures, incense burners, and other instruments for religious ceremonies; etc.—are used to signify the special nature of the “place”. Originally, these items were perhaps set up for festivals and removed after festivities were over. Thus, it may be said that the *Utaki* is a “natural environment” that has been purposely allowed to remain. However, if looked at from an overall perspective, the *Utaki* is not nature in itself; it is in fact a place that has been specially selected because it gives people a sense of the mysterious. Thus, over time, it becomes a manmade space whose special qualities have been preserved. In areas with a rich natural environment, the *Utaki* is surrounded by nature, and thus at first glance it appears to be natural. However, it takes exhaustive efforts by local residents to maintain the *Utaki* as a small cultural space. Without these efforts, the insatiable appetite of the wild forest would easily devour it. On the other hand, in regions in which urbanization is advancing, an *Utaki* can appear to be a small natural space that has miraculously survived between houses and buildings. However, this actually points to the fact it is a cultural space that has been maintained by the spiritual support of local residents. Conversely, when this support wanes, the *Utaki* is simply to be considered an empty lot, and it becomes very likely that it will become quickly devoured by the insatiable appetite of public works projects. In other words, we must recognize anew that it is the borderline nature of *Utaki* as natural and cultural heritage as well as the delicate connection between their tangible and intangible aspects that make maintaining *Utaki* difficult. This is also likely the case for many “places” that are recognized as sacred spaces in such regions as Asia and Africa.

### **“Place” is the “linchpin” for passing on intangible cultural heritage**

*Utaki* is a place where intangible cultural heritage that are representative of Okinawa regularly appears. Many times throughout the year, these forest spaces (where ordinarily “nothing happens”) become places where religious rituals to

welcome the deities are performed and stages for performing arts that are offered to the deities. In general, items referred to as “intangible cultural heritage” are artistry and knowledge that has been stored in people’s bodies and minds. These heritage are passed down over the generations and take form for the first time when “time” and “place” come together. Furthermore, if we consider the appearance of intangible heritage, such items as songs and dances can change or disappear in an instant; indeed, this accounts for the “intangibility” of “intangible heritage”. However, we expect that the repetition of these activities will result in the emergence of a “form” having a specific shape. In other words, while something is “intangible”, it inevitably has an aspect that is “tangible”. As tradition is handed down and inherited, artistry-such as stage art which is expressed primarily through the talent of the individual-can be performed at any time if the conditions are right. However, because ceremonial rituals and folk performing arts that are parts of folk culture are shared and handed down by local groups, there are many elements for which the local natural environment (time and place) and social relationships (people) cannot be separated. Above all, for intangible heritage that have come to be expressed at specific “places” and at specific “times” (such as religious ceremonies and performing arts offered at *Utaki*, which is the theme of this forum), the natural environment of the “place” often plays an important role. Celestial objects, topography, climate of each season, animals and plants, and other items have a connection. For example, emphasis may be placed on the appearance of the moon and its phase or on low tide, or special leaves of trees or grasses may be used in the construction of a stage or in dancers’ costumes. Nature-related knowledge and skill (for example, in decoration of stages, creation of objects used in performing arts, etc.) are also important elements of intangible cultural heritage. Words of prayer and ritual activities are also expressed within the limitations of “place” and “time”. Even many dances and songs have become activities that are presented only before the deities being worshipped. Stage arts of this sort cannot be easily carried on by just one person. Thus, rituals and performing arts that are not easily removed from their original sites must be abbreviated for performance at different “places” or “times”. Then, the possibility emerges that these rituals and arts will become abbreviated even at their original sites. Furthermore, the type of labor being expressed in a performing art and the instruments used often become stylized, and the original knowledge and skills tend to become lost. Here, local museums and other organizations are expected to play a role in their preservation. Then, there is the labor represented in performing arts during festivals that forms the background of the festival. At the *Tanadui* (seed gathering festival) on Taketomi Island, the

work of collecting chestnuts and picking seeds as well as net-fishing for small fish (called “*suru*”) is being continued by individuals. However, if only performing arts that mimic these activities are handed down, the original wisdom and skills behind them will most certainly be forgotten. Thus, the *Utaki*, as “space” where these intangible cultural heritage are expressed, serves as the “linchpin” that comprehensively integrates various tangible and intangible aspects.

I see the *Utaki* as a kind of “hole” or “door” to the supernatural world that has been built near the homes of Okinawans. On festival days, this door is opened and the deities come to visit, and in this way the *Utaki* becomes a place where the deities and people can come together.

As I have just mentioned, *Utaki* are positioned at the border between natural and cultural heritage. They are a typical example of a cultural heritage that has been preserved through the delicate balance of both tangible and intangible aspects. It is thought that very similar types of cultural heritage exist among various peoples of Asia and Africa who have a view of the spirits that is based on worship of nature and their ancestors (i.e., so-called “animism”, etc.).

## Spaces for religious ceremonies and spaces for production

Not only do the intangible technologies and rituals of spaces for religious services need to be passed down, but so do those of spaces for production. This forum has taken up the theme of “terraced paddy fields”, which are widely seen in the paddy field regions of East Asia, as a form of living-space and production-space asset. If you stand atop a rise having a view of a large “terraced paddy field”, you will be impressed by the view of multiple layers of stone walls that are as grand as massive castle walls. However, the value of terraced paddy fields as cultural heritage does not stop at their stone wall structures; we must not forget that there is value in the intangible cultural heritage that has been accumulated through their cultivation. The technology for cultivating rice plants - including skill in building stone walls and in managing water for paddy fields - functions in an integrated manner and has resulted in the emergence of terraced paddy fields with beautiful rows of green seedlings and golden rice plants. This production environment is reflected in the rituals and performing arts that are passed along by the people who work in these fields. Thus, a variety of intangible cultural heritage are condensed in this “place” known as the terraced field. What impresses us

when we view these fields is the fact that they are a “living tangible cultural heritage”. We must therefore examine measures that take a comprehensive view of intangible cultural heritage that have been handed down together with tangible heritage. We must do this so that the stone walls will not simply become “ruins” that have lost the intangible culture that supported them.

The *Utaki* of Okinawa are facing a crisis that is especially arised from urbanization and development through public works projects. However, having said that, in such places as the Yaeyama Islands, the environments of *Utaki* are being preserved as ceremonial spaces amid efforts to protect the traditional scenery of villages, as is the case on Taketomi Island. There are regions in which active efforts are being made to pass down tangible and intangible cultural heritage that form the core of these spaces. These efforts include the fostering of people (i.e., “human resources”) who will take the lead in this area. It is thought that the integrated and comprehensive preservation of these tangible and intangible heritage as cultural heritage in those places is extremely significant, even when viewed at an international level. By establishing standards for evaluating the “cultural integration” of nature and culture, and of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, we should be able to give great power to local people that are richly preserving similar intangible cultural heritage that surround “sacred spaces”.