

《Session 1》

Ceremonial Spaces and Traditional Performing Arts in Okinawa

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To begin, I would like to give an outline of *Utaki*, which are ceremonial spaces in Okinawa, and the shamans that preside over festivals at *Utaki* and other ceremonial places.

Places where festivals are held in Okinawa (in other words, sacred areas), are given such names as *ugan*, *uganju*, *on*, *Gusuku*, *suku*, *mui*, and *wa*. Together, they are referred to as “*Utaki*”, written with the kanji characters 御嶽. While serving as a place for festivals, the *Utaki* also serves as the core of the village’s religious beliefs.

Utaki have a variety of personalities. They are places where the village honors its ancestors, places where deities descend to earth, and places where people worship distant deities or sacred places. There are some areas where more than one *Utaki* may exist in a single town. There may also be cases where, with focus on the *Utaki*, a village may be a ceremonial unit comprised of several ceremonial groups that are made up primarily of descendants of the village’s founding family.

On the main island of Okinawa, a village’s oldest founding family (or, in other words, the head family) is called “*niya*”, and the head of the family (male) is called “*nitchu*”. One of his sisters is called either “*nigami*” or “*nigan*”, and she plays the leading role in the village’s festivals. On the main island, each group of blood relations is referred to as “*monchu*”. The *nigan* forms ceremonial groups that accompany female “shamans” that are selected from each *monchu* and manages the village’s festival. These shamans conduct rituals at ceremonial places called *Utaki* or *kami-ashagi* (or sometimes called simply *ashagi*). *Kami-ashagi* refers to ceremonial places in the northern part of the main island; ceremonial places called “*toun*” are found in villages in the south.

On the other hand, on Miyako Island, there is a small hut near the *Utaki* where the shamans pray all night and conduct rituals. On the Yaeyama Islands,

there is a place within the *Utaki* where deities come to sit (called “*ibi*”, “*ibe*”, or “*ubu*”) that is most sacred, and before this place stands a building that serves as an altar. The shamans pray throughout the night in this building. In the cases of Miyako Island and the Yaeyama Islands, there is a female shaman (called “*tsukasa*”) for each of the several *Utaki* that exist in one village. A group of shrine parishioners is formed for each *Utaki*, and each village resident has an *Utaki* to which he or she belongs.

On the main island of Okinawa, a governing shaman system called the “*norō*” system was established above the ceremonial organization of the village (at the top of which stood the *nigan* and *nitchu*), as was a system of female priests. A female shaman called the “*norō*”, who was appointed by the Ryukyu Kingdom, reigned over these systems. Each *Utaki* on Miyako Island and the Yaeyama Islands had a *tsukasa* who was commanded by an “*oamo*”.

Here, I would like to discuss the relationship between the “shaman” and the “festival”. In small villages, the shaman must take responsibility for all parts of the festival, whether it be large or small. In recent years, however, changes have been made to the ceremonial process of festivals because of a lack of people who can succeed as the shamans. Previously, the shamans had to pray all night in the *Utaki* and conduct strict rituals when receiving the deities; however, due to the lack of people who can serve as the shamans, the district leader or director of the local town hall steps in to offer food and sake to the deities. In some villages this ceremony is completed in a short period of time. And in many cases the persons representing the shamans do not conduct the ceremony during the time for all-night prayer, but rather the next morning.

The mantras (prayers) and hymns (songs) that are part of ceremonies are becoming lost. Because these mantras, hymns, and ceremonial procedures are passed down from one shaman to the next, these important rituals will vanish if there is no one to inherit this role.

There are many reasons behind the dwindling number of people able to inherit the role of shaman. As I mentioned earlier, once a person becomes a shaman, she must participate in and direct the village’s festivals. Villages hold some 20 festivals each year, and participating in these festivals is burdensome; thus, some people refuse to accept the role. There are also shamans who, due to personal circumstances, do not live in their villages but rather on other islands. Some of these people say that this makes participation quite taxing as they must travel to their home island each time a festival is held. There are also cases where people who should inherit the role of shaman live far away in mainland Japan.

And there are other cases where these people cannot serve as shamans because they have other religious beliefs.

Let us take one of the Yaeyama Islands as an example. There are five *Utaki* on this island, and two of them have *tsukasas*. These two *tsukasas* cannot fill in at the remaining three *Utaki* when no *tsukasa* is present. Consequently, for all practical purposes, these *Utaki* cannot function in village festivals if successors are not born.

Under these circumstances, the lack of people to inherit the role of shaman is truly becoming serious. And, together with this lack of successors, there is a tendency for the ceremonial organization (which is centered on the shamans) to change and become a mere shell of its previous form. Thus, it is a fact that festival ceremonies are in decay. As a result, when looking at festivals as a whole, we see that their connection with religious matters is tending to become abbreviated or simplified. On the other hand, performing arts programs of a lighthearted religious nature are becoming more and more overblown.

Festivals create a time and space that only the particular village's residents can understand, and thus the festivals must remain in a form that is acceptable to them.

However, as I have just explained, major changes are occurring in the connections among *Utaki*, shamans, festivals, and folk performing arts. How village residents are acting to deal with these changes is something that requires attention.