

《Session 2》

**Efforts to Pass Down the Traditional
Performing Arts of Taketomi Island**

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Suuninjuu narioori shikaitou miihaiyuu. Kyuyya teedounnu Utaki tou shimahitounu kurashinu hanashiyu shishsharunara. (In the Taketomi dialect)

[Hello, everyone. Thank you for coming today. I'd like to tell you about Utaki on Taketomi Island and daily lives of residents of the island.]

There are 28 *Utaki* on Taketomi Island. Among these are those called *muuyama*, *yaayama*, and *kunuyama*. Among these, the *muuyama Utaki* have particular spiritual importance for residents of the island. According to an ancient legend, there once were six chieftains who built six villages on Taketomi Island, and they are enshrined at each *Utaki* as ancestors of those villagers. All of us who were born and raised on Taketomi Island have served as parishioners (called *onbi* or *yamaninju*) at one of the *muuyama Utaki*. For us, they are places of inspiration and comfort, and they serve to remind us that we were born on the island. Today's children are too busy, but when I was a child, we used to climb the trees and play in the gardens of the *Utaki*, so they were a familiar part of our lives. However, even now, they remain as places for prayer during such events as the "Harvest Festival" (*Pui*) and "Tanedri Festival" (*Tanadui*) and as spaces we wish to revere as sacred. As I said, today's children are busy, but so are their parents, who these days work in the tourist trade. But as a festival day approaches, everybody comes together to prepare. The autumn *Tanadui*, in particular, is a time when many performing arts (offerings called *kankumuchi*) are presented, so the children must undergo special training during their summer vacation. The adults, too, practice every night from about one month prior to the festival. And even though the island is overflowing with tourists during the two-day festival period, these adults take a break from their usual tourism activities.

In Okinawa, women are said to be born with high spirituality (*shijidasai*).

They are revered as *bunarungan* or *bubamangan* who use their spiritual force to protect men. Women are the ones allowed to enter the rear of the *Utaki* (called *ubu*). Food offerings, which are prepared by men, are placed in an “offerings shed” at the side of the *Utaki*. The offerings are offered to the deities through a female priest (called *kantsukasa*).

When the day of the Harvest Festival (“*pu*”) approaches, each family began weaving. It is said that divine spirits reside within the women’s weavings. I always looked forward to receiving a new kimono during this festival. The *kantsukasa* wears an *uchikake* overgarment (called “*toubishin*”) over her that was woven from hemp and banana plant. I know a Taketomi man who married a woman in Tokyo, and the couple returned to Taketomi in their later years. The man’s wife studied this kind of weaving very hard, and the first thing she made was a festival kimono for her husband. In this way, she has truly immersed herself in the Okinawan way.

The children occasionally (*buimikizaru*) see a world that differs from the usual course of events in those lives of adults. During the festival, they follow their grandparents and mothers to the *Utaki*, and before they know it, the *Utaki* becomes part of them. Because the *muuyama* represents their own guardian deities, they learn of the deep connection between their deities and their own birth, and how they are allowed to live under their deities’ protection. While also existing as a sacred space, the *Utaki* is a place to become aware of history and to become one with nature and the traditional culture.

Here, I would like to look at how this traditional culture is passed on in our daily lives. By participating in rituals and events, people learn of the morals and discipline involved in being a member of the island community. They also learn responsibility and a sense of community. Although there are many parts of this that are invisible to the eye, we believe that behind these invisible parts is great, awesome, and unlimited power. We present dances in our festivals as proof of this power. These offering dances are repeated several times every year. This repetition signifies awe for the deities as well as delight and gratitude for being allowed to live.

For 35 years I have been working to preserve and pass on our folk performing arts. And 10 years ago I actually began teaching because I feel, as the number of school children falls, we must take earlier steps to teach them. When I teach children, I begin by putting them in the frame of mind that dancing is an offering to the deities. Even if only vaguely, the children are mindful of this as they learn how to dance. Of course, an understanding of the dialect is necessary if one is to know the meanings of the songs. The offering is expressed in the movement of the hands and feet, but if these acts are not done with a feeling of constant gratitude,

the offering will not be communicated to the deities. I tell this not only to the children but also young wives who have come to Taketomi from mainland Japan.

However, there are some times when people are halfhearted about dancing during practice. At times like these, communication in daily life becomes even more important. The word “*utsugumi*” has been passed down on Taketomi since ancient times. This word means to join arms, to join hearts, and to work together toward a single goal. On Taketomi, we have a superb environment for fostering the *utsugumi* spirit. The rows of houses with red tiles, the stone walls made of coral limestone, the roads of white sand. We sweep and clean these roads every morning. And we stand and chat (*yuntaku*) on these roads while admiring the flowers blossoming on either side. In this way, we have heart-to-heart communication. Celebrating this daily environment and immersing ourselves in our performing arts gives us the power to live. In other words, nature and culture give those of us who call this island home a reason to be in this world.

What is important is how we communicate these things to people who move to the island from outside. Of Taketomi’s current population of 327 people, over 100 have come from outside. This means that one-third of the island’s residents have married a local or are living in rented housing. And even these people have become *Utaki* parishioners (*onbi*). For example, the wife of my neighbor, Mr. NITTA, is from Fukuoka. The NITTAs belong to the Hariwaka *Utaki* (*Baiya On*)*, so she became an *onbi* there. My husband is from Nagasaki, so he of course entered the *Utaki* of the UESEDO family: Kumahara *Utaki* (*Kumaara On*)*. But a carpenter from Kume Island who came to Taketomi 12 years ago to marry a local woman did not enter his wife’s *Utaki*, but rather Kumahara *Utaki* (*Kumaara On*)*, which represents the deity of trees.

While, in general, boys become *onbi* of their father’s *Utaki*, and girls become *onbi* of their mother’s, people from outside the island are recognized as Taketomi residents simply by becoming *onbi*. In recent years there has been a gradual increase in the number of married couples from the Japanese mainland who, with the intention of becoming true Taketomi residents, undergo training in our performing arts, take the stage, and enter an *Utaki* that suits their own philosophy. If we bring in new people that identify with our lifestyle, and if islanders who have left return, I have full confidence that our *Utaki*-centered prayers and performing arts will survive for many years to come, and that the traditional culture of Taketomi Island will be preserved.

* There are two types of names for *Utaki*. Ones in normal letters are used by mainlanders, while ones in italics are used by people of Taketomi Island.