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Historical Background of Okinawan Dances

(I)

By *Fujiko Shimizu**

In this paper, mention is given to part of the historical background of Okinawan dances.

The public entertainments in Okinawa have attained a characteristic flourish as they were affected by China and southern nations and also by Court dances and music, *nō*, teenagers' *kabuki* and fellows' *kabuki* in Japan proper.

From the fact that these public entertainments have been protected with great care and handed down to the present day, it can be known that the Okinawan people, who were under many hardships of isolated islands and fatal history, have constantly sought peace with eagerness through traditional culture in the midst of all sorts of suffering.

Concerning the origination of dances, no affirmative theory exists even today. However, the oldest work by which the state of Okinawan dances in the old days can be seen in "*Omoro Soshi* (Vol. 9)," the oldest collection of songs in Okinawa, which were sung during the period from the 12th Century to the 17th Century. *Omoro* are songs pertaining to the creation of the world, prayers to God, glorification of heroes, navigations, encouragement of fighters and others. It is considered that these songs have their origin in the faith peculiar to the old Ryukyus, and that they differentiated and developed from the oracles (*miseseru*) told by "*norō*" who were female Shinto priests.

"*Omoro Soshi* (Vol. 9)" is classified by *Omoro* researchers as "*Koneri Omoro*." As *Koneri* means kneading hands, "*Koneri Omoro*" are choreographed dances.

"*Omoro*" were sung most popularly during the 15th Century; they were gradually replaced by songs of sonnet type as the Japanese balalaika was introduced, and after the advance of Lord Shimazu of Satsuma Clan in 1609, these songs vanished before long.

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By the advance of Lord Shimazu into the Ryukyus, Southern Satsuma Confucianism influenced the islands strongly and brought about great changes on the culture of Okinawa. The principal requirement was to become well versed in art and science of Japan proper, producing many scholars on Japanese literature.

Ryukyuans gave their minds to the songs which became popular in place of "*Omoro*" and to the creation of *kumiodori* (plays dramatized based on historical facts) which were developed as new literature; it is said that the 18th Century was a period during which Okinawan culture came into bloom.

Generally, dances were played and enjoyed on every occasion. At the government, it became customary to get "*kansen* dances" performed as an official affair in order to entertain envoys and to have Shogunate view when the governor of the Ryukyus went up to Edo (the present Tokyo). Since these dances were managed by the government, they were called national dances.

Included in the national "*kansen* dances" are *Omoro*, *iriko* dances, teenagers' dances, two years old dances, women's dances, *nō* comedies, *kumibo*, lion dances and *kumiodori*. Among these dances, those which are especially famed are *kumiodori* and women's dances created by Chokun Tamagusuku, the dance magistrate of 1718. Okinawan dances were elevated to the level where they can be proud of their value in the world, by making *kumiodori* and women's dances as their cardinal point.

Chokun was not only well versed on the historical facts and archaic words but also he could have knowledge of dances and music by minutely viewing public entertainments of Japan proper on his way to Edo and back to Satsuma.

Accordingly, though he used the music and dances peculiar to Okinawa, as to the stage and costume and others, he used fairly much those for *nō* and *kabuki* as reference. *Kumiodori* was designated by the nation as immaterial cultural property.

The public entertainments of Okinawa—mainly *kansen* dances and Edo *nobori*—were inherited by "*Odori nenbutsu*" (chanting of prayers while dancing), "August dances" performed in farm villages on occasions of harvest festivals and others while they were maintained among the Shuri class. However, due to the discontinuance of envoys' visits to Okinawa and Okinawan governor's visits to Edo with the abolition of clans and establishment of prefectures, the Court dances lost their ground; theaters were built newly and dances became to be viewed freely by the people, and thereafter becoming popular as they absorbed new elements.