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Historical Background of Okinawan Dances

(II)

By *Fujiko Shimizu**

The history of the Ryukyus can just be expressed by distress of isolated islands and as a tragedy of political fate. However, it can be known very well through the existing public entertainment culture that the Okinawan people, standing in the midst of various kinds of hardship, wished for peace.

In this article, continuing to the previous one, discussion is made on the historical background of the establishment of Ryukyuan songs beginning with Edonobori (going up to Edo—present Tokyo) and “Omoro” (ballads in ancient Ryukyu) and ending with samisen music.

1) It may be said that the history of official interchanges between Japan and the Ryukyus began after the establishment of Tokugawa Shogunate, namely in the 14th year of Keicho in which officials of the Satsuma Clan visited the Ryukyus.

“Edonobori” means sending up of a congratulation envoy to Edo each time when the office of the Tokugawa Shogun was taken by a new Shogun, and dispatching of a party to Edo in order to express gratitude each time of accession to the throne of a new king.

The purpose of this practice done by the Satsuma Clan was to make an inroad upon the Ryukyu islands; and if description is made further in detail, to show off the authority to the whole country as a controller of a foreign land, and have the Ryukyus act as an intermediary in order to revive the trade between Japan and Ming (present China). The real picture of “Edonobori” depicted a symbol of courtesy exercised by subjects, which was derived from these two purposes.

As to selection of envoys, persons of excellent character and intelligence were

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selected, and high culture was also required, because they must have contacts with feudal lords, their retainers and literary men.

In view of the purpose of "Edonobori", is, paying respects by kings of foreign lands which were possessed by Japan, the Satsuma Clan instructed strongly that everything should be exotic, in other words, everything should be in Chinese design. However, Ryukyuan music and dances were performed sometimes at the residences of feudal lords in Kagoshima and Edo or on the way up to and down from Edo at the request of feudal lords, therefore, envoys should be well versed in both Chinese and Ryukyuan public entertainments.

It took for the envoys a long period of time from half a year to one year to travel between their home land and Edo and Satsuma and to stay there, therefore, they were able to study "Noh" and "Kabuki" thoroughly, staying in the mainland, thus the effects produced on Ryukyuan public entertainments, especially on Ryukyuan dances were considerable.

2) "Omoro" are old Ryukyuan ballads by which prayers are dedicated to the Genesis or God, glorifies to heroes are expressed, navigations are sung about or by which soldiers are encouraged and so on. These ballads were sung from about the 12th Century to the early part of the 17th Century. The "Omoro Soshi" consists of twelve volumes in which 1553 ballads are contained; most of these ballads express primitive religious emotion. Contained in the "Omoro Soshi" are pure ancient ballads in which three elements, i.e. wording, singing and dancing, are consolidated; and these ballads are reflecting the society in which they were born.

In the Volume 9 "Koneri Omoro" is contained, and between lines of verse, explanations of various movements of hands in dancing are given. It seems that the forms of dancing established so far are collected.

However, during the years of the 15th Century, due to the appearance of a new musical instrument, samisen, which replaced the monotonous hand-dram which had lived together with the "Omoro," the "Omoro" disappeared gradually. As to the introduction of samisen, there are many opinions, however, it is surmised that the instrument was imported by the resident of Province of Fuchou in southern China. As to its origin, nothing can make it clear.

Any way, "Omoro" is, in a very wide sense, the mothers's womb for all singing,

dancing and misical public entertainments and "Bunraku" (dramas performed using puppets), and at the same time, the fact that there were changes in the social structure, the appearance of new misical instruments, the thriving inflow of foreign culture (from Japan, China and southern Asia) must be taken into consideration.

3) After the introduction of the new musical instrument, samisen, songs like 31-syllable Japanese poems which are of a fixed type, and can express a thought in a short song were required, instead of the free-style long poem like "Omoro." Thus, a base for the origination of Ryukyuan songs consisting 30 sounds (8,8,8,6) was founded.

In comparison with "Omoro" having a free rhythm, Ryukyuan songs are of a smaller structure and are not so powerful; they have a feminine softness and of course weakness. Ryukyuan songs may be said to be the only songs which express the groan of the people by the use of samisen music and in dancing, who were under the oppression of Satusma during a long period of time. During the 15th Century, Buddahism flourished in Okinawa, the priests who were the introducers of the learning in the mainland also introduced Japanese and Japanese songs together with the Japanese reading Confucianism. This new flow of culture is considered to have had some influence on the origination of Ryukyuan songs.