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Historical Background of Okinawan Dances (III)

— Festivals and Performing Arts —

By *Fujiko Shimizu**

Needless to say, a traditional festival is a ceremony observed in honor of the tutelary guarding the lives and livelihood of the inhabitants of a particular area or the evil spirit menacing them.

At festival, a prayer or occult ritual was observed for a specific purpose on the occasion, and these rituals were indeed the origin of what came to be known as “performing arts”.

To attain a deeper knowledge of the origin and nature of the dances among the traditional Okinawan performing arts, I decided to study and analyze the beginning of those dances as part of festivity and their relations to festivity.

These performing arts of Okinawa are broadly divided into three categories—festive, folk and classic performing arts.

These performing arts originated in rituals of ancient times which were held in honor of and by way of cordial reception of deity coming from afar to express gratitude to the deity for a rich agricultural harvest and observe festivities in expectation of good crops in the next year.

I made investigations into the ancient concept of deity evolved from such visiting god, the development into festivities on islands based on that concept and the transition from festivities to performing arts. As a result, it was learned that Okinawa, located near China and Southeast Asia, was influenced in many ways by the cultures of these two areas, with a wide variety of things introduced from them.

Nevertheless Okinawa retains some ancient elements of the traditional Japanese culture, now mostly lost in mainland Japan, in various aspects of the lives of the inhabitants of that prefecture. This suggests that Okinawans, among the inhabitants of entire Japan, inherit the ancient Japanese culture in the most genuine form.

Besides, many Okinawans have a fine sensibility and the ability to express their

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feelings straightly with their bodies and in words. Many factors which indicate early forms of Japanese performing arts are recognized in rituals held by these Okinawans, and they are valuable study materials.

The festive, folk and classic performing arts have all been coexisting up to the present day in Okinawa, and this is a remarkable feature of the traditional Okinawan performing arts.