

The Originality and Great Variety of Ryukyuan Music

Okinawa is located in southwest of Japan. There are more than 60 inhabited islands and its population is about 1.35 million. Human remains were excavated from Okinawa that were roughly 35,000 years old. That is the end of glacial period. Because the glacial ocean was lower by around 100 meters, it is archaeologically considered that people walked to Okinawa from Eurasia (China). Okinawa is also called Ryukyu; usually the word Ryukyu is used for the time before 1879 and Okinawa is used for the time after 1879.

The songs that are sang from the ancient Ryukyu era are called "Ryukyu Koyo (Ryukyuan ancient song)". The origin of these songs is revealed and classified into three groups; "ancient songs of incantation"- which are recited as a charm for the sake of God, "ancient songs of epic"- whose melody is full of variety, "ancient songs of lyric"- which have sort of an emotional expression. There are more than 20 kinds of ancient songs; Omoro, Quena, Amaueda, Tiruru, Tirukuguchi, Niri, Ayagu, Quicha, Tabi, Fusa, Pyashi, Tukuruhun, Yunta, Jiraba, Ayo, Kahuchi, Nigaihuchi, Yungutu and so on. Some explanations follows.

"Omoro"

It is classified into two groups; "Omoro of the court" and "Omoro of the public". There are some explanations about the derivation of this word, but I take the explanation which is "Omoro means to reveal one's feeling", since it refers to the Japanese word "Omoi (feeling)". The idea of it was from the 12th century and in 1623, the kingdom collected and completed the book "Omorosoushi" which contained 1554 songs and come down as "Omoro of the court".

There are opportunities to sing "Omoro of the court" about five times a year for the occasions of harvest festival, praying for rain, and for the time when ambassadors came from China.

"Omoro of the public" was also played when they had a good crop, large catch, and for the praying of a safe voyage, or a festival for a rich year of crops. Mainly "Omoro of the public" was sung by a female priest, called "Noro".

"Amaueda"

The next song is "Amaueda", the rice farming song. "Amamikiyo" is the name of the god who is considered to have made Ryukyu. The song is about the process of "Amamikiyo" finding a spring, making a rice field, sowing seed, and harvest its crop (rice).

Ryukyuan ancient songs were usually sang only by women, but "Amaueda" was sung by men. The singing style is also unique because the singers go up and down while they are singing, to refer to the sowing of seed.

"Ayagu"

This is ancient song of Miyako-island. The derivation of this word is "color the word" and it also has the meaning of "blessed word" and "beautiful word". The lyrics to this song are about praying for a safe voyage, the productiveness of grain, or a primitive hero story. Some of it has meaning of harambee (work song) and is sang while rowing a boat.

"Quicha"

The derivation of “Quicha” is “lapping a voice over another”. A characteristic of the song is to sing over dance. People clap their hands, hold the next person’s hands and make a circle, make active movement, make movement of agriculture and sing at the same time.

“Yunta”

There are two different derivations of this word. One is that it is from the word “Yumiuta (making Japanese poet)” and the other one is “Yuiuta”, that is so say the song about cooperation of labor. The content of this song is widespread, from agriculture, work, romance, and gossip, to animals like dogs, cats, birds, and fish. It is chiefly sang while working.

Here are some special features of Ryukyuan ancient songs as follows. (1) Almost all melodies move within one octave. (2) Many songs have reciting melodies. (3) Some songs have “Ritstu”-mode. (4) Some songs have more than 100 chorus texts. (5) Almost all melodies are not Ryukyuan-mode. (6) There are no specific written musical notes, so they were passed on orally from person to person.

“Warabeuta”

“Warabeuta” is a children’s song, but when and where these were made is not certain. It has an atmosphere of the tropical islands, cheerful and lively. The contents are mainly about animals, plants, nature, and life-style.

“Fushiuta”

“Shimauta” is one of the “Fushiuta”, it was sang in people’s daily life and it is still sung by the people today. It is classified into two groups; one is old, “Shimauta”, and it has influence by Ryukyuan ancient song and usually the composer is uncertain. The other one is comparatively new and its composer is known. The variety of contents in the songs are for example; work, pleasure of rich harvest, romance, love of husband and wife, jealousy, split, nostalgic, commerce, life, and so on. Any kinds of topics will do. When Okinawa was under the American occupation and rule after 1945, horror of the war and ironical remarks of American were hot topics at that time. It is hard to count “Fushiuta” but it is said that there are more than 1,000 songs. Moreover, “Shimauta”, sometimes called “new folksongs”, are produced to around 100 pieces every year. Lastly, a feature of “Fushiuta” is that it is made with tetra chord called “Ryukyuan mode”. Examples are below.

Here are special features of “Fushiuta”; (1) The mode is Ryukyuan mode. (2) Musicians usually use musical notes called “Kunkunshii”. (3) Musicians sing solo or chorus, sometimes with Ryukyuan dance. (4) Almost all songs were made and developed in the era of the Ryukyu kingdom.

“Eisa and Usudeku”

“Eisa” and “Usudeku” are sung and played only in the period called “Obon” of summer. It is considered that spirits of passed relatives come at this “Obon” period. With those spirits, it is said another spirit of dead - who died leaving no one to attend to his grave - will come. “Eisa” is played for people to avoid incurring divine wrath and having the wrong thing done, and they hope that these spirits placate and go back to the

other world without difficulty. This is not too old; it started about 120 years ago. It is played by a group of 30 to 50 young men and women from the same district. They then walk around the town with singing and dancing. New music with Ryukyuan mode is played with this event.

“Usudeku” is quite old music; it was made in many areas and naturally dance to this music appeared. Only women of 20 to 80 years old participated, making a circle and dancer come up to the middle and dance. Women hold a small drum which looks similar to a mortar. “Usudeku” looks like “Eisa” by the means of walking around streets singing and beating the drum. However “Usudeku” is not for the consolation of the spirits but for performers to rest from their labors and daily duties as women, and also it has a meaning of catharsis. This “Usudeku” music mostly affects the Ryukyuan classical music later.

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