

Prayers and Music:
The *Omori* of the
Noro*-priestesses of the **Kakeroma Island*
(Amami-Ôshima Islands)

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From a cultural and linguistic point of view the **Amami Islands** present on one side very important characteristics of the Ryûkyûan culture sphere, which is in many aspects different from the Japanese culture. On the other side, they show also, due to their geographical situation and their history, many references to the Japanese culture. **Amami** is neither Okinawa, nor is it Japan, but it is still considered to be important for understanding Japanese culture.

The **Amami Islands** comprise: Amami-Ôshima, the principal and biggest island, and eight other islands including the **Kakeroma Island**.

My research concerns specially the **Kakeroma Island**. Looking for old music pieces of Japanese tradition to apply the music theory I will describe briefly, I had the opportunity of hearing the *Omori* recorded by Josef Kreiner at **Kakeroma**. Since I was impressed by their musical structure, I decided to study them.

Kakeroma can be reached within 30 minutes by ferry from Koniya, the southernmost city of the main island Amami-Ôshima. The uninhabitable mountains in the middle explain the fact that the settlement was only possible in the small bays on the coast. The only method for moving from one place to another was by boat.

Amami was an independent island until the middle of the 15th century.

From the 12th century on, the introduction of agriculture caused a divide between the rich and the poor. The rich became the ruling class, the so-called *aji* who lived in castles named *gusuku*.

When on the islands the *aji* became strong enough, they started to pay tribute to strong nations around. Amami paid tribute to *Chûzan*, one of the three kingdoms which controlled **Okinawa** in the 14th century. The unification of Okinawa through *Shô Hashi* 1429, marked the beginning of the *Ryûkyû* Kingdom. Fifty years later King *Sho Shin*, (1477-1526) established, as part of his political

system, a centralised hierarchy of priestesses headed by his sister, who took the title of *Kikoe Ôkimi*. Under *Kikoe Ôkimi* came a number of high-ranking priestesses, the *Ôamushirare* and so on. The *noro* were the lowest in the priestess ranking. The relation brother-sister, called *onari*, is typical for Okinawa, and explains the fact, that it was always the sister of the monarch, lord or village chieftain who was chosen to assume the role of priestess. The function was handed down within the main branch of a family.

In 1571 King *Shô Gen* succeeded to put the islands under its control.

The *noro* system was applied throughout the island. There was a *noro* in almost every village, and some of them were authorized to travel to the **Shuri**, the capital of the *Ryûkyû* Kingdom, to receive a *jireisho*, a written of appointment, from the *Kikoe Ôkimi*. The *noro* were divided in two groups: the *Suda*-group in the northern region, and the *Masuji* group in the southern region. **Kakeroma** belongs to the Southern *Masuji* group.

Amami was invaded by *Satsuma* in 1609. Until the beginning of the Meiji-Era, it suffered under the domination of the *Shimazu clan*. *Satsuma* seemed to have had no concern with the needs of the people and tried to subjugate them. At the beginning the *noro* system persisted and the entitled *noro* continued to travel to Okinawa to fetch their *jireisho*. However the political influence of the *noro* on the population was so important that it became necessary to break the old *Ryûkyû* system based on family relationship, and *Satsuma* forbade the *noro* to sail to **Okinawa**. Then the *noro* lost the possessions due to their function (paddy fields, etc.) and finally they were forbidden to practice the cult, were oppressed and persecuted. For the inhabitants of the **Amami** Islands, the *Satsuma* domination corresponded to a period of almost total encapsulation from the rest of the world. The *Meiji* era changed very little in this matter. The isolation was absolute especially in the southern part of the island and at **Kakeroma**, since the **strait of Ôshima** was used as a military harbor and as it was forbidden to penetrate this zone. In 1945 the islands were divided from mainland Japan, and went under American control. In 1953, as **Amami** was returned to Japan, researchers began to deal with the culture of **Amami**. Even forbidden to do so, the *noro* had continued to pray and practice their ceremonies secretly, so that a part of the prayers still existed.

Nowadays all the *noro* have disappeared.

The *omori* prayers were recorded by **Joseph Kreiner** during his fieldwork on the village organization at **Kakeroma** in 1962. Since he is not an ethnomusicologist, the recordings were made quite fortuitous. There are only few pieces of the villages **Osai** and **Ketomi**. Because external influence was practically nonexistent, it can be assumed that the *omori* recording by **Josef Kreiner**

are of inestimable value and are considered unique by the Japanese researchers. The most important ceremonies where the *Omori* were chanted are the *Omuke* and *Ohori*. These rites took respectively place yearly in the second and fourth month of the moon calendar at a *mizunoe* day. Once a year, the gods living in the *nirai-kanai*, a mystical place situated eastward beyond the sea, are believed to come to visit the islands. They are ceremonially received during the *omuke* (jap. o-mukae お迎え). Two months later they are bid farewell during the *ohori* (jap. o-okuri お送り) when they sail back to the *nirai-kanai*.

For the *ohori* the priestesses go to the seashore in the evening, where they don their white ceremonial dress. After they have sung *ohori no omori*, they drink *mishaku*, the holy sake, and eat vegetables, tōfu and pickled fish. Then they take *susuki* twigs and looking eastwards they say some prayers swaying three times the *susuki* twigs and the gods depart. If the priestesses are too kind to the departing gods, it will be too difficult for them to leave and the swaying of twigs means that the priestesses almost quarrel with the gods, so that they can leave easier.

From the musical point of view the *omori* belongs to the category of the *Litany*, the oldest category of songs in the world.

The analyzing method I use in my thesis was developed by **Ivar Schmutz-Schwaller**, a Swiss researcher who lived in **Cologne** until his death (2000), in many years of painstaking work. The origin of his fundamental research lies in the difficulties he met to transcribe the old Syriac songs because the methods of analysis in use were not applicable to these microorganisms. He discovered the importance of the musical accents and impulses and developed a method to reconstruct the musical structure of the melody. I will now explain in a few words the different steps of the analysis and the results that can be obtained:

1. The first step consists of determining the pitch and the musical quantity (the smallest rhythmic unit) of each note: each musical impulse will be counted, one after another until the result is absolutely definite. Fundamentally we take the eighth note as base for the counting steps (These steps can be binary or ternary).
2. The next step consists in analyzing the groups of the so-called "**metric verses**": the objective is to determine the formal musical argumentation (logic and succession). This step constitutes the heart of the analysis.

The following questions have to be posed:

Which groups belong together and what are the specific characteristics of their togetherness? What is their relation to the other groups?

There are only four structural levels:

- the *beginnings*
- the *continuation* or *complement*
- the *returns*
- and finally the *arriving* or *cadencing (closing)* parts.

3. The **syntax**, the following analysis and the overall level of the pieces are all built on base of the **metric verses**

If I try to compare the method with a text analysis, I would say that the first step counts the syllables, one after another, the second tries to explain the structure of the sentence and the third step studies the structural arrangement of the complete text.

The results make it possible to examine the piece by means of the following analysis: the course of the melody, the synopses, the comparison of different strophes, the text versus music analysis (sometimes the text rhythm stands to the fore whereas the others levels are quasi turned off)

In Europe a tendency to symmetry can be observed in the music traditions since the 16th century. Remarkable is that the *omori* recorded by **Kreiner** have an asymmetrical construction. They use inlet of ternary (three beats) quantities during the binary (two beats) progression at different levels - like a multistory building, a musical piece can show several architectonic levels of counting. Asymmetry confers a singular liveliness to the music.

In summary it can be said that the *omori* must be very old. Determining their very exact age would require an extensive musical analysis of Okinawa, Japan and possibly the surrounding areas too. Like in ethnology or archeology, the musical tradition of a country cannot be defined until all its building blocks have been brought together.

NHK has published an anthology in 1993, the Nihon Min'yôtaikan 日本民謡大観, where the *omori* of **Kakeroma** were transcribed for the first time. In 1995, I have spoken to the author of the *omori* transcriptions at the NHK in Tôkyô and he confessed to me that he had to face many rhythmic problems that he was unable to solve. The present theory shows that these problems are solvable.

This new method of music analysis by means of studying the accents and impulses is scientific. It is applicable for every tradition of the world which resists to the normal way of analysis.