

SINGING AND DANCING TO ENTERTAIN ENVOYS



The traditions and culture of the Ryukyu Kingdom are concentrated in the *kumiodori*, a distinctly Okinawan style of musical theater with a 300-year history.

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PLAYING the traditional *sanshin* and *koto* (stringed instruments), *fue* flute and *taiko* drum, the chorus gives voice to the characters' emotions. At the climax of the performance, the actors on stage refrain from dialogue and movement altogether, leaving everything to the sounds and words of the chorus. Dressed in period costumes, words once used by the warrior families of the Ryukyu Kingdom ring out. This is the *kumiodori*, a unique form of musical theater.

The Ryukyu Kingdom (present-day Okinawa), an independent state for about 450 years beginning in the fifteenth century, conducted trade with the imperial Chinese dynasties of the day through tributes to the Ming and Qing dynasties. The kingdom flourished as an intermediary for trade between Japan and southeast Asia. When a new king ascended the

throne in the Ryukyu Kingdom, he would be officially crowned by envoys of the Chinese emperor, known as *sapposhi*. The kumiodori was held as an entertainment to cordially receive this Chinese imperial envoy party. It was created by Tamagusuku Chokun, a dance magistrate who oversaw all court art, and is said to have been first performed in 1719 by warriors in the courtyard of Shuri-jo Castle.


While based on ancient music and traditional dances unique to Okinawa, the kumiodori incorporates elements of the *noh* and *kabuki* performing arts of Japan. Confucian values, which were the norm in China at the time, also impacted the dances, with performances on the themes of loyalty and parental duty mainly being performed. Kakazu Michihiko, artistic director and planning and production manager at the National Theatre Okinawa, says, “The Kumiodori was court art for the entertainment of envoys from abroad. It must also have been a means of diplomacy full of wisdom and ideas for the small kingdom to survive between China and Japan.”

While the kumiodori has seen difficulties in survival, it has also amassed 300 years of history. The Ryukyu Kingdom was incorporated into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and since then, the artists who had once been under the protection of the court moved their stages

to town theaters, passing on the kumiodori. Additionally, towards the end of the Second World War, Okinawa became a harsh battlefield that pulled in not just soldiers but also ordinary citizens, and many supporters of the traditional arts lost their lives.

In 1972, Okinawa was returned to Japan after long being under American authority after the war, and the kumiodori was registered as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property. A department to study the art form was established at the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, which opened in 1986, and performance opportunities greatly increased when the National Theatre Okinawa opened in 2004. The dances were added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, becoming one of the many traditional arts representative of Japan.

The kumiodori played a central role in ancient Okinawan culture, but it is relatively unfamiliar to ordinary people when compared to folk songs, dances, and other Okinawan folk art. Given that it is court art meant to entertain foreign envoys, kumiodori leaves a very esoteric impression, and can only be performed in a few places. This is why Kakazu and others have begun to incorporate performances with new styles so that more people can become familiar with the dances. As part of this, there is a performance held each year at the National Theatre Okinawa to popularize the dances. Last year they included a kumiodori adaptation of *Cinderella* in the classic program. They have also adapted the picture book *Swimmy* for children, reimagining the story in the kumiodori style.

Kakazu says, “The kumiodori is a type of art that was created precisely because this was a small country, and it speaks of our unique history and culture. As more people become familiar with the charm of the dances, I hope that we can properly pass on to the next generation the spirit of our predecessors, who had to grit their teeth as they held fast to the kumiodori and its traditions.” 



The chorus and dancers in rehearsal
Photo: Tanaka Satoshi