

RETAINING SHIMA IN SHIMA UTA

Music as Mnemonic Expression of Heritage in Contemporary Kakeroma

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Abstract

The music culture of the Amami islands of southern Japan is a distinct regional form that constitutes an important element of contemporary Amami identity. This local music tradition is most strongly represented by the form of song known as *shima uta*. Our paper explores aspects of *shima uta* with substantial reference to the characterisations and interpretation of the nature of *shima* offered by Jun'ichiro Suwa in v1 n1 of *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, published in April 2007. Our intention is to illustrate the temporal transition and reformulation of aspects of *shima* sensibility in the late 21st Century, drawing on our field research in the Amami islands in mid-2006 and subsequent analysis.

Introduction

The Amami islands are located north of Okinawa and south of Kyushu, part of the arc of islands that stretches from main island Japan down to Taiwan (see Figure 1 below). The largest island of the group is Amami Oshima, home to the islands' largest urban settlement, Naze City. The current population of the islands is around 132,000, with around 75,000 resident on Amami Oshima. Kakeroma is located to the immediate south of Amami Oshima, separated by a narrow strait. Cultural demographers habitually characterise Amami as forming part of a continuum between main island Japan (current population 126 million) and Okinawa (1.3 million) within which progressive degrees of difference and transition between Okinawan and Japanese languages and culture can be traced. Given that contemporary Amami culture combines genres and media acquired from its periods of Okinawan and Japanese dominance, there is some merit in this characterisation but this continuum perspective is problematic in that the chief distinguishing feature of traditional Amami culture is its highly distinct local styles and repertoire. In this regard – and particularly in musical terms – Amami can be argued to represent an equal stage in a link of musical styles (and relations) along a north and south axis, rather than just a point of blending and crossover.

The word *shima* - which is most easily translated into English as 'island' – has a more complex meaning in Amami. It refers to an island as a geographical feature, an island as a small but densely cultured territory and local subsections of these. In Amami this definition can also be expanded to that of being and presenting a 'homeland', in some of the complex senses that the German term *heimat* also conveys. *Shima uta* thereby means 'island + song' (*uta*) but since *shima* also applies to particular areas of islands as well, *shima uta* is better understood as 'songs from specific island locations'.

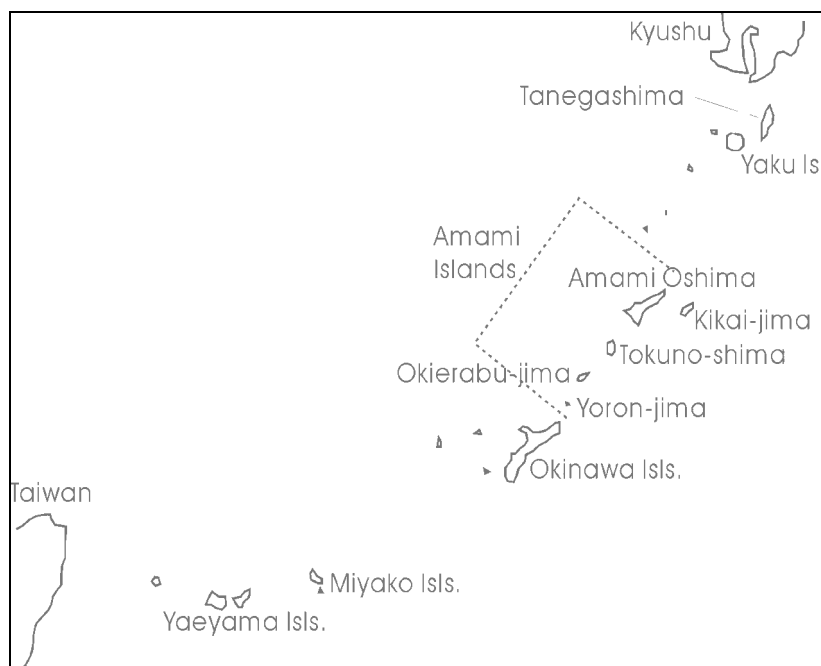


Figure 1 Map of Amami (and adjacent areas of Japan)

Traditional Music

Like Okinawa, the principal musical instrument of the Amami islands over the last few centuries has been the *sanshin*, a three-string, fretless, banjo-like instrument - similar to (although smaller than) the Japanese *shamisen*. The Amami *sanshin* is distinct from the Okinawa version in that its strings are thinner and lighter, allowing for an increased degree of fingering dexterity and subtlety. The second dominant instrument is the local drum known as the *chijin*. Traditional Amami vocal music is distinguished by a high degree of control and virtuosity in use of *guin* (an Amami term for emotive, upper-register vibrato), often combined with abrupt melodic leaps and/or (accommodated) register breaks (where the voice briefly 'cracks' as it flips up). The latter aspects are regarded as particularly prominent in southern Amami music (which extends from Setouchi in southern Amami Oshima down through Kakeroma to Tokunoshima). The former style is known as *Higya-uta* and its melodic variegation is often explained with regard to the rugged terrain of the southern part of Amami Oshima (in contrast to the flatter terrain and less dramatic melodic contours of northern Amami and its *Kasan-uta* style).

Like Okinawan and Japanese music, traditional Amami music is pentatonic. As in other parts of Japan, the principal forms of traditional music in Amami are song genres. The most prominent genres of Amami song are *shima uta* and its allied genre of *uta ashibi* - premised on dialogue between two (or occasionally more) vocal protagonists, often male and female, engaging in conversations, disputes and/or 'duels' in song. Traditional Amami songs are richly expressive and emotional through the combination of their musical-melodic affect, the nature of the performer and performance; and the beauty, information and/or evocation of their lyrics. *Shima uta* and *uta ashibi* share a number of characteristics. The first is that they are regarded as traditional songs whose dates of origin and authorship recede into history and are (assumed to) have been passed down orally over a prolonged period of time. Writers such as Koriyama (2001: 107) have identified that many songs have aspects that date back to the Ryukyu period of dominance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Other songs, particularly such popular core repertoire pieces such as *Kurudando Bushi*, exist in versions that combine (apparently) long-existent elements (such as the opening verse's 'mood setting' images of low

rain clouds triggering melancholic reflection) with obviously more contemporary references, such as those to US air raids during World War Two. The caveat about the origins and unknown authorship of *shima uta* material reflects the manner in which the genre is able to incorporate newer material. Koriyama's book *Beautiful Amami Island Folk Songs* (2001), for instance, includes *Erabu Yurinu Hana*, a 20th Century song of known attribution which describes the beauty of island lilies and the export trade to US markets (via Yokohama) that began in 1910.

Concepts of Shima

As co-editor of the journal *Shima*, one of the authors of this paper (Hayward) was party to a discussion by the three academic referees who evaluated Jun'ichiro Suwa's expanded study and advocacy of the model of *shima* for Island Studies. One of the main queries was how much Suwa may have been exaggerating the strong sense of Amami place identity – of how he might have been external fetishising exotic, quirky small island difference. This query was pertinent since Suwa isn't from Amami, and has not conducted detailed fieldwork there. As an editor who had conducted research in Amami, in collaboration with an Amami islander, Sueo Kuwahara (the co-author of this paper), Hayward assist in the referees' debate by asserting that, in specific contexts – particularly that of the *shima uta* they had studied on location – a deep and concentrated sense of 'rootedness' in history is still present; and that this – at least – served to reinforce aspects of Suwa's philosophically expanded debate. But our research angle – and our intention in this paper - is not simply to confirm Suwa's discussion but rather to cut across it to look at one set of contemporary *shima uta* practices and how they inhabit a social-material zone that is spatially co-terminous with its (literal) ground of origin but that has been culturally refigured by an associated batch of factors including modernity, Japanisation and depopulation caused by rural-urban drift.

Kakeroma in particular offers a key site for understanding this. In the 1920s its population numbered around 13,000. Immediately after World War Two, during the US occupation of Amami, the population fell to c9,000 and now comprises around 1,600 – representing a 82% decline over a 90 year period. As a result its primary schools are in crisis, many classes only having 1-5 students in each age band, further undermining the viability of its communities.

Kakeroma and *shima uta*

When we were researching on Kakeroma we interviewed a studiously traditional *shima uta* performer named Tokuhara Yamato. He had a great identification and reverence for the *shima uta* tradition. One of the aspects of our dialogue that interested us was his attachment to particular local songs. His sense of their precise local origin and aesthetic nexus meant that he often travelled to rehearse them in their referent space. For example, he travelled to Shodon to practice singing *Shodonu Nagahama Bushi* [trans 'The Long Beach at Shodon'] on the shores of Shodon, soaking up, being inspired by and newly re-sounding the song in its (notional) place. This shows a singular devotion to the rooted nature of *shima* (as concept) and *shima uta* as genre. But the kind of associations raised by Yamato's performances are, inevitably, complex. The space, history and associations that Yamato conjures through singing the song in situ – and imagining this situ when performing in concerts elsewhere - invests it with meanings that are supplementary to its text. What is curious about the original song is that its lyrics suggest that it might not be a song written by Shodon villagers about their place, their *shima*, but rather a composition written by either a visitor to Kakeroma or else someone who was widely travelled in and/or knowledgeable about Japan and/or the wider world. The first verse for instance, celebrates its subject place with a caveat:

No matter how long the beach of Shodon may be

It can't beat the beautiful beach of Ikeji

[Ikeji being a beach on Ukejima, the next major island to the south.]

This is quite surprising for a local 'anthem' in that an adverse comparison to another location runs contrary to local celebrations of place (both in *shima uta* and other international local song traditions).

The next verse shifts its geographical reference to the charms of local women:

*The waves that come and go on the beach of Shodon
Are like the teeth of the laughing maidens of Shodon*

Before offering a surprising comparison in the first line of verse 3:

*The teeth of the maidens of Shodon are white as snow
May the night fall quick so that I may kiss the maiden's lips*

The snow image is notable since it never snows in Amami, so therefore it is a somewhat out-of-place comparison.

The song then concludes with the lines:

*Bays are deep, bays are deep, the bay of Shodon is deep
Deep are the affections of the maidens of Shodon*

[Translation from Koriyama, 2001: 107]

Assessment of the significance of these lyrics - and their origins - to the song's expression of *shima* require consideration of historical context. But lack of written records means that we don't know how long *Shodonu Nagahama Bushi* has been so strongly associated with its referent place that singers have come to practice it on its beaches. It's even possible that the adverse comparison in the opening lines may have made the song (to some degree) unpalatable to local audiences in the past. But in the present the situation is different. One important point of current *shima uta* practice is that Amami language, *shima* sub-dialects - let alone archaic forms of these - render the actual textual details we just outlined unintelligible to many local listeners today. Indeed, when we talked with Yamato he clearly was only familiar with the general theme of *shima uta* song lyrics and couldn't translate individual phrases into the standard Japanese that he speaks.

So what do *shima utas* such as *Shodonu Nagahama Bushi* 'do' in such contexts? Most clearly, they replicate patterns of aesthetic affect that have established traditions of triggering broader emotive effect in audiences conversant with them. What we mean by that is that they function as evocative *shima uta* based on a cultural tradition of understanding them as such. Another aspect of *shima uta* and its reflection of place is the manner in which the music evokes and re-imagines senses of places past. The precise *shimas* that existed historically have of course changed significantly over time, and most markedly over the last century, as locations such as Kakeroma have experienced major depopulation. Referring to a beach that is probably little changed since its song's inception, *Shodonu Nagahama Bushi's* location can still be perceived to express fundamental aspects of its referent area but those songs that tell tales of specific communities and their issues are increasingly ghostly reflections of present places.

We gained an acute sense of this when we visited Shokazu village, on the south eastern corner of Kakeroma. Once a flourishing large village with fishing and trading boats in its harbour, Shokazu was home to two of the master musicians of the post-War southern Amami

shima uta style – Fukushima Kogi (now deceased) and Takeshita Kazuhira (who now resides in Osaka). Wandering through the quiet streets we asked an old woman where they used to reside, and she directed us to a nearby street. Both former residences had gone, their rectangular plots now turned into the vegetable gardens that form a large part of the village – like the white squares on a chessboard interspersed between those houses still standing, many of which are evidently disused. The *shima* of Shokazu's location, in a small horseshoe valley, with a sheltered bay, remains – but the human *shima* that engendered the consideration of the area as *shima* is radically different to what it would have been prior to modern depopulation. The place, like the *shima utas* that were learnt, practiced and performed there in the houses of master musicians, is increasingly one of memories and ghosts. This physical space is very different to the new space in which *shima uta* increasingly circulates – that of competitions and festivals and CD players and radios – a subject that we have explored elsewhere (Hayward and Kuwahara, forthcoming 2008). But this new space is one that represents and reasserts the power of *shima* and *shima uta* in Amami identity. The strength of *shima uta* in Amami is in the extent to which islanders regard it as a key marker of Amami heritage – as one t-shirt that was prominently worn at the Hanahana Festival on Amami Oshima in 2006 stated (in English) 'Take away the music and you take away the island'.

In terms of Jun'ichiro Suwa's assertion of *shima* as a valuable and incisive concept – or paradigm – for the study of island cultures and societies, what does our brief discussion of an internal *shima*-orientated practice suggest? One thing that it suggests is that the various means of performing *shima* though practices rooted in and redolent of it are complex, sometimes ambiguous and/or conjectural. Rather than being organic – understood in a smooth, almost vegetative growing manner, they are theatrical and performative – not only in overt public contexts – the competition, festival, stage show, audio-visual recording – but also in private contexts, in practice, in intimate surroundings. In this manner we can understand the role of the imagination, of imaginative projection and cultural ritual in the creation of *shima* – it is not so much a process of fabrication (understood in the sense of creating superstitious and/or illusory falsehood) as secular worship, reinvesting the materiality of place (/place of origin) with human expression. This suggests that the traditional animist religion of Amami has inclined its modern inhabitants to have a sense of space and materiality that is invested with particular condensations of cultural meaning that make its *shima* such an essential referent point – a mnemonic for an imagined past that can act as an anchor in a period of profound change.

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