

FOLKLORE

AGRICULTURE

In Miyako, agriculture and farming are referred to as “*muzufui*.” Food that was once gathered from the mountains and fields began to be cultivated through farming, with crops such as taro root, millet, wheat, and yams being cultivated as the main source of food. It isn’t exactly clear when, but slash and burn farming methods were also being utilized and paddy fields were being cultivated in low land – which, although not very abundant, contained good ground clay.

During the Poll-tax Era (1637 - 1902,) the main food source was millet and yams and such were used as tribute - although other wheat and bean products necessary for subsistence agriculture were also being cultivated. People who lived some distance away from the cultivating areas built a small guard post and slept there for a few days at a time while working the fields. By the Taisho Era (1912-1926,) sugar cane cultivation began to thrive and became the main crop in the farming economy.

Farming implements in general were referred to as “*parido*” in the local dialect but the “*pira*” or, spatula, and the “*fufatsu*” (hoe) were typically used when cultivating millet and yam crops. Beasts of burden, raised since old times for furrowing the fields, began to be more widely used to include work involved with the processing of sugar cane.

FISHING

The sea within the surrounding coral reefs of the island is referred to as “*Iso*” by the local people and is abundant with many varieties of fish and shellfish. During low tide, people would go out on the mudflats and coral reefs and gather up many kinds of fish and shellfish using simple fishing implements. Fish traps made of stone walls called “*kakisu*,” were built on the shallow shores.

During low tide, people would engage in the individual tasks of gathering shellfish and spear fishing as well as grouping together for net fishing.

From times past, the shallow seacoast and reefs were where people did their fishing however, with the improvement of fishing vessels and implements as well as changes in fishing methods, the range of the fishing grounds had widened dramatically. Rod and net fishing improved to the point where at one time tens of people could be seen fishing together.

Activities such as spear fishing, as well as diving for clams and sea algae - mostly individual work - continues to this day, although the number of people who do this remain few in number.

By the latter part of the Meiji Era (1868-1912,) Miyako's bonito fishing industry underwent a big change when it became commercialized. Bonito flakes had become a Miyako specialty and greatly helped improve the region's economy.

ISLAND LIFE & WATER

In the past, when choosing a place to settle a village, people would make sure to consider a place that had easy access to water. Collecting water from ground springs, caves, fens and depressions in the ground was a very important part of people's lives. In every effort to make the transport of water less arduous, in the case of caves, people would carve out stone steps and make steep paths leading up to the caves. These cave wells were referred to locally as "*uriga*" and were utilized up until running water became readily accessible through waterworks projects. Even today, these "*uriga*" can be found in various locations on the island.

With the improvement in iron tools, ground wells began to appear in various areas. By the Taisho Era, water collection tanks made of concrete that would collect water off of the tiled roofs became widely used - although the main custom of collecting ground water from these ground wells remained largely unchanged.

Carrying water was mostly women's work, but children of school age would

naturally shoulder a bucket to help with the housework. During the dry season, it was not an uncommon event to have to wait in line well into the night on the stairs leading to the local well.

THE FUNERAL ON MIYAKO ISLAND

Within the rites of passage of life, nothing connects the people of a village together as a funeral ceremony. Beginning with blood relations, then extended family and neighbors participating, the deceased is taken out into the outlying fields in a solemn ceremony. This is referred to as “*dabi*” in the local dialect.

When someone dies, the village is notified. Young villagers go to the place where a communal portable coffin or “*gan*,” is kept - bring it out and begin sharing in the preparations related to the ceremony. Included in the funeral procession are the funeral banner (“*ouzu*”) bearer, gong, funeral wreath, ceremonial table (“*mijaku*,”) bonze, the next-of-kin bearing the spiritual memorial tablets, the portable coffin, the bereaved family, close relatives, and, finally, general mourners making up the rest of the procession. The procession proceeds to the family plot for final farewells and is where the funeral ceremony comes to a close once the grave is sealed.

THE AUGUST DANCE OF TARAMA ISLAND

According to the Chinese calendar, during the month of August, Tarama Island holds a harvest festival. This is the biggest event in the island’s festival calendar. The local official presides over the events of the festival that take place in Aza-Nakasuji and Aza-Shiokawa (“*aza*” means “ward” or “village.”) Dances take place in the Nakasuji or Tsuchihara *Utaki* (an “*utaki*” is a small shrine-like area limited to the Okinawa region where it is believed local deities reside,) as well as the Shiogawa or Hitomada *Utaki*. On the first day, the people of Nakasuji invite the people of Shiogawa to the entrance of their *utaki*. On the second day, the people of Shiogawa, in turn, invite the people of Nakasuji to the entrance of their *utaki*. The third day is taken up with various closing ceremonies.

Both groups put on performances of traditional plays and dance during the morning and afternoon.

On May of 1976, this festival was designated an important national cultural treasure.

HIGA'S "PATSUKASHOGATSU"

On January 20, of the Chinese calendar, Gusukube Town's Aza- Higa holds a festival that, in the local dialect, is called "*Patsukashougatsu*."

The events of this day include a lion dance meant to exorcise evil spirits from the village. The "lion" performs its exorcism by going around the village and if there has been a new house built or one that has been reconstructed that year then it makes sure to circle the structure three times in order to drive away evil spirits.

Following the exorcism ritual, the lion leads the vanguard in a dance in the community center's square.

URUKA'S "NAPAI"

This ritual takes place on the first Day of the Bird in March of the Chinese calendar at the Umanyazu *Utaki* of Gusukube Town's Urakawa Ward. This is a ritual designed to protect the area against tidal waves.

Men line up in two columns before the *utaki*. They choose a branch for a paddle and imitate rowing a boat. Women exit the same *utaki* and, while singing religious chants, proceed down to the sea, all the while inserting a piece of bamboo tied with rope at designated intervals of 30-40 meters along the way. At the coast, they break up into two groups going East and West and continue repeating these actions until they reach their final destination.

This ritual is thought to demarcate the border between the land and the sea and is said to be effective against tidal waves.

NOBARU'S "SATIPARAY"

Just as Shimajiri Village does, Aza-Nobaru in Ueno Village has a ritual involving religious masks. It is called "*Satiparai*" and takes place every year on the last Day of the Cow in December according to the Chinese calendar.

The origin isn't certain, but "during one year's '*Masutoria*' (an event that takes place on August 15th of the Chinese calendar with dances involving men with poles and females with fans and bamboo castanets) on the main street to the rear of Nobaru - presently in front of the Self Defense Center - after the event had concluded, a plague descended upon the area causing many deaths. At that time, it was widely rumored that hobgoblins imitating humans were dancing there and it was necessary to drive them out. It is said that the masked "*Pantou*" appeared and proceeded to drive the hobgoblins away.

NOBARU'S "MASTORIA"

On August 15th of the Chinese calendar, Aza-Nobaru in Ueno village holds a harvest festival.

On the morning of the festival, two village "*tsukasa*" (loosely interpreted as religious persons who, depending on the region, are engaged through lottery as festival organizers, priestesses, communicators with the local deity or all of the above) tour 11 *utaki* giving thanks for the past year's harvest as well as praying for a good harvest in the coming year. In the evening, the villagers gather together at the old millet-measuring posts "*Masumutu*" (these posts all have names from Chinese astrology such as Rat, Tiger, Horse, and Monkey) drink liquor and spend an enjoyable time together. When the harvest moon reaches its zenith, the villagers gather in the community center square and play games and dance. It is then because of the performance of the "Men's Pole Dance" and "Women's Fan and Castanet Dance" that this event is generally referred to as "*Mastoria*."

KURIMA ISLAND'S "YAMASUPUNAKA"

"*Yamasu*" means to pray for a prosperous house and numerous progeny ("*ya*" means "house," "*masu*" signifies "to increase") and "*punaka*" means "ritual." In Kurima Island's Shimoji Town, the festival is thus referred to as "*Yamasupunaka*." This ritual takes place in September of the Chinese calendar over a period of four days.

During the first and second days, two "*tsukasa*" spend all night praying at the Tenganasu and Takagan *Utaki* located in the East and West areas of the village.

They rest on the third day while, in the village, the locals gather together at their genealogical birthplaces; the "*yamasuya*," "*upuya*," and "*sumuriya*," drink liquor and carouse. The purpose of this event is to pray for the increase of progeny.

On the fourth day, the drinking party that had begun on the previous day continues however, this time the purpose is to pray for the prosperity of the house and as the day turns into evening, the villagers from the three houses gather together at the village square and perform the "*Kuicha*" Dance and participate in Sumo wrestling.

HISAMATSU'S "UGAN BARI" AND LION DANCE

On the Fourth of May in the Chinese calendar, the Kugai and Matsubara communities perform a series of rituals to pray for a year of prosperous fishing and harvests.

Early in the morning, with the *tsukasa* leading, there are prayer visits to the "Upudumari," "Antsua" and "Dzugaki" *Utaki*. After this is done then two "*sabani*" boats (narrow style vessels seating **approximately 20** rowers) are taken out and the "*Ugan Bari*" begins. After an additional two more runs, the sea section of the ritual comes to a close. Next follows the Lion Dance - whose origins are said to have come from the Chinese Mainland. There is a strong belief in the power that the lion, King of Beasts, possesses. By performing

this dance, the village community hopes to exorcise evil spirits, bring about a good harvest, as well as create a strong community. It is only in the Hisamatsu area that the lion dance falls on the same day as the *Hari* boat races.

THE “UYAGAN” (GUARDIAN DEITY) RITUAL

This mysterious ritual takes place in the three district wards of Ogami, Shimajiri and Karimata.

“*Uyagan*” refers to the guardian deity associated with the founding of the village although, in this case, the approximately 15 women that dress up as this deity are also referred to as “*uyagan*” during this festival period.

Retreats at the *utaki* take place five times over a period of three months from June to October of the Chinese calendar in Ogami and from October to December in Shimajiri and Karimata.

The “*Uyagan*” ritual is meant to honor the gods who founded the village. It is what is called “*kanagi*” or “the naming of the gods” rite - however, this ritual’s participants claim that this event brings an awareness of the sense of community to the village.

IKEMA ISLAND’S “MYAKUDZUTSU”

Every year, around the time of August – September of the Chinese calendar, starting on the selected day, for the following three days in four ancestral homes in the village (*Maja, Agimasu, Mainuya, Maizado*) a harvest festival takes place. The first day is called “*Arabi*,” the second day is “*Nakanuhi*,” and the third day is “*Atonuhi*.” The ritual in the various sacred places involves honoring the age class system by centering on ancestral homes of those males 55 years and older.

During this period, at about four to five o’clock in the morning, people gather together in the villages and hold drinking parties at these designated households.

By four in the afternoon, the celebrations have moved to a designated location near the Mizuhama Village Square located close to the border between Ikema and Zenri. After the senior *tsukasa* perform the “*Kuicha*” Dance, the general crowd participates in the lively dance as well.

IKEMA ISLAND’S “YUKUI”

The “*Yukui*” of Ikema Island occurs on specifically chosen days in September of the Chinese calendar. The “*yu*” of “*Yukui*” means “luxuriance” and “*kui*” means to “invite.” In other words, it is a ritual to pray for a good harvest.

A number of women, aged between 51 and 55 years, are referred to as “*Yukuinma*” and they temporarily assume the roles of the gods. Together with the village elders, they enter the Uharuzu *Utaki* (also called Nanamui) on the first day of “*Yukui*” and spend the night in prayer. The group leaves the holy place in the early morning of the second day and performs the “*Kuicha*” Dance at a designated location. While chanting the “*Yukui nu Aagu*,” the group visits a number of prayer places and *utaki* and prays for a prosperous coming year. Of interesting note is that it is considered taboo to look the “*Yukuinma*” women full in the face during this ritual.

UTAKI RITUALS

Throughout the year, there are numerous village ritualistic events involving the *utaki* sacred places, focusing, in particular, upon the activities of the women *tsukasa* chosen to administer to these places.

Normally it is forbidden for anyone to enter the *utaki* shrines, they being sacred sanctuaries. However, during the festival period, villagers gather and are able to engage in pious prayer - spending a number of peaceful days in the presence of the deity praying for prosperity, good harvests, health and protection for the family.

The main festivals are the “*Soshin-sai*” (Guardian Deity Festival) of Karimata, Shimajiri, and Ogami. The “*Yukui*” of Ikema, Sarahama and Nishihara, the “*Awa Pudzu*” (Millet Ritual) of Masupari, Hisamatsu and

Oura, and the “*Shitsupunaka*” (Seasonal Festival) of Tarama and Takano areas.

UTAKI

The *utaki* is a sacred place where various deities reside. Deities such as those of the woods, mountains, ancestral home, present home.

As the mountains, forests etc. are considered sacred ground, *utaki* are located in these areas. Essentially, the *utaki* consists of a stone (called an “*Ibi*,”) where incense is placed and which symbolizes the object of religious faith.

The *utaki* is a place for local ancestral deities that protect the villagers as well as deities that come from far off at determined times of the year. Each having its own tradition and origin, deities for heroes, industry, family relations, and ancestral homes all gather together. It is through such ritualistic events that the villagers believe that these deities will protect their village from misfortune and bring about prosperity.