Okinawan koten udui:

an introduction to okinawan

classical dance based on an

examination of the dance

"menuhama"1

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The designation "Okinawan classical dance" refers to dances that have arisen out of the court tradition of Okinawa. These dances are known as Koten Udui2 (koten = classical; udui = dance), a term encompassing all the dances choreographed and performed in the courts of the Ryukyuan kingdom, which began in the seventeenth Century and was abolished by the Japanese in the late nineteenth Century. These dances are divided into three categories based on the movement style and character portrayed in the dance: nise udui (male dances), wakashü udui (young men's dances), and wunna udui (female dances).3 Some of the dances included in Koten Udui were originally part of Kumi Udui, the song-dance-drama of the courts. After the subjugation of Okinawa by Japan and the abolition of the monarchy in 1879, certain male dances in the Kumi Udui were presented as independent dances. These dances have since been classified along with the other male dances as nise udui. Some Koten Udui may also be categorized as ukwan-shin udui because they were performed during the coronation ceremonies (ukwanshin) given for visiting Chinese envoys.4

Originally, all Koten Udui dances were performed by men; the wunna roles were usually taken by young men in their teens. The performing arts found in the courts were the prerogative of the male aristocracy, and it was among their ranks that music, dance, and Kumi Udui developed. 1t was not until the early twentieth Century that changes in social values brought about the acceptance of female dancers and musicians in the court traditions.

Of the different styles of classical dance (wunna, wakashu, and nise), Kin-sensei,5 master of Okinawan classical dance, considers the wunna udui the most basic and feels it should be studied by every dancer, male or female. Kin-sensei describes differences between the styles by analogy—wunna udui is flesh, under which is found bone, and nise udui is bone (or skeleton), over which there is flesh. This analogy refers to the softness (flesh) of women's dance with underlying power or strength (bone), as opposed to the strength and power (bone) of male dance softened by the presence of the flesh over it. Kin-sensei takes this analogy one step further, saying that the bone without the flesh would not be dance but karate, an Okinawan martial art form. The wakashu udui lies somewhere between nise and wunna, but is closer to the women's style.

In the twentieth Century there appeared folk-like dances called zo udui. Over time some of these became, in performance style, very similar to the classical style. Though no longer considered zo, technically they are not classical either. Perhaps they could be most appropriately called "semiclassical." What distinguishes zo udui from the classical dance is a quality it shares with kachashi, the Okinawan improvisational social dance form. That quality is atchame, translated as "impulsive." This quality is dependent on individuality and gives the dances a feeling of spontaneity not usually found in the classical dance.

**"Menuhama"**

"Menuhama" is one of the five nise udui in the classical Okinawan dance repertoire. Like one of the other male dances, "Takadera Manzai," it originally appeared within a Kumi Udui. Although "Biko no Machi," the Kumi Udui in which "Menuhama" appeared, is not one of the well known plays, the dance is considered by Kin-sensei to be representative of nise udui.

According to Kin-sensei, "Menuhama" äs performed in the Kumi Udui and "Menuhama" performed as a nise udui are two different dances. The greatest difference between them is the appearance of a third song in the nise udui version and its additional choreography, In the Kumi Udui, only the first two songs and their accompanying movements appear. While the movements performed to the third song are in the nise udui style, Kin-sensei feels they are not similar to the movements found in the first two-thirds of the dance.

Another difference is in costuming, with its subsequent influence on movement. The Kumi Udui "Menuhama" is done by an aji (chieftain) to express his joy and happiness.6 The costume for this is the typical one for an aji— a long kimono and an embroidered overgarment plus an elaborate headdress, swords, and other paraphernalia. The nise udui "Menuhama" is an auspicious dance performed in a black kimono tied in tsubori style with kyahan (striped gaiters) wrapped around the calves of the legs, white tabi, and a shirasaji (a piece of white cotton wrapped around the head and tied in the front). This is the typical costume for nise udui, This difference in costuming accounts for some differences in movement between the two dances, the nise udui costume allowing for greater freedom and thus larger and more energetic movements.

A third difference is the common practice of using two dancers in the nise udui version, whereas the Kumi Udui version of this dance is always performed as a solo. Having two dancers perform in unison necessitates changes in the timing of some of the movements so that it is easier for the dancers to execute them together.7

These differences appear to be significant enough to warrant a clear distinction between "Menuhama" as found in the Kumi Udui and "Menuhama" performed as a mse udui. The analysis presented here is based on the nise udui version of "Menuhama."

Unlike other nise udui, "Menuhama" employs no stage properties such as banners (zei), so the movements of the dance are unaffected by the manipulation of objects.

**Song Text and Music for "Menuhama"**

The mse udui versoin of "Menuhama" consists of three songs: "Menuhama Bushi," "Sakawara Ku-duchi," and "Yunabaru Bushi." The texts for these songs appear on the following pages, along with a free translation of them. The sanshin8 melody follows the Ahuso Ryu (school) of sanshin technique. Each music piece has several possible texts. Those used in this Version of "Menuhama," and the order in which the songs appear, are as used by Kin-sensei.

The song texts here deal generally with happiness and auspicious places or occasions. "Menuhama" is a place name, referring to an area at the mouth of the Kokuba River in the Naha area on the island of Okinawa. At one time the area consisted of many islands and was considered very scenic and beautiful. Other place names in the texts refer to places in the same area.

Few of the movements of the dance are representational movements; most are abstract and have no meaning attached to them. In the Kumi Udui Version of "Menuhama," the arms spread to the side to represent flying birds as referred to in the second line of the first verse. The only other representational movements indicated by Kin-sensei were the rowing of the boat and the stamping of the feet and clapping of the hands as mentioned in the text.

**"Menuhama" (texts)**

I. "Menuhama Bushi"

A. (Yei, yei)9 Menuhama ni, Menuhama ni tsiri

Tuburu sa hamachiduri (yei sa)

Tumu yubu kui wa

Chiri chiri, chiri, chiri, chiri.

A. Going to Menuhama

Where there are many birds flying.

They call to their friends in the voice

"Chiri chiri, chiri, chiri, chiri."

B. (Yei, yei) Watanji10 nu watashibuni kugu

Funi nu saru nu utu ka (yei sa)

Karari kururi, kugi wa

Njai chichai.

B. The ferry of Watanji rows across the river.

The sound of its oar

"Karari kururi" as other boats

Row out and in [the river].

II. "Sakawara11 Ku-duchi"

A. (Yei, yei) Kiyu nu zashichi12 wa uwai nu zashichi

Kami ga utaiba na

Tsiru ya moru13

Tsiru ya moru

Kami ga utaiba na

Tsiru ya moru.

A. Today our house

Is a place of celebration.

If the turtle will sing

Then the crane will dance.

B. (Yei, yei) Nubui kudai nu

Sakawara kuiti

Mutu nu miyako14 ni na

Haya nuburu

Haya nuburu

Mutu nu miyako ni ma

Haya nuburu.

B. We are going

Beyond Sakawara

Where we come to the capital

And quickly go up to it.

III. "Yunabaru15 Bushi"

A. Kariyushi16 nu shibi

Ushihariti kara ya (yei suri, suri nu)

Yu nu akiti tida nu

Agaru madin (a suri, ashi-byoshi, ti-byoshi uchi hayashi udui hani ashibu urisha).

A. [We are] celebrating

This auspicious occasion.

We will have a good time

Until the sun rises. (Stamping our feet and clapping our hands, we sing and dance and make merry.)

B. Yu nu akiti tida ya

Agarawan yutasha (yei suri, suri nu)

Ni man tuchi madin

Uyuwe shabira (a suri, ashi-byoshi, ti-byoshi uchi hayashi udui hani ashibu urisha).

B. Even if the sun comes

And ends the night

We will continue

Our celebration. (Stamping our feet and clapping our hands, we sing and dance and make merry.)

**Some Aspects of Style in Okinawan Classical Dance**

There are several important concepts in Okinawan classical dance, the presence of which differentiates the good dancer from one of lesser quality. In all forms of dance (as well as music) konashi is an important quality. This term relates to the dancer (or musician) and refers to the individual's accumulated life experiences—the dancer's background, including intelligence, schooling, upbringing, etc. —that are manifest in the individual's performance. A dancer may execute movements in a technically correct fashion and not be a good dancer if konashi is not present. The ideal is that a dancer with konashi will instinctively find the "natural point" that makes the movement beautiful. This idea of "natural point" or "natural movement" is aesthetically important—dance movements must look natural and not forced or awkward. Therefore, the overall form or structure of the dance is not rigid. While there is a basic structural format, the most important element of classical dance is not so much form as quality. This quality should be a combination of basic Okinawan dance characteristics and konashi, which is expressed in the way the dancer relates to the dance and expresses his or her individuality in the performance of it.

The coordination of the music and the dance is of paramount importance. Often the dancers and their accompanying musicians each follow differing expressive impulses, but at certain key points, called tsibudukuru, they must precisely coordinate. Aside from these key points, each dancer is free to express his or her own individuality in phrasing, timing, and ornamentation. Tsibudukuru always occur at the same places in the dance and music and are often marked by stamps or claps.

Because of this almost improvisational quality, it is extremely important that the dancer know the music and text very well so that he will be able to coordinate the dance with the music at the appropriate moments. This separateness of music and movement is most obvious in the individuality of tempo at points other than tsibudukuru; timing of movements may be slightly off the steady beat and different each time they are performed. According to Kin-sensei, if the music and dance are both regular and always coincide, the performance becomes gymnastics, not dance.17 It is the slight non-synchronization of timing between movements and music that makes each dance different and alive.

Koshi is another component in the make-up of a good dancer. It refers to the point in the pelvic region from which all movement originates. It is considered the "center" of the dancer, something that a dancer always has, but which takes many years to find and learn how to use. If the koshi is used properly, all movements will follow freely and easily. (Koshi will be referred to again in regard to specific movements of the body.)

Another point on which a dancer is evaluated is the use of ateru. Ateru is the accent which occurs most obviously in the arms and hands. These accents, with their s mall bursts of energy, are important in the control of tension/relaxation in the dance. Ateru manifests itself in the arms and hands at the beginning and destination of movements. It is a difficult movement to describe, perhaps best explained in Effort/Shape terminology as a small, quick, light accent that occurs äs preparation to an arm movement and at its culmination. Ateru does not necessarily occur for all arm movements. Comparison of several performances of "Menuhama" indicates that ateru can happen with any arm movement if the dancer feels so inclined at the time of that particular performance of the dance. When ateru is used relates to konashi and the improvisational aspect of dance, as mentioned earlier.

Konashi, tsibudukuru, koshi and ateru are all qualitative components of style in Okinawan classical dance. They are elements with which every good dancer must be familiar, and which the dancer may use within a dance as he or she chooses. In addition there are structural elements that contribute to the basic nature of classical Okinawan dance.

Among detailed movements of specific body parts, those of the eyes are very important. It is perhaps because they are so important that they are not stressed at first, since the beginning dancer has not the konashi in dance, nor the control of his or her koshi to make the eyes meaningful. The eyes are "the life of the dance." They show the mind and heart. In actuality the movement of the eyes is limited to a lowering and raising of the gaze as the rest of the body moves. The impetus for this relatively simple movement though, must come from the koshi. The movement of the eyes and the movement of the koshi come almost simultaneously, with the koshi slightly ahead. Because the koshi moves, the eyes can move. The raising or lowering of the eyes precedes other movements in a movement phrase, coming just before the ateru in the arms and hands, which is in turn followed by the rest of the body. The usual sequence is: koshi, eyes, ateru, and follow-through of the rest of the body for the phrase of movement.

The torso moves in one unit, sometimes with a slight rotation of the whole torso in movements which progress forward. The body moves forward from the koshi, and in this movement the eyes, hands, and feet naturally point into the direction in which the koshi is moving. The body weight is usually held slightly forward, not in a tilt, but rather, a very slight shift toward the front. The center of weight is also held low, especially in women's dances.

The arms tend to stay in front of the body, usually ending in positions forward of the body or to the forward diagonals, in all levels. They almost never end directly out to the sides. Theoretically, the raising of the arms ends with the hands at about eye level, though this rule may not always hold true. The precise position is dependent on konashi and where the arms are coming from as well as where they are moving to.

Okinawan classical dance uses few hand positions. In the male style, one finds the open hand and the closed fist. Female style uses these two and a third transitional position in which the tip or first joint of the index finger and the tip of the thumb meet.

The outwardly rotated position of the feet is called hachi monji because the feet in this position look like the Chinese character for "eight" (hachi). The stance for mse udui in this position is wide since the male dance should express strength, while for wakashu udui the same stance is narrower. Wunna udui has a different stance—the koshi is very low, so the knees are slightly flexed, with the weight resting primarily on the right leg while the left leg is turned out to the left front diagonal, resting on the heel and outside of the foot. This difference between male and female stance is thought by Kin-sensei to come from a need to make an observable difference between

the two styles since at one time these dances were performed only by men.

The foot generally stays close to the ground or slides along the floor because social convention considers the showing of the sole of the foot to be rude. This is especially true for the wunna and wakashü styles. In the wunna dances, walking is referred to as nami o tateru, or "creating gentle waves." Keeping the koshi down, the foot slides forward and the front of it is raised clearly up before the weight is transferred. The koshi moves up slightly äs the transference occurs, then down again, creating the wave-like motion. When walking in the wakashü dances, the front of the foot is raised less because the koshi is slightly higher and more forward. In the mse udui, the koshi is held more forward than down, and the foot is lifted off the ground and does not slide, not only in walking, but in other leg movements as well.

The body faces forward, backward, or at 45-degree angles to the front and back of the stage, but almost never directly to the sides. Changes in these body facings originate in the koshi. The direction of the torso changes because the koshi moves and initiates the change, the rest of the body following this initial movement into the new direction.

Other aspects of style are those which relate not to the dancer or to movements but to the form of the dance as a whole.

Okinawan classical dance, unlike some other dance styles, does not begin or end with any kind of pose or bow. The dancer never starts or ends on the stage or dancing area, but walks onto it at the beginning of the dance and off again as the dance ends, accompanied by music at a tempo determined by the musician. Leaving the stage is called hik-komi no geijutsu, the "art of going away." It is called an "art" because it is still a part of the dance and so must be executed well. The initial reactions of an audience are set by the way in which the dancer comes onto the stage, and the feelings that remain with an audience are enhanced by the manner in which the dancer exits, making these parts of the dance important.

Injifwa, naka-udui, and irifwa, a theoretical three-part division of Okinawan classical dance, is not easily defined. There are no set rules concerning the beginning and ending of each part. If a dance consists of three different songs (as in "Menuhama"), then the division is easy, but otherwise it is divided according to the overall feeling of the dance, and not necessarily set by an entrance, a dance, and an exit as the three parts.

Hyoshi is important in the overall form of the dance. 1t is a punctuation to the structure of the whole dance but is not a dividing point between parts of the dance. 1t usually does not occur more than once or twice in a dance. Although there are no set movements for hyoshi, the punctuation usually occurs in the form of stamps or claps at the moment of tsibudukuru. In the nise udui it occurs once or twice per dance. However, in "Menuhama" it occurs often, partly because the song text refers to stamping and clapping, and partly because "Menuhama" employs no stage properties so the hands are free; hence there is more clapping than usual.

In the stamps it is not the sound that is important but the lifting of the leg f or the Erst stamp. The stamps usually come in pairs and the second stamp is usually softer, with the leg lifted not quite so high, since the second stamp is considered as just an ending to the first one. In the clapping, however, the sound is very important, the fingers of the right hand contacting the palm of the left to make a sharp, clear sound. The second clap is usually a little softer than the first, for contrast.

It is important that the dancer be in the center of the stage most of the time. For this reason, perhaps, the movements of the dances tend toward symmetrical repetition. Often movements or floor patterns to one side are followed by the same movements or floor patterns to the opposite side, returning the dancer as nearly as possible to the center of the stage. Movements that take the dancer forward are often followed by a movement called chirikeshi (a preparation for a turn), a turn, steps that progress in the opposite direction to take the dancer back to the starting point, and another turn to face forward, placing the dancer at center stage. The wakashü and wunna udui have their own style for this turning sequence, but follow the same pattern. Turns and steps are adjusted in size and direction to return the dancer to the position at the center of the stage.

In Okinawan classical dance, the dancer often shows his or her back to the audience, especially in the steps which take the dancer back to center stage after a movement forward. The showing of the back to the audience is not considered attractive, but it sometimes cannot be avoided, and this is especially true because Okinawan classical dance employs almost no backward steps. The way the dancer moves with his back to the audience, though, is just as important as when facing the audience.

There are few representational movements in the Okinawan classical dance vocabulary. Apart from the boat rowing, clapping, and stamping already mentioned, the only other representational movement in "Menuhama" is one indicating looking at something. In this movement the arm flexes forward high with the palm down, äs if shading the eyes, but with the hand about one foot in front of the face.

In the wunna style, there are more representational movements. The dance "Shudun," for instance, contains a movement where the head inclines toward the left and the left hand is held near the back of the left ear, forming a kind of cushioning effect. The name of the movement is makum-de which means "pillow hand." It can refer to such things äs resting, sleeping with someone, or dreaming. Shirakumu-de, or "white clouds gesture," is a representational movement found in the dance "Nuhwa Bushi." In this movement, both arms are up toward left diagonal high and are slightly flexed. The wrists and hands then undulate as the dancer tries to push the white clouds away to see the mountain (i.e., her lover).

These and other representational movements can also be found in other dances. Though originally the names of these movements referred to a specific movement in a specific dance, they have since come to be used for the same movement in other dances when the context in which they appear is similar.

**Summary**

A discussion of the performance style for the dance "Menuhama" reveals several major features of Okinawan classical dance aesthetics. Among these are the concepts of konashi (the dancer's life experiences that are brought to the dance), tsibudukuru (the coordination of the movement and the music), koshi (the point of origin of movement, found in the pelvic region), and ateru (the accents in the arms and hands). Analysis indicates pat-terns in the structure of the choreography (for example, symmetrical repetitions of movements), the overall form of the dance (the three-part division and the hyoshi), and the use of specific floor patterns (the return to center stage after each phrase of movement).

These characteristics are specific to the dance "Menuhama." A similar examination of other classical dances is necessary to validate that the above observations are applicable to other dances of the Okinawan classical dance repertoire. Through such analysis, characteristics of the dances can be compared. Examination of other types of Okinawan dance (for example, the zo mentioned earlier) can then allow for a delineation of characteristics (1) specific to classical dances, (2) specific to nise udui of the classical style or nise udui taken from the Kumi Udui, and (3) general to all or several types of Okinawan dance.

**Notes**

1The material presented here is based on research conducted as a participant in the Co-ordinated Research Project of the Japan Studies Institute: Performing Arts of Okinawa, Music Department, University of Hawaii, Summer 1976. The award of a scholarship from the Institute enabled this research to be done. The Institute was made possible through a grant from the University of Hawaii Endowment for Japanese Studies, funded by a grant from the Japanese Government.

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2 Throughout this paper, where I have used a technical term, the name of a dance genre, etc., I have used either the Japanese or the Okinawan word, following Kin-sensei's practice when I was learning the dance. There has been an attempt in the Glossary to clarify the Situation and to indicate whether the word is Okinawan or Japanese.

3 Dances in the Koten repertoire which are classified äs mse udui are: "Takadera Manzai," "Menuhama," "Zei-udui," "Nubui Kuduchi," and "Kudai Kuduchi." Wunna udui dances in the Koten repertoire are: "Shudun," "Chikuten," "Nuhwa Bushi," "Kashikaki," "Yana-ji," "Amaka," and "Mutu Nuchibana." There are two wakashü udui dances in the Koten repertoire: "Wakashü Zei" and "Kuti Bushi."

4 Okinawa paid tribute to China, and under the guise of "tribute state" was able to do profitable trade with the mainland country. Since Okinawa was a "tribute state," Okinawa's kings were "crowned" by the Chinese, who sent their envoys to participate in the six-month long ukwanshin (coronation ceremony). The ukwanshin udui consisted of seven wunna udui and two wakashü udui.

5 Sensei is a title of respect used to one's teacher. By request, Kin Ryosho will be referred to as Kin-sensei in this paper.

6 Dances in the Kumi Udui are usually:

a. to express personal happiness fas in "Menuhama");

b. to tell a story (as in "Takadera Manzai"};

c. in response to a request by an aji within the story of the play for a dance;

d. for "traveling," to show a character in the play going from one place to another.

7 Movements in the dances that appeared in the ukwanshin (including those in the Kumi Udui) could be "officially" changed by the Udui Bugyo (the Minister of Dance) for the ukwanshin each time they were performed. According to Kin-sensei, any of the official variations could then be used in subsequent performances.

8 The sanshin is the Okinawan counterpart of the Japanese shamisen, a two-stringed banjo-like Instrument played with a claw-shaped plectrum that fits over the first finger Together with the drums, it provides the main musical accompaniment to the dance.

9 Words in parentheses are hayashi ("calls") often, but not always, consisting of meaningless syllables.

10Place at which the ferry takes passengers across the Kokuba River.

11Place name meaning "hillside field."

12The tatami (padded grass mat) room of the house in which celebrations are held.

13The kame (turtle) and tsuru (crane) are auspicious symbols, the crane supposedly living 1,000 years and the turtle 10,000 years.

l4Miyako refers to the capital, or the "center of all things," where there are many festivals and life is lively and gay.

15Place name for an area east of the former capital, Shuri.

16Kariyushi is a word indicating auspiciousness.

17Kin-sensei considers regular timing in movements strange. He says that if the movements

are set and regulär, then it is enough to take a picture of the dance, put the picture in

a museum and say, "This is the dance."

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