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Okinawan Poetry in Light of the  
Transition from Epic to Lyric

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# Portrayal of the Spiritual Otherworld in Okinawan Poetry in Light of the Transition from Epic to Lyric

沖縄の歌謡(琉歌, オモロ)におけるスピリチュアルな他界の描写  
—叙事から抒情への変移に関する考察—

Jana Urbanová

## Introduction

The southernmost prefecture of Japan called Okinawa spreads across several islands of the Ryūkyūs lying in the subtropical region. Besides an exotic climate, the beautiful sea with rich flora and fauna that mesmerises visitors from all over the world, it has a unique history that has undergone paths very different from those of the mainland Japan. Furthermore, its cultural legacy with local songs, legends and beliefs offers us a fascinating glimpse into the way of living of people in the past. Many researchers believe that studying Okinawa can help understand the ancient roots of people in Japan, or even further in the Asian region.

One of the topics of increased interest is the presence of the spiritual otherworld and how ancient people imagined it. Okinawa is said to have an extremely deep connection to the spiritual world of gods and ancestors with its history reaching far beyond the beginnings of the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs that tried to establish the systematised foundation of these beliefs in the compilation of the royal anthology of old epic songs *Omorosaushi* in the period between the 16th and 17th centuries. The anthology that includes songs collected from different regions of Okinawa and arranged to serve the purpose of the kingdom became the record of all of the important *omoro* songs sung during rituals and ceremonies performed at the court. Written

mostly in plain *hiragana* syllabic alphabet with occasional *kanji* characters, its content is often difficult to decipher and although widely studied, it is still subject to debates regarding the meaning of certain expressions, or the order in which verses should be sung and repeated. The epic nature of *omoro* songs glorifying the king, the high priestess, and the ruling class from the third person's perspective together with the ancient flavour of former local songs that served as the basis for creating *omoro* invite us into the divine world of Okinawan ancestors, gods, creators of the islands and the country and spirits that extend their protecting powers upon the ruling class and the nation. We can observe the political intentions of the ruling class to strengthen the legitimacy of the king and find traces of the community way of thinking where the lives of peasants would be guided around the annual festivals and prospects of good weather and harvests. The spiritual otherworld presented in *omoro* songs is closely linked with the beliefs and intentions of the ruling class while also reflecting the way of life in rural communities.

On the other hand, approximately one hundred years later, a new type of song emerges and spreads throughout Okinawa and the Amami islands – a lyric type of poem called *ryūka*. As a poem of a completely different genre, it naturally deals with different sets of topics extending from community gatherings and festivals to personal themes, such as love, worries, desires, and the pursuit of happiness. Even though many poems are anonymous, the lyric nature of *ryūka* songs allows the individual poet to speak out and shine, and through the authors' first person's perspective the community life and the king are portrayed and related to in a uniquely individualistic way not to be observed in the former epic *omoro* songs.

With this remarkable shift of perspective and themes that occurred with the transformation of poetic genres from epic to lyric the question remains – How did this transformation influence the perception of the spiritual otherworld in Okinawan songs (poetry)? Did *ryūka* poets imagine and relate to the spiritual world in the same way as the ancient *omoro* poets did? What changes can we observe in lyric *ryūka* compared to epic *omoro*

when it comes to the portrayal of the spiritual otherworld?

As previously mentioned, Okinawa is a great source of spirituality which has aroused the interest of numerous scholars. However, most research has formed around the issues of the spiritual otherworld portrayed in ritual *omoro* epic songs, while practically no research papers mention a similar problem in *ryūka* lyric poetry. Therefore, this study takes a deeper look at this issue with a particular focus on *ryūka*. In the first part of this paper, I introduce the characteristic features of the spiritual otherworld in ritual *omoro* epic songs which mainly reflect the information from previous research conducted by other scholars, and in the second part I offer a comparative analysis of *omoro* and *ryūka* songs based on the results of my own research. The aim of the study is to clarify the transformation of the perception of the otherworld that occurred with the shift in poetic genre from epic to lyric which has not been academically discussed and researched to this day. To quote the Okinawan scholar Ikemiya Masaharu, “*ryūka* is important lyric poetry within the Ryūkyūan literature. As a song accompanied by the musical instrument *sanshin*, as a poem of poetic societies guided by artistic literary consciousness, it is also an important part of the Ryūkyūan traditional theatre *kumiodori* (組踊; pronounced in Okinawan as *kumuiudui*), However, compared to the amount of research conducted on the *Omorosaushi*, research on *ryūka* is (unfortunately) still lagging behind.”<sup>(1)</sup> Therefore, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the improvement of the present state of affairs, and by introducing examples of *omoro* and *ryūka* songs I hope to spark the interest of English-speaking scholars and a wider audience in these beautiful and charming pieces of poetry from the tiny remote islands to the south of Japan.

Finally, I'd like to add two comments regarding the English use of certain terms and the use of interpretations and translations of songs in this paper. Firstly, I use two terms – “songs” and “poetry” almost interchangeably, as the term *uta* (歌) which is part of the word *ryūka* (琉歌) (and also part of the word *waka* (和歌) which stands for Japanese classical poetry) can be translated either as “a song” or “a poem” depending on context. Since I

primarily focus on the lyrics (content) of the songs rather than their musicality and discuss the characteristic features of epic and lyric genres, I find it appropriate to refer to them as “poetry” in several passages of this paper when necessary. Therefore, despite the large number of *ryūka* that are mostly sung (although there are many *ryūka* which were composed with the intention of creating “poems” rather than “songs”), I refer to them as poems depending on the context of the explained topic. Secondly, all transcriptions provided in Japanese and interpretations of the songs/poems in this paper are based on the following Japanese materials: in the case of *omoro* it is Hokama, Shuzen, *Omorosaushi – jō, ge*, 2000 and in the case of *ryūka* I refer to two collections Shimabukuro, Seibin and Toshio Onaga, *Hyōon hyōshaku ryūka zenshū*, 1995 (abbreviated as *Ryūka Zenshū*) and Shimizu, Akira, *Ryūka Taisei*, 1994. If not stated otherwise, the English translations of the expressions, verses and interpretations of *omoro* and *ryūka* were made by the author of this paper.

## 1. Old Epic *Omorosaushi* Songs and Their Portrayal of the Spiritual Otherworld

### (1) What is the *Omorosaushi*?

The Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs saw its unification in the 15th century when the king of the Central State, or literally “Central Mountain” *Chūzan* (中山) conquered the kings of the Northern State *Hokuzan* (北山) and Southern State *Nanzan* (南山) on the main island of Okinawa and gradually brought the unified main island together with other islands of the Ryūkyūs under the rule of one kingdom.<sup>(2)</sup> The kingdom lasted for 450 years until its formal annexation to Japan in 1879 as Okinawa prefecture; it was during this period of royal rule that the Okinawan main island experienced political and economic prosperity and reached its cultural peak which comprised various influences, mainly from China and Japan as a result of lively diplomatic relations, as well as its own unique cultural heritage based on local beliefs, songs, legends and language.

The *Omorosaushi* is a royal anthology of epic *omoro* songs that was compiled by the central government of the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs located in Shuri. The anthology is a collection of ancient spiritual songs, mainly *umui* and *kwēna*, that existed in various parts of Okinawa and were collected, rearranged, and revised to fit the purpose of the royal anthology, and ultimately renamed as *omoro* in the process of compilation. Since it was customary in Japan to name the books *saushi* (草子; pronounced as *sōshi*), the Ryūkyūan aristocracy apparently considered it appropriate to append the suffix *saushi* to the word *omoro*, thus creating the title of the anthology *Omorosaushi* (おもろさうし)<sup>(3)</sup> written entirely in hiragana. The *Omorosaushi* is comprised of 1554 *omoro* songs that were compiled in 22 volumes. The first volume originated in 1531 during the reign of King Shō Sei – the son of King Shō Shin who was responsible for establishing a strong centralised government. According to Hokama, it was during the reign of Shō Shin when we can assume that a firm system of beliefs which linked the king to the heavenly existence of the Sun deity crystallised on a national level.<sup>(4)</sup> The second volume followed 82 years later in 1613 and the remaining volumes No. 3–22 were completed in 1623. It is interesting to note that all of the volumes except for the first one were completed after the invasion of the Satsuma domain in 1609 – the year after which the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs was forced to play a dubious role in diplomatic relations with China as an independent kingdom and a tributary state of China as if nothing had changed, when in fact, behind the scenes it was controlled by Satsuma. According to Allen, “throughout the period of Japanese political control, the deception that Ryūkyū was an independent kingdom was maintained for Chinese consumption, and, to a large extent, for consumption among Ryūkyūans – in particular, the elite in Shuri.”<sup>(5)</sup> This complicated situation might have further reinforced the awareness of the importance of national identity among the Ryūkyūan aristocrats and intellectuals which resulted in the compilation of the remaining 21 volumes of the *Omorosaushi*, which in fact constitute the majority of the anthology (the first volume contains only 41 *omoro* songs). However, despite this difficult situation in which the

Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs was being controlled and restricted by the Japanese Satsuma domain, it continued to entertain active diplomatic relations with both China and Japan, and gave rise to some of the finest cultural and literary achievements, such as the genuine epic anthology *Omorosaushi*, numerous lyric *ryūka* poems, charming traditional dance and the unique Ryūkyūan theatre *kumiodori*.

As I previously mentioned, although *omoro* originally stem from local *umui* and *kwēna* spiritual songs that were used as prayers to gods in rural areas, the process of the rearrangement and compilation of these songs into the *Omorosaushi* anthology bore a particular significance for the ruling class of the Ryūkyūs, namely the intention to create a system of the strong rule of the king and his relatives and to strengthen the belief that this rule was in every way legitimate. Songs in the *Omorosaushi* therefore have a strong connection to rituals and ceremonies performed at the royal court by the high priestess *Kikoe Ōkimi* (聞得大君) – a post held either by the wife or sister of the king. The ritual songs of epic nature frequently praise the king as the symbol of the nation and depict the high priestess as a spiritual medium who exerts her supernatural powers received from the gods to protect the king and the country. Hokama explains that in the persona of a female high priestess *Kikoe Ōkimi* the ruling class created the political system of a state religion that blended ancient rural beliefs of *onari-gami*<sup>(6)</sup> – “goddesses”, or in other words, female relatives who spiritually protect their male relatives embarking on a journey.<sup>(7)</sup> Thus, in the same way as local female relatives protected their brothers and husbands when they had to leave their homes and villages, the high priestess *Kikoe Ōkimi* extended her supernatural heavenly powers to protect her relative – the king when he exercised his royal duties. The religious system was well established with branches reaching from the capital Shuri to every remote area controlled by the kingdom. Below the high priestess *Kikoe Ōkimi* there were 33 divine priestesses called *kun* (君; written with the same *kanji* character as the last character of the name of the high priestess *Ōkimi*), such as *Shuri Ōkimi*, *Aoriyahe*, *Sasukasa* and others, and below them there were minor local

priestesses called *noro*<sup>(8)</sup> who were all subordinate to the high priestess within the religious system. The political system with the king on top and the religious system with the high priestess performing rituals and chanting *omoro* songs to protect the ruler of the country and to ensure the prosperity of the whole nation were firmly supported by doctrines, several of which can be found in the *Omorosaushi*. *Omoro* songs thus naturally contain references to the spiritual otherworld of gods and supernatural powers to reinforce the political system – a complex set of concepts which combine ancient rural beliefs with the government’s religious establishment, and which are represented mainly by the following four sets of expressions.

## (2) The Divine World beyond the Sea: *Nirai-Kanai*

*Nirai-Kanai* is a complex otherworld that bears several meanings. In *omoro* songs it is referred to as *Niruya-Kanaya*, although its concept existed in rural areas of Okinawa long before the compilation of the *Omorosaushi*. It can be said that it is probably the most common concept of the Okinawan otherworld compared to the other three concepts of the widespread spiritual otherworld that stretched from Amami to the Yaeyama islands,<sup>(9)</sup> practically throughout the whole Ryūkyūan archipelago. In the current dialect it is often called *Girē-Kanē*.<sup>(10)</sup> It can probably be best explained as the world that comprises the following four features:

Firstly, *Nirai-Kanai* can be defined as the world of ancient ancestors – the very first and oldest world where the Okinawan ancestors reside and come from. In this way, we can proceed to the second related meaning which is the old peaceful and unmoving underworld where the souls of all deceased ancestors reside – a so-called land of the dead. Connected to the world of the living, this spiritual otherworld is not something rigid, sad or forlorn, but bears the connection to this world in a way where people believe that the otherworld sends gods with their divine energy called *seji* to this world to bring good fortune and happiness to people, for example in the form of a good harvest and prosperous year. And finally, people believe that those gods coming from *Nirai-Kanai* reach the island from the direction of



the sea, thus leading us to the fourth definition of this otherworld which is the divine land beyond the sea.<sup>(11)</sup>

Although several former researchers, such as Yanagita Kunio, the founder of modern Japanese folklore studies, found striking similarities between this world and the underworld depicted in the *Kojiki*, the book of Japanese mythology<sup>(12)</sup> (『古事記』, compiled in 712), we can see that the Okinawan *Nirai-Kanai* is probably far more complex and has more attributes than the peaceful world of the deceased. Furthermore, it is sometimes combined with other spiritual otherworld concepts, such as in the *omoro* song No. 40 (from Vol. 1)<sup>(13)</sup> which sings about the gods coming from *Niruya-Kanaya* (*Nirai-Kanai*) who bring divine energy *seji* to the king and call the high priestess who prays in the sacred place within the premises of the Shuri castle; the gods including the goddess *Amaniko* (in other words, the goddess *Amamikyo*<sup>(14)</sup> – the ancient creator of the islands of the Ryūkyūs who according to the local legends doesn't live in *Nirai-Kanai*, but in *Amamiya-Shineriya* otherworld) are moved and enchanted by the priestess's ritual incantations and decide to choose an auspicious day – “a lucky *Niruya* day” and “a lucky *Kanaya* day” to descend to the sacred hill of Shuri and bless the king – the son of the Sun deity who shall reign, prosper and live a long life, as long as the divine energy *seji* from the otherworld *Niruya-Kanaya* protects him.

In this song, in addition to the presence of the high priestess as an important spiritual medium and the king as the supreme ruler and son of the gods, we can observe the blending of the two very different concepts of the otherworld *Nirai-Kanai* and *Amamiya-Shineriya* (which will be mentioned in the next chapter) – a combination that can be explained as a result of the establishing of the state religion as a mixture of beliefs taken from various rural areas, each of which had a particular local set of beliefs. These were blended and rearranged to fit the needs of the Shuri government, and therefore they do not fully coincide with all of the former local practices and concepts. Another example of selecting one concept from the variety of regional concepts for the government's purpose can be the fact that in most

areas of Okinawa it was believed that the direction of the *Nirai-Kanai* otherworld was to the east where the sun rises; however, on the island of Taketomi which is part of the Yaeyama islands in the south of the Ryūkyūs, people pray to the gods of *Nirai-Kanai* facing the west. Nevertheless, *Konkōkeshū* (『混効験集』 the old dictionary of *omoro* language dating back to 1711) defines the word “Lord of the East” (*akarui no ohonushi*, あかるいの大ぬし) as the “Great God of *Niruya-Kanaya*” (*niruya kanaya no ohokami nari*, にるやかなやの大神也) which indicates that the otherworld of *Nirai-Kanai* depicted in the *Omorosaushi* was believed to be exclusively in the east,<sup>(15)</sup> thus neglecting ancient local beliefs of some rural areas.

The unique selection, mixture, and rearrangement of local beliefs in the *Omorosaushi* offer us an interesting insight into the ancient rural practices as well as the official philosophy and rituals performed at the court during the time of the Ryūkyūan kingdom. As Iha Fuyū, the father of Okinawan studies, conveys through his research, “by comparing the three concepts of the Okinawan otherworld *Nirai-Kanai*, *Amamiya-Shineriya* and *Obotsu-Kagura*, we get important clues about the relationship between different cultural layers.”<sup>(16)</sup>

In the following chapter we will have a look at the second type of the otherworld called *Amamiya-Shineriya*.

### (3) The World of the First Gods – Creators of the Islands: *Amamiya-Shineriya*

According to *umui*, an old song that has been passed down in the island of Zamami within the Kerama islands to the west of the Okinawan main island, the ancient creators of the country gods *Amamichu* and *Shinumichu* planted the trees, found the stream, created the island, created the fields, started to grow the rice and offered the sacred *sake* (alcohol) to gods.<sup>(17)</sup> These two ancient gods, often referred to as *Amamikyo* (or *Amamiko/Amamiku*) and *Shinerikyo* (or *Shineriyako/Shineriku*), are believed to be the ancient predecessors of the Okinawan people and creators of the islands and the country, who reside in the divine otherworld called *Amamiya-Shineriya*.

According to *Konkōkenshū*, the old *omoro* language dictionary from 1711, they were considered a couple – the goddess *Amamikyo* and the god *Shinerikyo*; however, since these two words appear in the *Omorosaushi* as *tsuigo* (対語),<sup>(18)</sup> a so-called pair of words, i.e. interchangeable expressions that can stand for the same object, they are now considered as one identical deity, and not a couple.<sup>(19)</sup> It is arguable whether *Amamikyo* and *Shinerikyo* really are one and the same god, since according to various legends they are referred to as a couple. However, one of the remarkable features of *omoro* songs collected in the *Omorosaushi* is that they contain a significant number of *tsuigo* – pairs of words with very similar meanings that are inserted in one verse after another, with the second word of the pair being inserted probably to rephrase the first word and retain the rhythm of the song when chanting the verses. A famous *tsuigo* is for example the expression *Kikoe Ōkimi gya* (聞得大君ぎや; “Oh, the high priestess *Kikoe Ōkimi*”) in the first verse and *Toyomu sedakako ga* (鳴響む精高子が;<sup>(20)</sup> “Oh, the splendid divine priestess”) in the second verse, both of which stand for one person of the high priestess.

Regarding the origins of *Amamikyo* and *Shinerikyo*, Iha Fuyū offers a theory that links the tradition with the arrival of the tribe *Amabe* (海人部) from Kyūshū to Okinawa who spread the belief in *Amamikyo*. He explains that the words *ama* or *amabe* were changed to *amami*, and *ko* (or its palatalised version *kyo* (子); meaning: child, young woman/man) was attached to *amami* thus creating the word *Amamiko* or *Amamikyo* which came to mean the goddess *Amamikyo*. Iha also links the arrival of the Kyūshū people to the introduction of rice; thus, the goddess *Amamikyo* has a deep connection to rice production.<sup>(21)</sup>

In general, *Amamiya-Shineriya* means the divine otherworld where the first creators *Amamikyo* and *Shinerikyo* reside. However, over the course of time the expression *Amamiya-Shineriya* diverted from its original meaning of the “divine otherworld” and started to be used as an idiom meaning “traditional”, “ancient”, “from a long time ago”, “being connected to the ancient ancestors”, etc. and it is used in this way in most *omoro* songs.<sup>(22)</sup>

According to old local legends and songs across various parts of Okinawa, *Amamikiyo* and *Shinerikiyo* are regarded as the first creators of the islands. While the *Omorosaushi* offers a similar portrayal, slight differences and adjustments were made to fit the national doctrine. The following is an excerpt from *omoro* No. 512 (from Vol. 10) that was introduced by Hokama:<sup>(23)</sup>

**[Omorosaushi Vol. 10 – Omoro No. 512]**

(1) <sup>(24)</sup> <i>Mukashi hajimari ya</i>	一	昔 <small>むかし</small> 初 <small>はち</small> まりや <sup>(25)</sup>
<i>Tedako ohonushi ya</i>		てだこ大 <small>ぬし</small> 主 <small>や</small>
<i>Kiyoraya teriyoware</i>		清 <small>きよ</small> らや 照 <small>て</small> りよわれ
(R) <i>Senomi hajimarini</i>	又	せのみ初 <small>はち</small> まりに
(R) <i>Teda ichiroku ga</i>	又	てだ一 <small>いち</small> 郎 <small>ろく</small> 子 <small>く</small> が
(R) <i>Teda hachiroku ga</i>	又	てだ八 <small>はち</small> 郎 <small>ろく</small> 子 <small>く</small> が
(R) <i>Osanshichihe mioreba</i>	又	おさんしちへ 見 <small>み</small> 居 <small>お</small> れば
(R) <i>Sayokoshichihe mioreba</i>	又	さよこしちへ 見 <small>み</small> 居 <small>お</small> れば
(R) <i>Amamikiyo ha yosewachihe</i>	又	あまみきよは 寄 <small>よ</small> せわちへ
(R) <i>Shinerikiyo ha yosewachihe</i>	又	しねりきよは 寄 <small>よ</small> せわちへ
(R) <i>Shima tsukuretete wachihe</i>	又	島 <small>しま</small> 造 <small>つく</small> れて、 わちへ
(R) <i>Kuni tsukuretete wachihe</i>	又	国 <small>くに</small> 造 <small>つく</small> れて、 わちへ

(\* The above is an excerpt of the song; the actual *omoro* has nine more verses which are abbreviated in this paper.)

Interpretation of *omoro*: In ancient times when the earth and heaven came into being, the Sun deity *Tedaichiroku*/*Tedahachiroku* looked down on this world from its high land above. Looking at the world below, the Sun deity realised that this world had not yet been created. So, the deity summoned the creator deity *Amamikiyo*/*Shinerikiyo*, and ordered the deity to create the island and the country.

The high number of *tsuigo* in this *omoro* is noteworthy. “*Mukashi hajimari ya*” in the first verse and “*Senomi hajimari ni*” in the fourth verse (both meaning “in ancient times”, “at the very beginning”) are followed by “*Teda ichiroku ga*” and “*Teda hachiroku ga*” (both meaning “the Sun deity”)

in the fifth and sixth verses and the list goes on with the seventh/eighth, ninth/tenth and eleventh/twelfth verses which contain pairs of words. It is assumed that the pairs of words in this poem stand for identical persons, objects, or actions, such as the Sun deity (one deity), the creator *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* (one creator) or “to create the islands/the country” (one action in one place).

The above is an excerpt of the song, but the full song goes on to state that *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* was not able to create enough islands, so the Sun deity grew impatient and told the deity not to bear any children from the land of *Amamiya-Shineriya*, but to create “proper” children (probably from the lineage of the Sun deity).<sup>(26)</sup> The content of this *omoro* is difficult to understand and it is disputable whether the Sun deity really meant to forbid the deity *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* from bearing any children from the land of *Amamiya-Shineriya*, or whether the words have a different meaning and the world being mentioned in the song is not *Amamiya-Shineriya*, but an inferior, unlucky world. The latter half of this *omoro* is especially confusing, since the local beliefs concerning *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo*, the ancient creator of the country, were particularly strong in various parts of rural Okinawa and to deny or criticise the brilliant divine powers that had been attributed to *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* among Okinawan people long before the establishment of the kingdom would mean that the ruling class denied its ancient roots and undermined its own authority. Therefore, I am reluctant to give any conclusive opinions about the content of the latter half of this *omoro* despite Hokama’s interpretation of this song summarised above. Nonetheless, what is quite remarkable here is the supreme authority of the Sun deity who summons the ancient creator *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* and orders the deity to create the country. The Sun deity thus serves as the highest god above all others and has the ultimate rights to decide and command over all other gods subordinate to him. This system which places the Sun deity at the centre of attention is visible from a plethora of *omoro* songs which depict the Sun deity as lending its divine powers to the high priestess to protect the king or serving as the most important ancestor of the king and rulers of

the country. This doctrine around the supreme authority of the Sun deity with a direct connection to the king and his relative, the high priestess, was firmly established on the national state level, and although the ancient creator(s) *Amamikyo/Shinerikyo* and the divine world *Nirai-Kanai* still played an important role in rural Okinawa on the local level and they are depicted in the *Omorosaushi* as well, we can clearly identify the shift in beliefs presented on the official state level that were reflected in the *Omorosaushi* which places the Sun deity and its heavenly world above all other concepts of the spiritual otherworld and deities present in rural Okinawa and makes them subordinate to the Sun deity.<sup>(27)</sup> This government philosophy stands out even more clearly in the remaining two types of the otherworld discussed in the following two chapters.

#### (4) The Heavenly World of the Sun Deity: *Obotsu-Kagura*

The *Omorosaushi* dictionary defines the word *Obotsu* as the heavenly world above where gods reside, as opposed to the world on this earth and explains that this space is to be understood more in conceptual than geographical terms. It also adds an explanation that during the times of the *Omorosaushi* people believed that all things in this world were a reflection of the things from the heavenly world. The second word of the *tsuigo* often combined in *omoro* songs with *Obotsu* is *Kagura* and has a similar meaning.<sup>(28)</sup> The definition of *Obotsu* as the heavenly world above can be observed in *Konkōkenshū*, the oldest preserved *omoro* language dictionary dating back to 1711,<sup>(29)</sup> through which we can understand that this philosophy permeated the *Omorosaushi*.

While this is the official concept presented by the government, according to ancient beliefs of the Okinawan people, rather than the meaning of the world above, the concept of *Obotsu* had stronger connotations of a sacred hill *Obotsu-yama* (オボツ山) or a spiritual place *Obotsu-take* (オボツ嶽) to which the gods descended. It was the Shuri government elite and intellectuals who, as Hokama assumes, under the influence of the Chinese Taoist and Japanese Shintoist philosophy, were responsible for “elevating” the world of

*Obotsu-Kagura* to heavenly heights and linking it to the Sun deity with deep bonds to the high priestess as the medium through which the Sun deity communicates and the king as the direct descendant of the Sun deity. This way of thinking solidified particularly during the reign of King Shō Shin leading to the compilation of the *Omorosaushi*. Furthermore, the divine heavenly world of *Obotsu-Kagura* is depicted in *omoro* songs as a great source of the supernatural energy *seji* which is sent through the medium of the high priestess to the king to give him the power to peacefully rule the country.<sup>(30)</sup> In the *Omorosaushi* the sun is referred to as *teda* (てだ) with several theories about its etymology relating the expression to the verb *teru* (照る; to shine)<sup>(31)</sup> or the expression *tendō* (天道; the way of heaven).<sup>(32)</sup> In addition to its original meaning of “the sun”, in *omoro* songs it is mostly used to refer to the king, the famous local ruler in history, the high priestess, and sometimes even famous singers of *omoro* songs.<sup>(33)</sup>

The philosophy of the world of *Obotsu-Kagura* is in some aspects (especially the one related to “heaven above”) very similar to the following concept of *Teni* which I translated as “the heavens” in the next chapter.

### (5) The Heavens: *Teni*

The focus on the expression *Teni* (天) in the *Omorosaushi* (or *Ten* in modern Japanese which can nowadays be simply translated as “heaven”) is of special importance in this study, since it is also widely depicted in lyric poetry *ryūka*, as I discuss in the latter half of this paper.

Wu Haining (呉海寧; Go Kainei) provides an extensive analysis of the expression *Teni* throughout Ryūkyūan history and further focuses on its portrayal in various genres of Okinawan literature, such as the ancient epic songs which existed before *omoro* songs, *omoro* songs compiled in the *Omorosaushi* and the traditional Ryūkyūan theatre. According to his research, the portrayal of *Teni* in *omoro* songs can be classified into the following four groups:<sup>(34)</sup>

- A) *Teni* as the natural object – “the sky/the heavens”
- B) *Teni* as the abstract spiritual world – “heaven”

- C) *Teni* as an expression used to refer to the world on this earth ruled by the king
- D) *Teni* as a eulogistic expression for the king, high priestess, the sun, and the Sun deity

From the above classification we can confirm that the concept of *Teni* has a wider range of meanings than the terms *Nirai-Kanai*, *Amamiya-Shineriya* or *Obotsu-Kagura* which were discussed in the previous chapters and exclusively refer to the spiritual otherworld. Nevertheless, even though *Teni* has a broader variety of meanings than the above three terms, all of them have a deep ritual connotation, referring for example to the blessing from the sky or the heavens, or to the divine power of the gods communicated through the high priestess and bestowed upon the king who himself is subject to the heavenly command to rule the country. The ritual nature of each group can be described as follows.

A) *Teni* as the natural object – “the sky/the heavens”

Songs in this group portray *Teni* as the natural object that we can see with our eyes when we look above – “the sky”. In this way, other natural objects related to the sky, such as snow, rain or the sun naturally become the centre of attention, too.

For example, we can discover *omoro* depicting crops of rice as the highest blessing that is sent from *Teni*, “the sky”/“the heavens”, in the same way as “rain” or “snow” fall from the sky above. Although *omoro* No. 222 introduced in the following text does not contain the expression “snow”, in several *omoro* songs rice is often described as “snow” – in the form of a direct metaphor where the word “snow” literally means “rice” in the context of the song, such as for example in this verse taken from *omoro* No. 672 (Vol. 12): *yoki gerahe yoki no medzurashiya* (雪げらへ 雪の 珍らしや; meaning: Oh, how splendid the snow=rice! This snow=rice, what a rarity!)<sup>(35)</sup>

The below *omoro* No. 222 is introduced in Wu Haining’s research<sup>(36)</sup> as an example of expressing gratitude to the heavenly sky *Teni* for sending a



good harvest. At the same time, this *omoro* serves as a means of glorifying the high priestess for mediating the divine energy and the local ruler who was responsible for this splendid harvest.

【*Omorosaushi* Vol. 5 – *Omorō* No. 222】

- |                                  |   |   |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| (1) <i>Omohi matafuki ya</i>     | 一 | 思 <small>おも</small> ひまたふきや  |
| <i>Yonemoiha gerahete</i>        |   | 米 <small>よねも</small> 思 <small>も</small> いは げらへて                   |
| <i>Kagura atsuru</i>             |   | 神 <small>か</small> 座 <small>ぐら</small> 在 <small>あ</small> つる      |
| <i>Kumokogochihe miwoyase</i>    |   | 雲 <small>くも</small> 子 <small>こ</small> 口 <small>ごちへ</small> みをやせ  |
| (R) <i>Kanashi waushiyaku ga</i> | 又 | 愛 <small>かな</small> しわうしやくが                                       |
| <i>Yonemoiha gerahete</i>        |   | 米 <small>よねも</small> 思 <small>も</small> いは げらへて                   |
| (R) <i>Teni karawa furiosote</i> | 又 | 天 <small>てに</small> からわ 降 <small>ふ</small> り襲 <small>おそ</small> て |
| <i>Yonemoiha gerahete</i>        |   | 米 <small>よねも</small> 思 <small>も</small> いは げらへて                   |
| (R) <i>Jii karaha wakiagaru</i>  | 又 | 地 <small>ちい</small> からは 沸 <small>わ</small> き上 <small>あ</small> がる |
| <i>Yonemoiha gerahete</i>        |   | 米 <small>よねも</small> 思 <small>も</small> いは げらへて                   |

Interpretation of *omoro*: Great ruler *Matafuki*,<sup>(37)</sup> exceptional ruler *Waushiyaku*<sup>(38)</sup> grew outstanding rice. The divine priestess prayed beautiful words to the gods above. In the same way as (rain or snow) fall from the sky *Teni* and overflow from the earth, so shall the rice increase, become a great harvest, and the prosperity of the country shall thus be achieved.

The Japanese interpretation of this *omoro* provided by Hokama does not mention the words “rain” or “snow”. However, Wu Haining interprets this *omoro* stating that the prayers of an abundant rice harvest are deeply linked to the concept of “snow” or “rain” falling heavily from the sky and that thanks to the prayers of the priestess and the greatness of the local ruler the sky sends blessings to the region in form of a good harvest.<sup>(39)</sup> Besides the portrayal of *Teni* as the natural object “the sky”, we can also identify the deep spiritual meaning of *Teni* as the source of blessing for the country in the songs belonging to this group.

In addition, Wu Haining introduces another song in this group – *omoro* No. 212 which refers to the king of Shuri as *teda* (the sun) and compares it to

the sun shining in the sky concluding that they both shall unite their hearts and become one. The song then continues with the words that the Sun deity *Tedaichiroku/Tedahachiroku* shall also become one heart and one soul with the sun *teda* shining in the sky. In this way, although the song primarily portrays the natural object “the sun in the sky”, by linking the sun directly and the king through the sun indirectly to the Sun deity, both the sun shining in the sky and the king ruling the country obtain the status of divine supernatural beings connected to the great Sun deity. *Omororo* songs in this group (as well as in other groups) thus clearly demonstrate the government’s intention to strengthen and legitimise the rule of the king as the “shining” heavenly deity.

B) *Teni* as the abstract spiritual world “heaven”

*Teni* as “heaven” symbolises a place from which gods send the magic power to the high priestess to protect the king so that he can accomplish great things. This concept of the abstract spiritual world is close to the concepts of the spiritual otherworld expressed by the previously introduced expressions *Nirai-Kanai* and *Amamiya-Shineriya*, and it is particularly similar to *Obotsu-Kagura* which is the spiritual otherworld elevated by the Shuri elite to “heavenly” heights to serve the purpose of the strengthening of the political establishment of the kingdom which positions the king as the supreme ruler and the high priestess as the head of the religious system and links them both to the heavenly world, especially to the divine existence of the Sun deity. Although the above three worlds portrayed in the *Omorosaushi* are closely intertwined, *Teni* has a very similar role, particularly in connection to *Obotsu-Kagura* as the magical heavenly world above this earth.

C) *Teni* as an expression used to refer to the world on this earth ruled by the king

*Teni* portrayed in the songs in this group is part of expressions such as *teni ga shita* (天か<sup>s</sup>下), the palatalised version *teni gya shita* (天ぎや下) or the variation *teni yori shita* (天より下) that refer to the world “under the

sky” or “under heaven”. This simply means the world on this earth, however, with a special emphasis on the fact that it is ruled by the king who received special divine energy *seji* from heaven *Teni* which he in turn pours to the whole nation below and blesses the people as the supreme and heavenly ruler from above. The songs in this group praise the king and pray for his long rule and longevity as this can secure the prosperity of the country. Furthermore, they often include the high priestess who receives divine energy which she then ritually gives to the king so that he can accomplish many outstanding deeds, such as building castles, constructing ships, or growing rice, and in the end blesses the whole country below heaven (referred to as *teni ga shita*) with his divine existence.

D) *Teni* as a eulogistic expression for the king, the high priestess, the sun, and the Sun deity

In *omoro* songs in this group *Teni* can be seen as part of various eulogistic expressions which *Omorosaushi* researchers have interpreted as “the king”, “the high priestess”, “the sun”, and “the Sun deity”. Wu Haining offers a list of these expressions<sup>(40)</sup> from which the following ones are especially remarkable:

- Expressions for the king: *Teni tsugi* (天つぎ; literal meaning: the heir of heaven), *Jiteni toyomu ohonushi* (地天鳴響む大主; literal meaning: the great master whose glory resonates on earth and in heaven), *Teni kiyora* (天清ら; literal meaning: beautiful heaven), *Teni ganashi* (天加那志; literal meaning: outstanding person from heaven)
- Expressions for the high priestess: *Kikoe aya (no) teni* (聞ゑ綾(の)天; literal meaning: *Kikoe* mysterious heaven), *Toyomu aya no teni* (鳴響む綾の天; literal meaning: mysterious heaven whose glory resonates)
- Expressions for the sun/Sun deity: *(Ji) teni toyomu ohonushi* (地)天鳴響む大主; literal meaning: the great master whose glory resonates (on earth and) in heaven), *Teni no teda* (天のてだ; literal meaning: the sun in heaven)

The aim of the above poetic expressions is to glorify and emphasise the importance of the divine nature of the king, the high priestess, and the sun/Sun deity which, as I previously explained, was an indispensable part of the state philosophy.

Finally, let me briefly mention one more expression related to the above *kanji* character 天 which uses the Japanese way of reading as opposed to the reading of *teni* which is in principle the Chinese way of reading this character. It is the reading of *ama* (very similar to the old Japanese reading, such as for example in the name of the ancient Japanese goddess *Amaterasu*). The reading of *ama* can be seen in combination with various expressions, and its original meaning “heaven” over the course of time shifted to the meaning “the best”, “the highest”, “the ultimate”. In addition to being used in *omoro* to glorify a famous person, it expresses “the ultimate” joy (such as the expression *ama no sokorashiya*) of the beneficial effects of rituals performed by the priestess which bring good fortune.

In this chapter we identified the main characteristics of the spiritual otherworld portrayed in the *Omorosaushi*. Based on the findings of previous research, we were able to obtain comprehensive insight into the ritual nature of songs centered around the divine existence of the king, local rulers, and the high priestess with a deep connection to the sun and the Sun deity as the main deity of the spiritual otherworld. These images formed the fundamental basis of the state philosophy of the Ryūkyūan kingdom, although in many ways they were intertwined with old rural beliefs existing across the islands long before the establishment of the kingdom. One of these concepts can be seen in the presence of *Nirai-Kanai* and *Amamiya-Shineriya*-type of the otherworld, or in the prayers for a good harvest that were crucially important for every local community of Okinawan peasants. As Wu Haining points out, “The concept of *Teni* in the old rural songs *otakabe* and *kwēna* on the local level is closely connected with the way of life of common people who prayed for rain or an abundant rice harvest. In other words, compared to the government’s philosophy of *Teni* that emphasised the legitimacy of the kingdom, the concept of *Teni* on the local level among

common people was not that abstract; on the contrary, it became more concrete and practical.”<sup>(41)</sup>

In the following chapter I'd like to dive into the way of thinking of the Okinawan community that was preserved in lyric *ryūka* poetry and explore how its perception of the otherworld changed over the course of the almost one-hundred-years that marked the shift from epic to lyric genre.

## II. Lyric *Ryūka* Poetry and Its Spiritual Otherworld

### (1) What Is *Ryūka*?

The word used for Okinawan *ryūka* (琉歌) poetry is a compound formed by two *kanji* characters – the first character *ryū* (琉) comes from the word *Ryūkyū* (琉球), such as in the name of the islands of the Ryūkyūs and the second character *ka* (歌), also read as *uta* when standing alone, means a poem or a song, such as in the following two expressions – *waka* (和歌) which is usually translated as Japanese poetry, and *ryūka* which typically means a Ryūkyūan song. Okinawan people have generally referred to *ryūka* simply as *uta* (a song), whereas the name *ryūka*, as opposed to the name *waka*, is believed to have been created by the Shuri elite during the era of the Ryūkyūan kingdom as a result of their awareness of the existence of Japanese classical poetry *waka* – a very similar situation to the one in which Japanese court aristocrats created the name *waka* (the “Japanese” poem/song) as opposed to the Chinese classical poem/song *karauta* (唐歌) after it was introduced from China to Japan.<sup>(42)</sup>

*Ryūka* can be defined as a lyric song which originated in the Okinawan main island and gradually spread to other islands of the Ryūkyūs which form the present Okinawa prefecture, and to the Amami islands which are nowadays part of the Kagoshima prefecture. *Ryūka* is very popular in Okinawa to this day, especially its musical feature – you can hear *ryūka* songs on the streets, on TV and the radio, often accompanied by traditional Okinawan musical instruments, the most typical being *sanshin* (三線), a

three-stringed instrument which was introduced to Okinawa from China. Around the 16th century *sanshin* spread from Okinawa to mainland Japan where in the following century it became an important accompanying musical instrument for *jōruri* and later *kabuki* theatre, known as *shamisen* (三味線).<sup>(43)</sup> It is unknown when exactly *sanshin* arrived in Okinawa, but Ikemiya assumes that it must have been sometime around 1500 during the reign of King Shō Shin when *sanshin* started gaining popularity at the court among the Ryūkyūan aristocrats and accompanied *ryūka* songs or a type of songs that existed before *ryūka* songs crystallised into their fixed form.<sup>(44)</sup>

Regarding the syllabic form of *ryūka*, compared to *omoro* whose number of verses and syllables is not fixed (although according to several researchers we can observe a slight tendency towards the use of 8- and 6-syllabic verses in *omoro* and other old epic songs, such as *kwēna*<sup>(45)</sup>), *ryūka* has a fixed form; it consists of four verses arranged in an 8-8-8-6 syllabic form, comprising 30 syllables. In comparison, the traditional form of the Japanese *waka* (or *tanka* 短歌 which means a short type of poem as opposed to *chōka* 長歌 – a long type of poem) is very different; it comprises five verses arranged in a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic form with 31 syllables. Thus, both forms create an entirely different rhythm when sung or chanted.

In contrast to epic *omoro* songs whose individual authors are not clearly specified, although the *Omorosaushi* is believed to have been compiled by the Shuri elite, many *ryūka* songs have a specific authorship by a famous Shuri aristocrat or even a member of the royal family. On the other hand, many *ryūka* are anonymous, with their authors ranging from those believed to be common people living in the countryside to minor aristocrats visiting Edo and mainland Japan on official journeys. In addition, we can find *ryūka* attributed to legendary poets, such as two female poets, Yoshiya Tsuru and Onna Nabe. Despite the unclear authorship of many *ryūka* poems, their distinguishing feature lies in the expression of the author's individuality, regardless of whether or not the poem is authored by a famous poet. The inner world of individuals in *ryūka* pictured from the first person's perspective offers us a perception that varies from the world portrayed in *omoro*.

The exact origins of *ryūka* are unknown since the songs were primarily transmitted orally. The latest written record dates back to the year 1683, in which, according to the family register of a person named *Zamami Keiten* (座間味景典), the Chinese envoy *Ōshū* (汪楫, *Wang Ji*) upon his return to China brought a present from the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs – a folding screen decorated with pictures of chrysanthemum, pine, bamboo and poems that had been written in the form of *ryūka*.<sup>(46)</sup> However, it is unknown to what extent the songs were spread across the Ryūkyūan islands, or at least across the main island of Okinawa and whether at this point the name *ryūka* already existed. The latest record which mentions the word *ryūka* can be traced back to the beginning of the following century, namely to the old dictionary of *omoro* language *Konkōkeshū* compiled in 1711. Furthermore, the fact that not so many collections of *ryūka* have been compiled, compared for example to the large number of *waka* anthologies, with the oldest *waka* anthology *Man'yōshū* (『萬葉集』) dating back to the second half of the 8th century, or the imperial anthologies starting with *Kokinwakashū* (『古今和歌集』) in 905, makes it even more difficult to determine the exact time period and circumstances of *ryūka's* birth. Following the collection of songs with musical notations for performing *ryūka* songs entitled *Yakabikunkunshi* (『屋嘉比工工四』) around 1770,<sup>(47)</sup> the oldest anthology of *ryūka* poems called *Ryūka Hyakkō* (『琉歌百控』) published in three volumes – *Ryūka Hyakkō Kanjūsetsuryū* (『琉歌百控乾柔節流』; 1795), *Ryūka Hyakkō Dokūsetsuryū* (『琉歌百控独節流』; 1798) and *Ryūka Hyakkō Ransetsuryū* (『琉歌百控覽節流』; 1802) did not appear until the late 18th century, followed by another famous collection *Kokinryūkashū* (『古今琉歌集』) compiled in 1895 by Onaha Chōshin which, as the title suggests, was a result of an inspiration by the structure and concept of the first Japanese imperial anthology *Kokinwakashū*.<sup>(48)</sup> Based on the above dates, we can assume that *ryūka* emerged sometime around the second half of the 17th century if not earlier, and judging from the oldest dictionary entry of the word *ryūka* and the spread of *ryūka* collections in the 18th century, it is logical to suppose that there is an approximately a one-hundred-year span between the birth and

spread of epic *omoro* and lyric *ryūka* songs.

Scholarly opinions vary regarding the origins of *ryūka*, but in principle we can observe two mainstream theories. The first group of theories supported by Tajima Risaburō, Seirei Kunio, Ono Jūrō and others assumes that *ryūka* was primarily formed under Japanese literary influences as a result of cultural exchanges after the invasion of the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs by the Satsuma domain in 1609, while the second, a more prevalent group which features the theories of Iha Fuyū, Nakahara Zenchū, Hokama Shuzen, among others, argues that *ryūka* developed primarily from *omoro* or other old Okinawan songs, and is thus the unique heritage of Okinawan culture.<sup>(49)</sup> There have also been attempts, mainly by scholars from the second group, to point out the beginnings of the lyric portrayal observed in some *omoro* songs in order to prove the connection between *omoro* and *ryūka*.<sup>(50)</sup> However, these lyric portrayals in *omoro* are more of a random nature, and cannot be considered a systemic feature. Moreover, according to the traditional literary classification provided by Hokama, *omoro* together with *kwēna*, *umui* and other ancient songs belong to the group of classical epic literature, while *ryūka* is classified as classical lyric literature.<sup>(51)</sup> It is indeed difficult to offer a clear-cut theory on the origins of *ryūka*, since we can discover influences from both Okinawan old epic *omoro* and Japanese classical lyric *waka*. The aim of this study is not to determine the basis for the formation of *ryūka*. Instead, in the following two chapters I would like to offer insight into how the portrayal of the spiritual otherworld changed with the transition from epic *omoro* to lyric *ryūka*, since I am confident that it is reasonable to classify *omoro* as epic and *ryūka* as lyric genres, and by providing a comparative analysis of concrete examples of poems I would like to clarify the changes in spiritual perception that occurred with this remarkable shift from epic to lyric.



## (2) Portrayal of the Spiritual Otherworld Represented by the Expression *Ten* (天; the Heavens)

Although the ancient spiritual otherworld in Okinawa has been a subject of wide-ranging research since the beginning of the 20th century, starting with such famous names as the Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio and the father of Okinawan studies Iha Fuyū, and flourishing with extensive analyses provided by Hokama Shuzen, the theories have mainly focused on ancient ritual practices or epic *omoro*, while practically no research has examined the spiritual otherworld in *ryūka*. One reason for the insufficient research regarding *ryūka* might be that, with a few exceptions which will be explained later, expressions such as *Nirai-Kanai*, *Obotsu-Kagura* and *Amamiya-Shineriya*, are not included in this lyric genre, which suggests that *ryūka* does not contain any references to the spiritual otherworld whatsoever. However, as my research shows, the concept of the spiritual otherworld in *ryūka* does exist, although to a great degree it is represented by the expression *Ten* (天; the heavens), whose concept has shifted from that of the similar expression *Teni* portrayed in *omoro*.

So, how does lyric *ryūka*, whose nature is different from epic *omoro*, depict the spiritual otherworld? This chapter discusses the characteristics of the world *Ten* in *ryūka* which is written with the same *kanji* character 天 as the word *Teni* in *omoro*, and thus we can assume has the same overall meanings in *omoro* and *ryūka*. Nevertheless, the world of *Ten* depicted in *ryūka* bears connotations very different from the world of *Teni* in *omoro*, which can be explained in relation to a different selection of topics and their distinct portrayal using a unique attitude of the first person's perspective and other features typical for lyric poetry.

The proposed study analyses 65 *ryūka* poems which include the expression *ten* (天) either as a single word or as a compound with other words. Out of 65 poems 43 poems were taken from *Ryūka Zenshū*, and after removing the poems from *Ryūka Taisei* that were identical with those found in *Ryūka Zenshū*, the number of the remaining poems from *Ryūka Taisei* reached 22.

In the study I used a classification based on the definitions of the expression *ten* (天) from the Great Dictionary of Okinawan Old Language<sup>(52)</sup> and analysed the meanings of all words *ten* (including compounds) based on context of the poems in which they were included. According to the analysis, the concept of *Ten* in *ryūka* can be classified into the following four groups arranged in order from the group containing the largest number of poems to the group with the smallest number of poems.

- Group 1) *Ten* as a eulogistic expression for the king (37 poems, approx. 57%)
- Group 2) *Ten* as the abstract spiritual world – “heaven” (17 poems, approx. 26%)
- Group 3) *Ten* as the natural object – “the sky/the heavens” (9 poems, approx. 14%)
- Group 4) *Ten* as an expression referring to the world on this earth (2 poems, approx. 3%)

At first sight, the above groups resemble the groups of *omoro* songs with their concept of *Teni* classified in Wu Haining’s research. Despite the obvious similarities with the concept of *Teni* in *omoro* songs, several important features of *Ten* are unique to *ryūka* which I will examine below by analysing the poems of each group in more detail.

Group 1) *Ten* as a eulogistic expression for the king (37 poems, approx. 57%)

*Ten* in this group is used in compounds similar to those identified in *omoro*, namely the expression *Tenganashi* (天加那志) which can be translated in the same way as *Teni ganashi* in *omoro* – “an outstanding person from heaven”. The original meaning of *kanashi* (or *ganashi*) which is “lovely” or “beloved” has shifted to “outstanding”, “great”, “respected” and “admirable” used either as a prefix or as an honorific suffix whose exact meaning is not specified;<sup>(53)</sup> however, considering the above-mentioned definition I believe it is possible to translate this expression as “an outstanding person”, especially

in words related to the king or other famous historical figures. The pronunciation of this expression in *ryūka* is *tinganashi*, while there is also a palatalised version *Tengyanashi* (天ぎやなし) pronounced as *tinjanashi*. In most cases, the expressions are used in compounds with the word Shuri (the capital of the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs), such as the compound *Shuri Tenganashi* (首里天加那志; pronounced as *shuyui tin ganashi*) or *Shuri Tengyanashi* (pronounced as *shuyui tin janashi*) which can be translated as “the heavenly king from Shuri”. In addition, there is an unusual expression that places the word *ten* at the end of the compound, such as *Shuri Ganashi Ten* (pronounced as *shuyui ganashi tin*) or its palatalised version *Shuri Gyanashi Ten* (pronounced as *shuyui janashi tin*). Despite their slight differences in wording, all expressions mean “the heavenly king” or “the heavenly ruler”.

Both *ryūka* and *omoro* use the expression *ten* (*teni* in *omoro*) to glorify the heavenly authority of the king and share a similar content that includes prayers for the king’s longevity and words to celebrate his reign. Furthermore, the king or the local ruler is often an object of worship – the songs express the wish to look at the king’s face, such as the following famous *ryūka* believed to have been composed by the legendary female poet Onna Nabe.

**【*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 122, Author: Onna Nabe (pronounced as Unna Nabii) <sup>(54)</sup>】**

The voice of the waves, stop!                      *Nami nu kwin tumari*

The voice of the wind, stop!                      *Kaji nu kwin tumari*

The Shuri king’s                                      *Shuyui tin ganashi*

Sacred face – I want to see it!                      *Miunchi wugama*

Poem in characters: 波の声もとまれ 風の声もとまれ 首里天がなし みおんき拝ま

Transliteration of characters: *Nami no koe mo tomare / Kaze no koe mo tomare / Shuritenganashi / Mionki ogama*

Interpretation of the poem: The waves and the wind, calm down your voices! I want to see the divine face of the king!

This energetic poem sends a powerful message of an individual who feels a strong desire to see the beloved king's face – so strong that she commands the waves to cease and the wind to calm down. Moreover, the author of this poem is not a queen or high priestess, as is often the case in *omoro*, but quite the opposite; according to legend, she was a commoner born in the countryside where she lived all her life as a daughter and wife in a family of peasants. Despite her experience of village life, or probably because of it, her poems are full of vitality and relentlessness, speaking out on behalf of her fellow villagers with the determination to never give up even when faced with unfavourable circumstances. Viewed one way, the above poem expresses the daring, even sassy attitude of a village girl who does not take into consideration her own lower status in front of the king. However, it also suggests that the poet imagines the king to be the epitome of something heavenly and divine, something even greater than the mysterious sounds of the waves or the wind which she bids to keep quiet in his heavenly presence. And at the centre of the poem stands the poet, not as a high priestess praying for the king and sending her divine energy, but as a common person, an individual who expresses her own desire to see the king's beloved face and create a personal relationship with him.

The following *ryūka* contains a similar scene of looking at the king, but the expression in the last verse reflects the attitude towards the king's glorious authority and divine nature even more clearly than the previous poem. The poem expresses the desire to look at the king's face while praying for his longevity in the following way.

**【*Ryūka Taisei*, Poem No. 2200, Author: Anonymous】**

The king of Shuri	<i>Shuyui tin ganashi</i>
May He live one thousand years!	<i>Tumumutu nu unige</i>
All the people together	<i>Umanchu nu majiri</i>
Let's look at Him and be reborn!	<i>Wugadi sidira</i>

Poem in characters: 首里天がなし 十ももとのお願ひ お万人のまぎり 拝  
ですであら

Transliteration of characters: Shuritenganashi / Tomomoto no onegahi / Omanjin no magiri / Ogade sudera

Interpretation of the poem: We, people, pray “Long Live the King”. All the people together, let’s look at the king, receive his divine blessing and be reborn.

The poem uses the same verb as the previous *ryūka* No. 122 – the verb *ogamu* (拝む; meanings: to worship or to look at, with the latter meaning used towards a person of a higher status in humble *kenjōgo* language<sup>(55)</sup> which can be interpreted as “to look at admiringly”). However, in this latter poem we can see a slightly diverse expression *ogade sudera* which the Great Dictionary of Okinawan Old Language defines as “to look at and be reborn/feel rejuvenated” and explains that in the context of the above poem this expression can also mean “to meet a noble person”.<sup>(56)</sup> Considering the original meaning of the verb *suderu*, “the birth of a new life, such as the shedding of snake’s skin” and its figurative meanings “to be reborn” and “to feel rejuvenated”,<sup>(57)</sup> we can see that the act of looking at the king implies a strong connotation of the king’s divine nature that can make a person looking at him “be reborn”. The above expression could be identified in four *ryūka* poems in connection to the King of Shuri and in one poem glorifying the Chinese emperor, which makes it a common expression used in *ryūka* and an interesting example of expressing the divinity of the king or ruler.

The similarities between the above two *ryūka* poems and the following *omoro* can be observed in the wish to look at the face of the king or ruler and the fact that the songs glorify his heavenly nature.

**[Omorosaushi Vol. 8 – Omoro No. 442]**

(1) *Akano owetsuki ya*

*U no toki no teda no*

*Agate teriyoru yani*

*Omikauno miboshiya*

(R) *Nehano owetsuki ya*

一 阿嘉のお祝付きや  
卯の時のてだの  
上て 照り居る様に  
御み顔の 見欲しや  
又 饒波のお祝付きや

Interpretation of *omoro*: Great *omoro* singer *Akano-owetsuki*, outstanding singer *Nehano-owetsuki*<sup>(58)</sup> prays the following prayer: “In the same way as the sun rises and shines around five o'clock in the morning, so does the beautiful face of the ruler shine. I want to see his brilliant face.”

In the above *omoro* we can identify the presence of a famous *omoro* singer who is also viewed in some *omoro* songs as “the heavenly existence” like the high priestess, with the expression *teda* “the sun” attributed as an honorific prefix to glorify his divine nature. Unlike *ryūka*, the above *omoro* does not use the verb *ogamu* (“to look at admiringly”) to express the wish to see the ruler’s face, but a simpler verb *miru* (to look at) in the form *miboshiya* (“I want to see”). Nevertheless, there are several *omoro* songs that include the verb *ogamu* to express the act of looking at a person of a high status, such as the ruler or king, in a way that is similar to *ryūka*.

The significant difference between *omoro* and *ryūka* lies in the person looking at the ruler or the king. Although *omoro* songs express the same wish as *ryūka* to look at the face of the heavenly king or ruler, this wish is always expressed by an appropriate person of an equally divine nature, such as the high priestess or a famous *omoro* singer, and never by a commoner with an unspecified (and most probably low) status, as is often seen in *ryūka*. The presence of the high priestess as a spiritual medium who prays and blesses the king in *omoro*, is completely missing in *ryūka* despite several similarities which include the glorifying of the heavenly nature of the king, offering prayers for his longevity and expressing the wish to see and worship him. Unlike *omoro* which never fails to place the high priestess or other “heavenly existence”, such as the singer of *omoro* songs at the centre of the poem, *ryūka* is sung from a first-person point of view, by an individual who freely expresses his wishes without having the need to place a spiritual medium between the king and himself, which results in a very different way of perceiving the king and the heavenly world in relation to oneself.

Another important feature of *ryūka* when compared to *omoro* is the fact that the presence of the Sun deity who is widely depicted in *omoro* songs, is

significantly reduced. First of all, although *omoro* songs glorify both the king and the Sun deity by using the expression *Teni* (heaven), *ryūka* uses *Ten* (heaven) as a eulogistic expression only for the king. In addition, although several expressions in *ryūka* use the word *teda* “the sun” to express the heavenly nature of the king which implies his connection to the divine Sun deity from the ancient times, this bond is not as strong as in *omoro* since the Sun deity does not appear in *ryūka* songs. One of the rare examples implying the existence of “the divine sun” which also reflects the ancient local Okinawan beliefs can be seen in the following *ryūka*.

**[*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 2892, Author: Anonymous]**

Looking admiringly at the rising sun	<i>Agaru tida wugadi</i>
I came to Tokunoshima and the Erabu islands.	<i>Toku Irabu watati</i>
Looking at (praying to) the <i>onari-gami</i> goddess	<i>Wunaigami wugadi</i>
I returned to my home island.	<i>Washima muduro</i>

Poem in characters: あがるてだ拝がで 徳永良部渡て をなり神拝がで 吾島もどろ

Transliteration of characters: *Agaru teda ogade / Toku Erabu watate / Wonari-gami ogade / Washima modoro*

Interpretation of the poem: Looking admiringly at the rising sun, I came to Tokunoshima and the Erabu islands. Praying to the goddess *onari-gami* for protection, I returned safely to my home in Amami island.

In this poem we can identify the worshipping of the sun mixed with the ancient belief of *onari-gami* – a female “goddess” protecting her male relative who embarks on a journey. Although the Sun deity is not mentioned here directly as in the *omoro* songs introduced in the previous chapters, we can assume that the Sun deity is somehow present in the image of the rising sun in the first verse, which the poet looks admiringly at, and which is combined with *onari-gami* in the third verse thus forming *tsuigo*. There is one more similar *ryūka* which includes the presence of the sun during the journey on the sea. Written from the perspective of a man on a ship heading towards

the capital Shuri, this *ryūka* portrays a situation in which the man is looking at the setting sun and thinking about arriving in the capital soon. The poem mentions nothing further in connection to the Sun deity or the protective female goddess *onari-gami*, so it might be hasty to conclude that this *ryūka* portrays the divine presence of the Sun deity. Instead, we can look at it from a more lyrical perspective, as a poem describing the scenery of the setting sun which coincides with the personal feelings of the author, a man heading towards the capital full of expectations, anxiety and perhaps a bit of melancholy when thinking of his home and the family he left behind. The poetic portrayal with remarkable lyric features, as in this poem, is quite common in *ryūka*; it penetrates a wide range of *ryūka* poems including the expression “the sun” which is referred to more as a natural object than a supernatural existence. In lyric *ryūka*, the sun is often portrayed as part of nature’s romantic or nostalgic scenery or as an expression of one’s feelings which is a characteristic feature of lyric poetry, as we can see from the following two *ryūka* poems.

The first poem portrays a nostalgic atmosphere of the setting sun in which the poet asks the sun to wait and shine a bit longer as he wants to continue to admire “the shade of the flower tree”. We can think of different interpretations, from the one which describes a couple on a date in nature wishing that it doesn’t get dark because then they will have to go home, to the more sensual interpretation in which the setting sun symbolises one’s final stage of youth and the shade of the flower tree the beauty and love of a beautiful woman. Regardless of how we interpret the content of the poem, it certainly describes a fleeting moment full of nostalgia. The second poem introduced below uses the shining sun as a metaphor for directing one’s romantic affection to one’s partner and the rain which wets one’s sleeve as a symbol for tears. It is a sad lyric poem including the metaphor of the rain often used in Japanese *waka* which might have influenced this *ryūka* and which was skillfully combined with the picture of the shining sun symbolising affection – a metaphor unique to *ryūka*. There is little in the two poems that would remind us of the world in *omoro*, as their portrayals offer a fascinating



glimpse into the world of lyric poetry.

**[*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 1410, Author: Anonymous]**

Oh, the sun setting in the west,            *Iri sagaru tidan*  
 Please wait for a while!                    *Shibashi machi mishori*  
 I was tirelessly admiring                 *Akanu nagamitaru*  
 The shade of the flower tree.             *Hana nu kukaji*

Poem in characters: いらさがるてだも   しばし待ちめしやうれ   あかぬ眺め  
 たる   花の木蔭

Transliteration of characters: *Irisagaru teda mo / Shibashi machi meshiyaure / Akanu nagametaru / Hana no kokage*

Interpretation of the poem: Oh, the sun setting in the west, please kindly wait for a while! I would like to admire a bit longer the shade of the flower tree which I kept admiring so far without getting tired of it.

**[*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 257, Author: Anonymous]**

You cruel girl,                                *Uramishiya nzo ga*  
 Please make the sun shine!                *Tiru tida ya tirashi*  
 The rain is falling on my sleeve         *Wasudi furu ami nu*  
 Night and day.                                *Asan yusan*

Poem in characters: 恨めしや無蔵が   照るてだや照らせ   我袖降る雨の   朝  
 も夕さも

Transliteration of characters: *Urameshiya muzō ga / Teru teda ya terase / Wasode furu ame no / Asa mo yusa mo*

Interpretation of the poem: You cruel girl, you made the sun hide in the clouds. Please, let it shine again! My sleeve is wet night and day from the falling rain.

To sum up, the *ryūka* poems introduced in this group share similarities with *omoro*, especially in expressing admiration for the divine nature of the king who serves as a supreme person and secures the prosperity of the country and the happiness of its people. On the other hand, unlike epic

*omoro*, *ryūka* songs sung from the first person's perspective revolve around one's emotions, describe the scenery that matches one's feelings, include the sun portrayed as a natural object and lyric expression rather than a distinctive god, and reveal a more personal relationship with the king without the presence of the high priestess as a medium between the king and the individual.

The poems in the following Group 2 also emphasise the personal relationship of the individual and extend it even further towards the spiritual otherworld.

Group 2) *Ten* as the abstract spiritual world – “heaven” (17 poems, approx. 26%)

Although the classification of the *ryūka* songs in this group is similar to the Group B of *omoro* songs which bear the concept of *Ten* as the abstract spiritual world “heaven”, the concept of heaven in *ryūka* is very different from that perceived in *omoro*. Like the poems in the previous Group 1, the main subject of *ryūka* in this group is the individual who expresses personal desires, fears, and beliefs towards “heaven”. Again, there is no Sun deity or divine priestess to serve as a medium for communicating people's desires to “heaven” or to extend her supernatural heavenly energy to the king, country, and its people; the individual in *ryūka* perceives his relationship with heaven as a direct connection without any go-between. He feels that “heaven” sees him and knows what is in his heart, and while this awareness can be frightening, there are several *ryūka* poems in which the individual prays to heaven and asks for help with the words full of trust saying “heaven, who knows my heart, please help me”.

In addition to the above perception of heaven, we can identify the influences of Confucian moral teaching which resulted in the portrayal of heaven in *ryūka* as an abstract world of the highest moral authority that has the legitimacy to judge what is right and wrong and guide the individual on the right path. Heaven in *ryūka* is personified. It can judge things and reflect them like a mirror. It is also personal and able to create an intimate relationship with the individual seeking its help. The following *ryūka* aptly illustrates the

personal relationship with heaven as a place of moral guidance by depicting a situation in which heaven knows every part of the human's heart, like someone who is close to us and knows us really well.

【*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 261, Author: Nago Oyakata Chōbun (pronounced as *Nagu Wēkata Chōbun*)】

Even if one tries to hide it	<i>Kakusatei siriba</i>
Heaven and earth are the mirror.	<i>Tin tu ji ya kagami</i>
I feel really embarrassed	<i>Hajikashiya kaji nu</i>
When I think about how the mirror reflects it.	<i>Utsira tumiba</i>

Poem in characters: かくさてやりすれば 天と地や鏡 はづかしや影の う  
つらとめば

Transliteration of characters: *Kakusateyari sureba / Ten to ji ya kagami / Hadzukashiya kage no / Utsura tomeba*

Interpretation of the poem: Even if one tries to hide one's bad thoughts and behaviour, heaven and earth are the mirror. When I think about how the mirror reflects everything, I feel really embarrassed.

The following *ryūka* expands the influence of Confucian moral teaching even further by portraying heaven as a place which “has a heart as clear as the moon and completely devoid of any unjust judgments or emotions”. In this poem the individual is not visible which gives “heaven” an aura of even greater moral authority that exists above everything and everyone in this world regardless of the ephemeral and changing human emotions, and evenly extends its clear light through the moon to “the whole country”. The poem portrays the pure atmosphere of heaven's justice towards the country and its people in accordance with Confucian ideology.

【*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 1657, Author: King Shō Tai】

The moonlight tonight	<i>Kiyu nu tsichikaji ya</i>
Shines on the whole country.	<i>Kuniginin tiyura</i>
There's no injustice	<i>Katakakin neranu</i>

In the heart of heaven.

*Tin nu ujimu*

Poem in characters: 今宵の月かげや 国も照ゆら かたかけもないらぬ  
天のお肝

Transliteration of characters: *Koyohi no tsukikage ya / Kuniguni mo teyura / Katakake mo nairanu / Ten no ogimo*

Interpretation of the poem: The moon tonight shines brightly and evenly on every piece of the country. The heart of heaven has no unjust preferences or bias.

To sum up, the concept of *Ten* in *ryūka* as the spiritual otherworld – “heaven above” is personified and influenced by Confucian moral teachings. There is no god or priestess to act as a go-between for heaven and people; heaven itself acts as a supernatural being that has the ability to think, judge and communicate with the individual. Moreover, heaven is largely personal, with the individual creating an intimate relationship in which he can turn to heaven for help or where he realises that he is exposed in front of heaven that knows him with all his good and bad sides. Heaven in *ryūka*, although still far up in the sky and above this world and its earthly existence, is much closer to the individual than the heavenly otherworld portrayed in *omoro*.

Group 3) *Ten* as the natural object – “the sky/the heavens” (9 poems, approx. 14%)

Unlike *omoro*, this group of *ryūka* poems does not contain “rain” or “snow” depicted as a direct blessing from the sky. However, by no means it does follow that *ryūka* includes no “rain” or “snow” in other situations; on the contrary, they are widely portrayed in *ryūka* as a great blessing as well as within the beautiful lyric atmosphere, as I will explain later. It is probably a matter of coincidence that the *ryūka* poems depicting *Ten* do not refer to rain or snow.

The poems in this group can again be interpreted in terms of personal lyric expression where the subject of the poem, the individual poet, uses the sky together with other natural symbols to express personal desires, beliefs

or romantic experience. The following *ryūka* speaks of one's desire to break free and literally fly like a bird in the sky, a lyric portrayal not observed in *omoro*.

【*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 2625, Author: Asato Antei (pronounced as Asatu Antii)】

With the eagle that flies in the sky *Tin nu ni nu washi tu*

I want to spread my wings together *Nufani uchinarabi*

I want to fly farther and farther *Tubimawati mibusha*

To the edge of the world. *Shike nu hatin*

Poem in characters: 天の根の鷲と 能羽うち並べ 飛び回て見ほしや 世界のはても

Transliteration of characters: *Ten no ne no washi to / Nohane uchinarabe / Tobimawate miboshiya / Sekai no hate mo*

Interpretation of the poem: Spread my wings together with the eagle that flies high in the sky. I want to fly farther and farther – to the edge of the world.

Concerning the lyric features of *ryūka*, the following poem which describes a romantic story from the past is a perfect example of lyric poetry. Unlike *omoro* with its mainly ritual nature, the content of the following *ryūka* shows us how important it was for the individual to perceive and express romantic feelings and how the relationship between two people despite their different statuses – the one believed to be the princess of King Shō Toku (尚徳王女) and the other a man called Kōchisatunushi (幸地里之子) who was of a much lower status than the princess, bore special importance in the hearts of common people who seem to have valued personal feelings above social norms, at least based on the expression of the feelings implied in this poem. The description of a romantic situation unseen in *omoro* which uses the personification of birds flying high in the sky as a symbol for the princess with her high status is an example of the powerful shift in topics and their portrayal in the lyric genre compared to that of the epic genre.

The sky serves as a place to express the feelings of freedom, high status, and above all romantic affection towards ones living on the earth (in the fields) that goes beyond all boundaries of society and our restricted human world. It is also interesting to note that the poem is anonymous; implying that the image of romantic love was spread among common people.

【*Ryūka Zenshū, Poem No. 500, Author: Anonymous*】

Birds who fly high in the sky	<i>Tin nu ni ni tobyuru</i>
Such as the eagle or the hawk	<i>Washin kumatakan</i>
They descend to the birds that live in the fields	<i>Nuhara sumu tui ni</i>
And become one with them.	<i>Utiti soyusa</i>

Poem in characters: 天の根に飛びゆる 鷲も熊鷹も 野原住む鳥に 落てて  
添ゆさ

Transliteration of characters: *Ten no ne ni tobiyuru / Washi mo kumataka  
mo / Nohara sumu tori ni / Otete soyusa*

Interpretation of the poem: Even the eagle or the hawk that flies high in the sky reaching heaven, descends to the fields and becomes one soul with the small field bird.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the explanation of this group, I'd like to add a few words about the natural elements of "rain" and "snow". Although these two expressions are not seen in *ryūka* in connection with the expression *Ten*, we can find many *ryūka* poems depicting "rain" or "snow". In both *ryūka* and *omoro* rain and snow symbolise a blessing that brings vitality to plants and is essential for good harvest. The presence of the harvest, rain, and snow in *omoro*, as being an important part of community life in the village and acting as a means of strengthening the bonds within the community, is also widely preserved in *ryūka*. On the other hand, we can clearly observe the birth of an individualistic approach with highly personal values and desires that prioritise one's individual existence over the community. In such *ryūka* poems "rain" is perceived as a protecting agent that helps the individual hide from the unwanted eyes of the community

when he/she secretly meets with their lover, as the following poem shows. Thanks to the falling rain, the girlfriend's identity while returning home from a date with her boyfriend can go unnoticed, since she hides her face under an umbrella. In this poem, the role of "rain" clearly shifts from the role of "a community blessing" to the role of "a blessing that serves the individual and his/her personal needs".

【*Ryūka Zenshū, Poem No. 2127, Author: Yonabaru Oyakata Ryōku (pronounced as Yunabaru Wēkata Ryōku)*】

If it should rain, then let it rain	<i>Furaba furi nzo ga</i>
On the whole way back home.	<i>Muduru michi sigara</i>
The rain hides my girlfriend's face	<i>Ami ya kawu kakusu</i>
What a blessing!	<i>Tayui demunu</i>

Poem in characters: 降らば降れ無蔵が 戻る道すがら 雨や顔隠す たより  
だいもの

Transliteration of characters: *Furaba fure muzō ga / Modoru michi sugara / Ame ya kao kakusu / Tayori daimono*

Interpretation of the poem: If it should rain, then let it rain. The falling rain helps my girlfriend hide her face as she's returning home after meeting me – the rain is a real blessing!

The lyric portrayal of "snow" in *ryūka* is remarkable, too, in that it is often perceived as an object of aesthetic admiration rather than a means of securing a good harvest. This aesthetic portrayal is seen for example in the context of highly personal preferences, such as expressing the beauty of the smiling face of one's beloved girlfriend with words *yuki no haguki* (雪の歯莖 or 雪の歯口; pronounced as *yuchi nu haguchi*; meaning: snow-white teeth; the expression is used to imply the admiration for the girlfriend's beauty as well as to describe the warm atmosphere in which one can see her smiling and talking while she exposes her teeth in a spontaneous and adorable manner). The use of personal expressions in *ryūka*, such as "snow-white teeth" as opposed to the expressions in *omoro* which use "snow" in connection

to rice and harvests clearly demonstrates the shift from the group way of thinking in epic songs to the expression of an individual in lyric poems.

Group 4) *Ten* as an expression referring to the world on this earth (2 poems, approx. 3%)

This group contains the fewest poems compared to the previous three groups. A significant difference from the *omoro* classified in a similar group (Group C) is that *ryūka* uses a slightly modified expression to describe “this world” – it is the abbreviated word *Tenga* (天下; pronounced as *tinga*) which applies the Chinese reading *ga* of the second character (下) instead of the Japanese reading *shita*, thus giving it a different rhythm from the *omoro* expression *Teni ga shita*. Furthermore, as the title of this group suggests, not all *ryūka* poems have a connotation of the world “ruled by the king”; they simply mean “this world (under heaven)” without the presence of a king – a phenomenon in which we can identify *ryūka*’s fading connection of the heavenly world *Ten* with the ruler of the country.

In addition to the two poems in this group, I discovered another poem with an expression which has the same meaning as *Tenga* “this world (under heaven)”, but whose reading of the character 天 is not the Chinese reading *ten*, but the Japanese reading *ame* – resulting in *Ame ga shita* (天が下; pronounced as *ami ga shicha*). What is more, the content of the poem with this expression is highly lyrical and reveals the strong emotions of romantic love that would never ever disappear from this world.

[*Ryūka Taisei*, Poem No. 2094, Author: Anonymous]

I gave you all my love.	<i>Shinasakin tsikuchi</i>
And even though I go on a journey,	<i>Utabi ati karaya</i>
Could my feelings for you	<i>Chimu nu nenu uchumi</i>
Ever stop existing in this world?	<i>Ami ga shicha ni</i>

Poem in characters: し情けも尽ち お旅あてからや 肝のないぬおきゆめ  
天が下に

Transliteration of characters: *Shinasake mo tsukuchi / Otabi ate karaya /*



*Kimo no nainu okiyume / Ame ga shita ni*

Interpretation of the poem: I gave you all the love I have. And like this I go on a journey. How could my feelings disappear from this world even if I am far away? (It's impossible – they will never disappear).

The comparative analysis of the *omoro* and *ryūka* poems in the four presented groups which seemed similar at first sight demonstrated a clear shift of topics and perspective in light of the transition from epic to lyric. Firstly, the topics moved from a ritual and spiritual depiction in *omoro* towards the portrayal of personal relationships, one's situation and emotions in *ryūka*. Secondly, we could identify the shift of the poems' perspective from the communal in *omoro* towards the individual in *ryūka*. As a result, despite its similar reading to the word *Teni* in *omoro*, the concept of *Ten* in all four groups of *ryūka* proved significantly different from that of *omoro*.

The following chapter discusses several other expressions that show how *omoro* and rural beliefs influenced *ryūka* in a peculiar fusion with additional influences from Japan.

**(3) Additional Expressions Referring to the Spiritual Otherworld in *Ryūka***

This chapter examines additional expressions connected to the spiritual otherworld in *ryūka* poetry. Despite their relatively small number, they offer us a unique glimpse of how ancient Okinawan beliefs blended with more recent influences, mainly concepts introduced from Japan.

The first expression is found in only one *ryūka* poem; however, its significance is profound, as it refers to the old Okinawan belief about the goddess *Amamīkyo* and the ancient creation of the Ryūkyūan islands.

**【*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 150, Author: Anonymous】**

The goddess <i>Amamīkyo</i>	<i>Amamiku nu nchan</i>
Descended from heaven	<i>Amakudai mishochi</i>
And the islands and country she created	<i>Tsukuru shimaguni ya</i>
Will flourish for generations.	<i>Yuyuni sakaru</i>

Poem in characters: あまみこのみちやも 天降りめしやうち つくる島国や  
 世世に栄る

Transliteration of characters: *Amamiko no michiyamo / Amakudari  
 meshiyauchi / Tsukuru shimaguni ya / Yoyoni sakaru*

Interpretation of the poem: The goddess *Amamikyo* descended from heaven to this earth. The islands and the country (the islands of the Ryūkyūs) which she created will flourish for generations.

Unfortunately, apart from the above poem, no other *ryūka* poems with this expression could be detected. This suggests a marked change of themes in the process of transition from the epic to the lyric. Furthermore, the use of the verb *amakudari* (pronounced as *amakudai*; meaning: to descend from heaven) is noteworthy. In contrast to the above poem in which the verb is used in connection with the goddess *Amamikyo*, all other *ryūka* poems include this verb to express the descending of the female celestial nymph from the famous legend *Hagoromo* (羽衣), according to which a man encounters a celestial nymph (*tennyo*) who descended from heaven. While she is bathing, the man hides her garment made of feathers (*hagoromo*), so she has no other choice but to become his wife. She gives birth to his children and they live happily until she finds out about the whereabouts of her garment and decides to return to her heavenly home.<sup>(59)</sup> Since this legend is famous in Okinawa, Japan, and other Asian countries, it is difficult to determine the exact origins of the influence on this topic in *ryūka*. However, the story of *Hagoromo* is also included in the famous Okinawan traditional *kumiodori* theatre play entitled *Mekarushi* (銘苺子; pronounced as *mikarushi*), which was performed at the court to entertain Chinese envoys visiting the Rūkyūan kingdom. The play was composed by Tamagusuku Chōkun and is said to have had its first performance in 1719. Its main influences can be traced back to the old Okinawan legends recorded in written materials, such as the first official history of the Rūkyūan Kingdom *Chūzan Seikan* (中山世鑑), the written records directly linking the relatives of the king to the children of the legendary nymph which were famous

among the Rūkyūan court aristocrats, as well as the Japanese *nō* theatre play *Hagoromo* that Tamagusuku Chōkun used as a reference when composing *Mekarushi*.<sup>(60)</sup> *Kumiodori* plays include numerous *ryūka* songs, so it is possible to assume that the topic of *Hagoromo* became depicted in *ryūka* as a result of various influences, one of which might be the influence from the Okinawan *kumiodori* theatre.

In regard to the goddess *Amamiyō*, a related expression can be observed in three *ryūka* poems – “the era of gods” expressed by the word *Amamiyō* (pronounced as *aman’yū*). In this word we can clearly identify a remnant of the expressions for the ancient spiritual otherworld *Amamiya* found in *omoro* and old rural beliefs. However, the meaning of this word in *ryūka* has slightly diverged from that of *omoro*, which can be confirmed from the dictionary definition and from the actual *ryūka* poems including this expression. As I previously mentioned, the original meaning of *Amamiya* as the divine world of the first gods – creators of the islands was transformed to the meaning of “traditional”, “ancient”, “from a long time ago” in most *omoro* songs. In its explanation of the expression *Amamiyō* (also written as *Amanoyō* and pronounced as *aman’yū*) in *ryūka*, the Great Dictionary of Okinawan Old Language lists similar meanings to the *omoro* concept: “ancient”, “from a long time ago”, and “the era of (ancient) gods”.<sup>(61)</sup> These meanings were identified in two *ryūka* poems that refer to *shinugu*, an old rural festival, as *aman’yū nu shinugu* – “the festival *shinugu* from a long time ago”. However, the dictionary also includes the second definition of the word *Amamiyō* (*aman’yū*) as “a prosperous year” which is different from the concept seen in *omoro*. The following poem illustrates this latter definition; rain as a blessing for the harvest is portrayed in a scene that begs the rhetorical question of whether “the era of ancient gods”, meaning “the ancient era of prosperity” has come again.

**[*Ryūka Zenshū*, Poem No. 716, Author: Anonymous]**

Has the ancient era of prosperity	<i>Aman’yū nu nkashi</i>
Come again?	<i>Kuimuduchi sarami</i>

The evening rain after ten days      *Tukagushi nu yuami*

Never fails to miss the right time.      *Tuchin tagan*

Poem in characters: 天の世の昔    くり戻ちさらめ    十日越しの夜雨    時もた  
がぬ

Transliteration of characters: *Amanoyo no mukashi / Kurimodochi sarame /*  
*Tōka koshi no yoame / Toki mo taganu*

Interpretation of the poem: Has the era of ancient gods – the ancient era of prosperity come back again? The evening rain falling after ten days never misses the right time (to bring vitality to plants and result in a good harvest).

Not only does the meaning of this word slightly differ from that of *omoro*, there is a similar *ryūka* poem which uses the last two verses about the rain from the above *ryūka* but combines them with the divine world *Mirokuyo* (弥勒代 or 弥勒世; pronounced as *mirukuyu*) which is defined as “the world where the god *Miroku* appears” or as “the world of abundant harvest”<sup>(62)</sup> – an expression not used in *omoro*. The Great Dictionary of Okinawan Old Language further explains that the god *Miroku* brings a good harvest and prosperity to this world from the otherworld, and in the concept of this god we can observe the combination of Buddhist and ancient Okinawan beliefs.<sup>(63)</sup> In the above-mentioned *ryūka* poem, the world *Mirokuyo* (*mirukuyu*) replaces the world *Amamiyo* (*aman’yu*) in an almost identical scene, thus implying the interchangeability of these two expressions. Moreover, the expression *Mirokuyo* (*mirukuyu*) appears in ten *ryūka* poems in contrast to three *ryūka* poems which include the expression *Amamiyo* (*aman’yu*). This number suggests that in *ryūka*, the newer expression *Mirokuyo* (*mirukuyu*), influenced by Buddhist beliefs and not observed in *omoro*, gradually replaced the more traditional expression *Amamiyo* (*aman’yu*) which traces its roots to Okinawan *omoro* songs and the ancient local beliefs of the Okinawan people.

In this chapter we have identified several expressions which share similarities with expressions for the spiritual otherworld and divine existence in *omoro*. Although *ryūka* lacks concepts of the otherworld expressed by

*Nirai-Kanai* and *Obotsu-Kagura*, it includes expressions related to the otherworld *Amamiya* and its goddess *Amamikyo*. Despite their scarcity, these expressions offer us great insight into how the concept of the otherworld from older epic songs gradually transformed some of its nuances in lyric poetry as a result of new influences, such as Buddhism and Japanese theatre. The blending of old beliefs with new philosophy previously observed in *omoro*, has taken place in *ryūka*, too; although with slightly different outcomes, as was demonstrated in this study.

## Conclusion

The presented study confirmed that both epic *omoro* and lyric *ryūka* portray the spiritual otherworld despite the lack of research on this topic in *ryūka* and demonstrated its most remarkable characteristics in both genres.

The main concepts of the otherworld in epic *omoro* are represented by *Nirai-Kanai*, *Amamiya-Sineriya*, *Obotsu-Kagura* and *Teni*, whose depictions skillfully combine the government's official doctrine with ancient local beliefs found in various parts of Okinawa. The role of *omoro* as ritual songs performed at the court portray the otherworld as a place of various deities with the Sun deity as the supreme authority and link their divine existence to the heavenly nature of the king, the ruling class, and the female relative of the king – the high priestess. The songs depict the king as an object of worship and prayers for his longevity and prosperous rule performed by the high priestess, acting as a spiritual medium who communicates with heaven and sends its divine energy to protect the king so that he can secure the prosperity of the country and accomplish outstanding deeds. This concept can be seen in all of the above-mentioned types of the otherworld, out of which the world *Teni* has the broadest spectrum of meanings. In addition to the connotations of the otherworld explained above, *Teni* as “the sky” or “the heavens above” serves as a sacred place from which rain or snow is sent to bless the earth with vital energy which helps plants to grow and produce a good harvest. In the concept of *Teni* we can identify features important for

community life, such as the harvest, as well as the efforts of the ruling class to legitimise its supreme power in the person of the heavenly king and the high priestess.

On the other hand, lyric *ryūka*, although still a type of song that retains strong features of the community way of thinking, clearly demonstrates the shift towards individual values and a personal perception of the otherworld typical for lyric poetry. *Ryūka* expresses the otherworld mainly by the expression *Ten* which is similar to the expression *Teni* found in *omoro*. However, as the study demonstrates, the concepts of this otherworld in these two genres are far from identical. While maintaining the community values, such as worshipping the king and expressing joy and gratitude for a good harvest, which is similar to *omoro*, *ryūka* gradually shifts its point of view from the community towards the individual who is not afraid to express personal desires towards heaven or the king without the presence of the high priestess as a go-between. The poet in *ryūka* is thus important enough to be allowed to form a direct relationship with heaven or the heavenly king, not only as a member of the community but as a sensitive and self-aware individual with emotions that match the lyric atmosphere of many *ryūka* poems. Furthermore, the study demonstrated more recent influences on *ryūka* when compared to *omoro*, such as the lack of expressions for the ancient world *Nirai-Kanai* and *Obotsu-Kagura* or the shift towards different connotations of the expression *Amamiyo* (*aman'yu*) and the verb *amakudari* implying the descending of supernatural creatures which are often seen in combination with concepts that were introduced as a result of influences from outside, mainly from Japan.

In conclusion, we can say that although the concept of the spiritual otherworld during the transformation process from epic to lyric poetry has become less formalised, ritualised and therefore perhaps less powerful in its ancient divinity, the closeness of the individual towards heaven that he perceives as a place of moral guidance, help and important divine existence which a human can rely on has contributed to a different quality of spiritual perception of the otherworld on a deeper personal level in lyric poetry.

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#### Note:

- 1 Ikemiya, Masaharu. *Ryūkyū bungaku sōron* 『琉球文学総論』 [General Theories of Ryūkyūan Literature] Tokyo: Kasamashoin, 2015, p. 419.
- 2 Kamei, Takashi et al. *Gengogaku daijiten (dai 4 kan) Sekaigengohen (ka-2)*. 『言語学大辞典 第4巻 世界言語編 (下-2)』 [Great Dictionary of Linguistics, Vol. 4, The World Languages Edition (Vol. 2)] Tokyo: Sanseido, 2001, p. 776.
- 3 Hokama, Shuzen. *Omorosaushi – ge* 『おもろさうし 下』 [*Omorosaushi – Vol. 2*] Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2000, p. 447.
- 4 Hokama, Shuzen. *Nantō bungakuron* 『南島文学論』 [Literary Theory of the Southern Islands] Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1995, p. 372.
- 5 Allen, Matthew. Okinawa, ambivalence, identity, and Japan. In: *Japan’s Minorities – The Illusion of Homogeneity* (ed. by Michael Weiner). New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 191.
- 6 Hokama, 1995, p. 372.
- 7 *Onarigami* (おなり神) means sisters’ soul or spirit which was regarded as “goddess” in ancient Okinawa. It was believed that the sisters’ supernatural power had the protective energy upon their brothers when they had to leave the island and go on a journey. Men would often take their sisters’ hair or handkerchief with them for protection. (*Nihonkokugodaijiten dai2han* 『日本国語大辞典第二版』 [Great



- Dictionary of Japanese Language Second Edition] , Shogakukan. Retrieved on 14 Sep 2023 from: <https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=200200a48241avmp2r87>)
- 8 Hokama, Shuzen et al. *Omorosaushi jiten sōsakuin (dai 2 han)* 『おもしろさうし辞典・総索引 (第二版)』 [Dictionary and General Index of *Omorosaushi* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)] Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1978, p. 122.
  - 9 Hokama, Shuzen. *Umi wo wataru kamigami* 『海を渡る神々』 [Gods Crossing the Sea] Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1999, p. 16.
  - 10 Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1978, p. 267.
  - 11 Hokama, 1995, p. 349.
  - 12 Hokama, 1999, p. 70.
  - 13 For the actual *omoro* song please refer to: Hokama, Shuzen. *Omorosaushi - jō* 『おもしろさうし 上』 [*Omorosaushi* - Vol. 1] Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2000, p. 44-46.
  - 14 The expression “*Amaniko*” is different from the usual name for the goddess *Amamikyo*; however, Hokama considers the spelling to be a mistake of the word *Amamiko* and assumes that the word stands for the ancient creator goddess *Amamikyo* (Hokama. *Omorosaushi - jō*, 2000, p. 45).
  - 15 Hokama, 1999, p. 15-16.
  - 16 The quotation is taken from Hokama, 1999, p. 14. For detailed Iha Fuyū’s research please refer to: Iha, Fuyū. *Kotōku no Ryūkyūshi* 『孤島苦の琉球史』 [The Troubled History of the Isolated Islands] Tokyo: Shunyodo, 1926, p. 14-17.
  - 17 Hokama, 1999, p. 17-18.
  - 18 *Tsuigo* (対語) is a pair of words. The role of pairs can vary; the two words in a pair can have slightly opposing meanings, opposite meanings (antonyms) or similar meanings (synonyms), etc. (*Nihonkokugodaijiten dai2han* 『日本国語大辞典第二版』 [Great Dictionary of Japanese Language Second Edition] , Shogakukan. Retrieved on 15 Sep 2023 from: <https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=2002028ccc4d701Qb4Vf>).
  - 19 Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1978, p. 41. Hokama apparently considers the words *Amamikyo-Shinerikyo* that appear in the *Omorosaushi* to be synonyms for one identical god (or goddess), similar to *Amamiya-Shineriya* which stands for one divine otherworld, not two.
  - 20 The *kanji* characters were attributed by Hokama Shuzen; as I previously mentioned, songs in the *Omorosaushi* were mostly written down in *hiragana* with occasional *kanji* characters.
  - 21 See: Hokama, 1995, p. 357-358; Hokama, 1999, p. 17-18 and Iha, 1926, p. 5-13.
  - 22 Hokama, 1995, p. 356-357 and Hokama, 1999, p. 18.
  - 23 Hokama, 1995, p. 354-356.
  - 24 The symbols (1) (“one”; 一) or (R) (“repeat”; 又) stand at the beginning of almost every verse. The general rule is that verses starting with (R) should be repeated after the verse starting with (1) or the following verses without a symbol. However, it is difficult to determine the exact order and number of verses which should be repeated; as a result extensive research is nowadays being conducted to

- reproduce the songs. See: Hateruma, Eikichi et al. (Meio University Editorial Committee). *Ryūkyū Bungaku Taikei 1, 2: Omorosaushi jō, ge* 『琉球文学大系 1、2 おもろさうし 上・下』 [Collection of Ryūkyūan Literature No. 1, 2: *Omorosaushi* – Vol. 1, 2] , Yumani Shobō, 2022.
- 25 The Japanese transcription of the songs is according to Hokama, 2000. All *kanji* characters that have their reading provided in *furigana* were attributed by Hokama. Those *kanji* characters that do not have any reading above them, such as 大, appear in the original *Omorosaushi* written in *kanji* characters, not in *hiragana*.
- 26 Hokama, 1995, p. 355-356.
- 27 Ibid, p. 354-357.
- 28 Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1978, p. 87.
- 29 Hokama, 1999, p. 20.
- 30 Hokama, 1995, p. 353 and Hokama, 1999, p. 20-23.
- 31 Hokama, 1995, p. 364.
- 32 Mamiya, Atsushi. *Okinawakogo no shinsō – omorogo no tankyū (zōhoban)* 『沖縄古語の深層 オモロ古語の探究 (増補版)』 [The Depths of Okinawan Old Language – Research of the Language in *Omorogō* (Revised edition)] Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2014, p. 20-40.
- 33 Hokama, 1995, p. 368.
- 34 Wu, Haining (呉海寧 : Go Kainei). *Ryūkyū ni okeru “Ten” no kannen no hisokenkyū* 『琉球における「天」の観念の基礎研究』 [Fundamental Research on the Perception of “Ten” in the Ryūkyūs] , Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts, 2015, p. 111-148.
- 35 Hokama, *Omorosaushi – jō*, 2000, p. 448.
- 36 Wu, Haining, 2015, p. 115. The Japanese transcription of the song is based on Hokama, 2000 (as stated in the Introduction of this paper).
- 37 The expression *omohi* in the first verse serves as an honorific prefix attached to the names of famous people meaning “great”, “splendid”, “brilliant”, etc.
- 38 *Waushiyaku* was a local ruler *aji* (按司) residing in the Gushikawa-gusuku Castle on Kumejima Island in the Ryūkyūs. *Waushiyaku* is a different name for *Matafuki* – both names stand for the same person, the ruler of Gushikawa Castle. The expression *kanashi* in the fifth verse is an honorific prefix which means “great”, “outstanding”, “brilliant”, etc.
- 39 Wu, Haining, 2015, p. 115-116.
- 40 The list can be found in: Wu, Haining, 2015, p. 146-147. The *kanji* characters in the expressions from this list that are introduced in this paper have been attributed based on the research by Hokama, 2000.
- 41 Wu, Haining, 2015, p. 169.
- 42 Hokama, Shuzen. *Nantō no jojō – ryūka* 『南島の抒情 – 琉歌』 [Emotions of the Southern Islands – Okinawan Poetry *Ryūka*] Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1995, p. 9.
- 43 Ikemiya, Masaharu. *Ryūkyū geinō sōron* 『琉球芸能総論』 [General Theories of Ryūkyūan Performing Arts] Tokyo: Kasamashoin, 2015, p. 321-322.

- 44 Ibid, p. 329-330.
- 45 For further explanation about the relation between syllabic forms of *omoro* and *ryūka* please refer to the monograph Urbanová, Jana. *Ryūka no hyōgen kenkyū – waka, omoro to no hikaku kara* 『琉歌の表現研究 – 和歌・オモロとの比較から』 [Research of Expressions in *Ryūka* – from the Perspective of Comparison with *Waka* and *Omoro*] (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2015, p. 13-17), which summarises theories by Iha Fuyū, Kinjō Chōei, Nakahara Zenchū, Hokama Shuzen and others who relate the 8- and 6-syllabic occasional tendencies observed in *omoro* to the origins of the fixed form of *ryūka*.
- 46 Kadekaru, Chizuko. *Omoro to ryūka no sekai* 『おもろと琉歌の世界』 [The World of *Omoro* and *Ryūka*] Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2003, p. 21.
- 47 Hokama, *Nantō no jojō – ryūka*, 1995, p. 9.
- 48 Ibid, p. 372-374. Note on *ryūka* collections *Ryūka Zenshū* (1995) and *Ryūka Taisei* (1994) that were used for the purpose of this study as specified in the Introduction of this paper: the two collections are comprehensive collections that include a large number of poems (3000 poems in *Ryūka Zenshū* and 5100 poems in *Ryūka Taisei*) taken from several old collections, such as *Ryūka Hyakkō*, *Kokinryūka*, etc.
- 49 Higa, Minoru. *Ryūka no genryū to sono seiritsu* 「琉歌の源流とその成立」 [The Origins of *Ryūka* and its Formation] . In *Okinawa bunka kenkyū* 『沖縄文化研究』 [Okinawan Culture Studies] Tokyo: Hosei University Institute of Okinawan Studies, 1975, p. 98-107.
- 50 See for example: Hokama, *Nantō no jojō – ryūka*, 1995, p. 326-327.
- 51 Hokama, *Omorosaushi – ge*, 2000, p. 466-467.
- 52 Hokama, Shuzen et al. *Okinawa kogo daijiten* 『沖縄古語大辞典』 [Great Dictionary of Okinawan Old Language] Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1995, p. 447.
- 53 Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1978, p. 110.
- 54 Note on the organisation of *ryūka* poems in this paper: the left side of the poem contains the English translation of the verses made by the author of this paper. The right side contains the alphabet transcription which shows the actual Okinawan pronunciation of the poem based on the Shuri dialect. Below the poem are the Japanese characters in which *ryūka* is written (based on their historical use) together with the transliteration of the Japanese characters in alphabet. Finally, the English interpretation of the poem is based on the Japanese interpretation found in the collections *Ryūka Zenshū* or *Ryūka Taisei*.
- 55 *Nihonkokugodaijiten daiZhan*, Shogakukan. Retrieved on 26 Sep 2023 from: <https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=2002009546ccaeER0B1>
- 56 Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1995, p. 360.
- 57 Ibid, p. 360.
- 58 Both names *Akano-owetsuki* and *Nehano-owetsuki* stand for a famous *omoro* singer during the era of King Shō Shin (Hokama, *Omorosaushi – jō*, 2000, p. 293).
- 59 *Nihondaihyakkazensho (Nipponica)* 『日本大百科全書 (ニッポニカ)』 [Great Encyclopedia of Japan Nipponica] , Shogakukan. Retrieved on 28 Sep 2023 from:

<https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=1001000161933>) and Encyclopedia of Japan, Kodansha, CD-ROM edition, 1999. Retrieved on 28 Sep 2023 from: <https://japanknowledge.com/lib/display/?lid=10800FL003901>)

- 60 Hateruma, Eikichi et al. (Meio University Editorial Committee). *Ryūkyū Bungaku Taikei 14: Kumiodori jō* 『琉球文学大系 14 組踊 上』 [Collection of Ryūkyūan Literature No. 14: Kumiodori Theatre – Vol. 1] , Yumani Shobō, 2022, p. 125-127.
- 61 See: Hokama, Shuzen et al., 1995, p. 39.
- 62 Ibid, p. 647-648.
- 63 Ibid, p. 647.

### 付記

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