

Comparative Analysis of Local Rituals and Folk Beliefs

Kurbanova Gulnoza Irkinovna

Doctor of Philosophy in Arts and Letters, Associate Professor, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (Uzbekistan)

Abstract. *This paper compares folk ritual specialists in Amami and Okinawa, Japan, with those in Uzbekistan. In Amami and Okinawa, noro and yuta perform communal and individual rituals, divination, and healing. In Uzbekistan, spiritually gifted individuals - behalfa, gulgir, murdashuy, domlo, and folbin - fulfill similar roles. The study finds that the processes of gaining spiritual authority closely resemble shamanic initiation, indicating a shared shamanic cultural foundation. Noro are officially appointed ritualists, while yuta are independent shamans. Beharfa correspond to noro, and the other Uzbek specialists collectively correspond to a yuta. Differences in divine status reflect the influence of Islam in Uzbekistan versus traditional beliefs in Amami. This comparative analysis demonstrates how shamanic culture persists and shapes ritual practices and spiritual authority across different regions.*

INTRODUCTION

While studying at Meiji University in Japan, I had the opportunity to conduct field research on the Southwestern Program of the Bunka GP, visiting Amami Ōshima, Kakeromajima, and Kikajima. I investigated the spatial aspects of Noro rituals and folk traditions. Additionally, in Amami Ōshima, I was able to observe the Shochogama of the Shinsetsu and the Hirase Mankai festivals.

Throughout the Southwest Program's fieldwork, I sensed several similarities with Uzbekistan. One of them is that Uzbekistan, like Amami, Kakeroma, and Kikai, maintains a settlement system known as "mahalla," which functions as a communal unit with strong interpersonal ties. Furthermore, as a developing country, Uzbekistan continues to preserve robust forms of folk belief, much like the island communities studied in this research.

In Amami, I learned about the presence of not only noro priestesses but also Yuta, spiritual practitioners believed to possess supernatural abilities. In Uzbekistan as well, there are individuals who fulfill similar roles - those who conduct village rituals and prayers, functioning in ways comparable to the noro and the spiritually endowed figures reminiscent of the Yuta.

As Uzbekistan is a nation striving toward rapid development, its people are increasingly becoming part of this fast-paced transformation, leading to progressively busier lifestyles. As a result, traditional folk beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies that have long been practiced are gradually being abandoned. Moreover, because folk culture and indigenous belief systems have not been adequately studied, these cultural practices risk disappearing without being recorded for future generations. Unfortunately, I have observed that there are still very few dedicated individuals engaged in documenting, researching, and preserving the country's folk culture and belief traditions.

For this reason, in the present study, I would like to offer a comparative introduction to Uzbekistan's traditional ritual specialists and those of Amami - namely the Noro and Yuta - as well as to the

Shochogama and Hirase Mankai Noro rituals I investigated in Amami, and similar ritual practices in my home country.

MAIN PART

In Amami, I began my field research by examining the noro ritual spaces. The ritual sites for noro generally share a common structure. In the open space called myaa, there are sacred trees as well as structures called ashage and toneya. From the myaa, a sacred path (shinto) leads to the kami-yama (sacred mountain or forest). Nearby, there is also a sacred river where priestesses purify themselves.

According to Juro Ono, the ashage originally consisted of upright posts with a thatched roof made of kaya, without walls or floors. Nowadays, many ashage have corrugated metal roofs and floors, while still lacking walls, making them open and easily visible ritual spaces. The toneya, in contrast, resembles a residential house, containing a hearth dedicated to the fire deity and a kitchen. In larger settlements, each district has its own toneya. Although male ritual specialists usually reside there, traditional rituals are often conducted in the front room of the toneya.

The noro are “priestesses” who have formed an organized system that has persisted continuously since before the Shimazu invasion of Amami (1609). During the period when the Amami Islands were under the control of the Ryukyu Kingdom, noro received formal appointments to their positions and were provided with stipends. Men known as gujinushi also assisted in the priestess organization.

In Uzbekistan, ritual specialists who conduct folk ceremonies are called behalfa (also referred to as bakhshi in some regions). Unlike the noro of Amami, behalfa are not appointed or dismissed by official state orders; only those believed to possess spiritual power can become behalfa. (It should be noted that the noro, yuta, and folk rituals discussed in this report primarily pertain to the Bekho mahalla around Samarkand, and the terminology and practices may vary in other regions.)

In Uzbekistan, people believed to possess spiritual power - momo - are called momodor. Regardless of gender (although women are more frequently chosen), a person is selected by a spirit to become a momodor. As Eliade noted, a momodor is a “chosen individual.” This selection may be inherited from ancestors or occur independently. Once chosen by a spirit, the individual often suffers from illnesses that cannot be explained by medical science.

Momodor are typically quick-tempered and nervous. They become aware of their special spiritual abilities either through dreams or divination practices. A diviner instructs them to perform rituals for the momoho (plural of momo). If the rituals are not performed, the spirits continue to afflict the person until they acknowledge them.

The ritual is called oshi-qaish (also referred to as qayish-tuppa), which involves preparing sacred dishes from lamb meat to honor the spirits. In addition to oshi-qaish, other offerings such as tunuk - a dough made from wheat flour, water, and a little salt, shaped into large, flat, round pieces resembling plates, and fried in oil - are also prepared. The ritual is typically conducted on Wednesdays or Saturdays, and spiritually powerful senior practitioners, always in even numbers, are invited to participate.

The most important aspect of the ritual is the sacrifice of a sheep. During the ceremony, the momodor’s mouth, back, and soles of the feet are anointed with the sheep’s blood, which is considered food for the spirits. If a sheep cannot be sacrificed, a chicken may be used instead. By performing the ritual for their own spirit, offering the blood and oshiqash, and inviting other momodor to share the oshi-qaish, the practitioner heals illnesses and pacifies the spirits.

After the ritual, the momodor must enter a period of seclusion lasting either three or forty days, depending on the type of sacrifice: three days for a chicken and forty days for sheep meat. During this time, the momodor must not meet anyone, and only a single person is allowed to bring food. The oshi-qaish ritual must then be repeated once every one or two years.

In Uzbekistan, people with supernatural abilities are divided into five groups, with their group determined through instructions received in dreams during seclusion. One of these groups corresponds to the noro of Uzbekistan, namely the ritual specialist called behalfa described above.

To conduct the oshi-qaish ritual (the spirit's food), it is essential to invite either a senior behalfa or a folbin (a diviner, to be introduced later).

The remaining four groups of spiritually gifted individuals in Uzbekistan are Gulgir, Murdashuy, Domlo, and Folbin.

Spiritually gifted individuals:

Behalfa - ritual specialists (as described above)

Gulgir - healers

Murdashuy - morticians

Domlo - prayer specialists

Folbin - diviners

A closer examination follows. Gulgir are practitioners who heal children. When a child suffers from a blockage in the throat, causing them to be unable to eat and to experience persistent vomiting or diarrhea, the child is brought to a Gulgir. The Gulgir can immediately determine whether the obstruction is present. Murdashuy serve as morticians. Ordinary people cannot perform this role; only those with spiritual power are capable of cleansing and preparing the deceased for the afterlife. Domlo primarily conduct rituals by reciting the Qur'an and mantras, praying to remove misfortune and invite blessings. Finally, Folbin are diviners who practice fortune-telling and guidance based on spiritual insight.

Next, I would like to discuss the yuta. In Okinawa and Amami, individuals who perform divination, fortune-telling, and healing through spiritual abilities—essentially shamans—are referred to as yuta. According to Yoshimasa Ikegami, the direct catalyst for becoming a yuta is a personal life crisis, accompanied by a condition called kamida-ri. Kamida-ri, also referred to as fubyo, appears as a set of patterned physical and psychological disturbances.

Ikegami explains that kamida-ri is not an illness but a message from the gods or ancestors, serving as a warning to the individual to recognize themselves as a person of high spiritual potential, destined to serve the deities. During the process of kamida-ri, conventional medical treatment is ineffective, resulting in a state of “modern medicine ineffectiveness.” The individual then progresses through several stages, including: suggestions from relatives or neighbors regarding kamida-ri, judgment by a yuta, and resistance from a spouse, before ultimately reaching the decision to undertake kamigutu (divine service). This represents an idealized, socially recognized process of becoming a yuta; in reality, many individuals may never reach this decision and live their lives carrying the symptoms.

It should also be noted that researchers have mentioned the involvement of yuta in funerary rituals and death-related customs.

As we have seen, the process by which individuals become yuta in Amami and Okinawa, and behalfa, gulgir, murdashuy, domlo, and folbin in Uzbekistan, is essentially the same as the shamanic initiation process. It is reasonable to conclude that shamanic culture forms the basis for these practices. Furthermore, it appears that the abilities of Uzbekistan's gulgir, murdashuy, domlo, and folbin correspond collectively to the abilities of a single yuta in Amami.

Returning to the ritual specialists, noro and behalfa, the noro are officially appointed religious functionaries, whereas behalfa are beings endowed with spiritual power - that is, shamans. However, according to Yoshimasa Ikegami, even among the noro, certain family-line ritualists, such as kudi (called chijibi for males), often undergo a process very similar to the yuta's kamida-ri state despite some genealogical conditions. In such cases, noro may become ritualists of the same nature as behalfa.

Moreover, as Ikegami points out, even before the Ryukyu Kingdom's rule, noro in Amami were chosen by spirits. While noro and yuta are both spiritually selected, their roles differ: noro perform communal rituals and prayers for the village, while yuta perform individual prayers and healing rituals. Osamu Toyama defines this distinction succinctly: noro constitute a public priestess

organization that prays for the island's prosperity, safety, and bountiful harvests, whereas yuta are independent religious specialists who heal illnesses and offer personal consultations to islanders.

In summary, noro can be understood as having the same nature as Uzbekistan's behalfa, while yuta encompass the combined abilities of gulgir, murdashuy, domlo, and folbin, representing a truly shamanic figure.

Furthermore, yuta are not considered to become divine beings, whereas noro are believed to possess the potential to become deities. In Uzbekistan, where monotheistic Islam is practiced, spiritually powerful individuals are regarded as gifted and exceptional compared to ordinary people, but they are not considered divine. This distinction results from the influence of Islam, which spread after the Arab incursions in the 8th century, and from its strong sociopolitical control; in Islamic belief, the actions of spiritually powerful individuals are often likened to those of demons, and shamanic practices are generally rejected.

These differences reflect manifestations of shamanic culture in both countries, shaped by the distinct historical and religious contexts in which these practices developed.

CONCLUSION

When visiting a country far from one's homeland, one may sometimes sense something familiar, even if social systems and cultures are very different. This is because shamanism and many other forms of indigenous religion have been widely transmitted across the world and continue to coexist with major contemporary religions and beliefs. Likewise, when I traveled from Tokyo to Amami, I was able to perceive an atmosphere reminiscent of Uzbekistan. Considering that this was something I did not feel in Tokyo, it suggests that both Uzbekistan and Amami still retain strong traces of indigenous religion and folk beliefs, which may continue to foster deep social connections among people.

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