

Gender and Awa Dance Movements*

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ABSTRACT

At around the period when Japanese women began to seek the liberation from sexual segregation, the sex difference in the movements of the Awa Dance gradually widened, due to obtaining more attractive performance as tourism resources. Women danced a female dance and men danced a male dance. Despite clear differences in movements, some women came to challenge the male dance. This article attempts to make clear, through interviews, who began to dance the male dance and when and tries to describe the present state of women performing the male dance.

The women's male dance was first performed by Takeichi in 1960's. Others soon followed her. Some assumed the position of group leader. Although the solo male dance usually indicates leadership in the group, women's positions as leaders are not simply due to their abilities to dance the male dance but to their passions and personalities which enable them to create something new by dancing the male dance.

Key words : Japanese folk dance, Awa dance, Gender,

INTRODUCTION

Tokushima is a city on the island of Shikoku in Japan. In Tokushima, a folk dance called the Awa Dance is performed during the *obon* period in August when dead ancestors are supposed to come back to this world. The dance is performed to please the souls. It has been performed by generation after generation for more than 200 years (Nakamura 1996). There are different theories about the origin of the dance, but this dance has certainly been preserved for amusement and local cultural tradition.

Awa Dance is very simple: Groups of male and female dancers move forward while raising their hands and feet to the rhythm of musical instruments such as drums, flutes, and *shamisen* (three-stringed musical instrument). Dancers lift their right hands and right feet for two beats (Hinoki 1987). Then dancers lift their left hands and left feet for the next two beats. Before World War II, there was no big difference between dancing styles of men and women (Asahi 1992). But after the war, Awa Dance was developed for tourism in Tokushima; the dancing was refined to attract spectators (Hinoki 1980).

From 1947 to 1951, dancing contests were held, and excellent dance groups were organized (Nakamura 1993). There were competitions among groups and new unique dancing styles was created. During these three years, many Awa dance groups reconsidered the dance in various ways. Movements were refined and costumes were designed to make the dance more visually enjoyable. There were also new variations of movements and new group formations of various kinds of ranks and files (Nakamura 1991).

After the war, groups were divided according to gender instead of men and women dancing together in one group. Men and women formed separate columns. Contrast between men and women became stronger. As a result, men's and women's costumes are now clearly different. Men wear light Japanese kimono called *yukata* or *happi* with underpants and a cloth belt around the waist. They wear *tabi* or *suppon* on their feet and sometimes wear *hachimaki* (hairband) on their heads. Women also wear *yukata* but with special underwear called *juban* on the upper body and *koshimaki* around the waist and feet. Kimono is fastened with a long and heavy *obi* tied in a special way. Women wear *tabi* and *geta* on their feet. They also wear *tekko* to cover their hands. On the head, women wear *amigasa*. In general, male costumes allow much freedom of movement whereas female costumes restrict movements because they cover most of the body.

Desire for visual effect led to different dances emphasizing masculinity or femininity. There was a "male" dance for male subgroups and a "female" dance for female subgroups. The basic steps of these dances are similar but there are differences. In the male dance, dancers keep a very low center of balance with

knees deeply bent. Toes are turned outward, and soles are flat on the ground. Female dancers do not bend their knees so much. Their toes are turned inward, and only the toes touch the ground. Male dancers wave their arms a lot. Female dancers do not wave their arms so much, keeping their elbows more rigid and close together and wiggling the fingers.

On the whole, the male dance is dynamic, free and unrestricted, emphasizing masculinity. The female dance is graceful and elegant, emphasizing femininity. Because dancers performed for many spectators, differences have grown between the male and female dances. Newspaper articles have reported on the development of Awa Dance from refinement to unification of movements, to variations of movements. In this process of the development of the dance, different male and female movements and different male and female costumes were encouraged.(Nakamura 1995)

The established dancing pattern for men is to dance dynamically with much motion, displaying individuality, sometimes in a comical way. Women dance gracefully and elegantly in a style without individual dancing identities because every movement is synchronized with the other dancers in their subgroup. Also, a man dancing solo sometimes appears between male and female groups or in front of the whole group. So group formations are more defined. Solo dancers are mostly leaders of groups. Some groups introduced a subgroup for children, resulting in even greater varieties of subgroup formations.

In the 1960's, some women dancers began to perform male dance. They often joined male subgroups, but some of the women performed the male dance solo in a female subgroup of only female dancers. This article attempts to make clear, through interviews, who began to dance the male dance and when and tries to describe the present state of women performing the male dance.

METHODS

In order to achieve the purpose of the present article, i.e., to investigate the beginning of the male dance performed by female dancers and how it came to be, interviews were conducted with those women who began performing the male dance and are still performing it solo in their groups. The main points of the interview were their careers as Awa Dance dancers and their present commitment to the dance.

PERIOD OF DATA COLLECTION: From May to July 1999.

SUBJECTS: Sachiko Tsuruse , Leader of Ebisu-ren Group.
Masako Sinohara, Advisor of Yachiyo-ren Group.
Reiko Takeichi, Leader of Miyabi-ren Group.

RESULTS

The interview results are summarized as follows:

Sachiko Tsuruse : Leader of Ebisu-ren Group.

Born in 1944. Head of the Branch Office of the Municipal Office.

Began performing the female dance in 1947.

Began performing the male dance in 1979 (age 35)

Became the 7th leader of the group in 1980 (age 36)

Masako Shinohara : Advisor of Yachiyo-ren. Group.

Born in 1940.

Began performing the female dance in 1943 (age 3).

Elected Miss Tokushima in 1959 (age 19)

Elected Miss Companion in 1964 (age 24)

Began teaching Awa Dance to the Youth Group of Komatushima city in 1968.

Began the male dance in 1968.

Organized a group called Yachiyo-ren and became an advisor of the group in 1968.

[Dancing career : Japanese traditional dance (age 3 – 12),
Ballet (age 12 – 18)]

Reiko Takeichi : Leader of Miyabi-ren. Group.

Elected Miss Tokushima City Exposition and learned the female dance for the first time in 1956 (age 20).

Performed the male dance and organized a new group in 1965.

Organized a group consisting of only female members and became a leader of the group in 1966.

Admitted male members into the group in 1967.

[Dancing career : Modern Ballet (age 13~18)]

Among the three women, Takeichi was the first to dance the male dance. What made her start dancing Awa Dance was her appointment as a queen of the city's exposition, i.e., Miss Tokuhisma City Exposition. At the time, the main role of the queen was to introduce Awa Dance to other prefectures to attract tourists to the city: as a queen, she had to dance. One of the groups consisting of only male members influenced her very much, and she herself organized a group made up of only female members, where she began to perform the male dance.

Shinohara said that she began to perform Awa Dance at the age of three, but she also took the same path as Takeichi since she too was elected as a queen, succeeding Takeichi. She is still active as a leader of the group organized in Komatsushima City.

Tsuruse used to perform the female dance and even stopped dancing for a certain period, but resumed dancing as a successor of her father who was the leader of a group. She began the male dance when she resumed dancing.

Takeichi and Shinohara said that they began male dancing in the 1960's: this period in the history of Awa Dance was found to be the beginning of male dance performed by women.

All these women are now in their middle 50's or early 60's and have important and responsible roles in society. They all organized a group or assumed a leadership position in a group after they began to perform the male dance. They have all continued to perform solo male dances up to the present. Many female dancers began performing the male dance after these three. But the newer dancers join male dancers or form a group of female dancers performing the male dance. None of the newer dancers perform a solo male dance.

DISCUSSION

The Association for the Promotion of Awa Dance and Tokushima (Prefectural) Awa Dance Association together have 32 so-called renowned groups as members. These are the leading groups among Awa Dance circles in the prefecture. Groups have to pass severe tests in order to acquire membership in the associations. For example, they have to practice everyday in addition to the ordinary summer period to maintain their high standard of dance. In spite of the long practice, some groups have 100 dancers and musicians. Leaders of these groups often work fulltime as well as coordinating everything in the group. The leaders of 30 of the 32 groups are males.

Takeichi and Tsuruse are the only female leaders who perform the male dance solo. For these two women, leadership and the male dance solo go together. But one reason why these women are leaders who dance the male dance is because they desired to make Awa Dance more individualized.

The male dance does not simply indicate differences in the dance according to sex. Male dance implies position in a group which allows for the display of individuality or creativity, in solo or group performance. The female dance does not allow such individuality since it typically shows the beauty of mass movement; it does not display interesting movements derived from the individual personalities of dancers. There is no female dance solo, and female dances are always in female subgroups where individuality is suppressed in synchronized movements and unified costumes.

Women who want to express their own individuality leave female groups and begin performing the male dance. Performing the male dance might seem to be a necessary condition to assume leadership in a group, but it is not the only necessary condition.

Of the women who danced the male dance, only those creative and passionate enough to preserve and develop Awa Dance perform the male dance solo. Creativity and passion added to personality and devotion seem necessary for leadership in a group. Some male leaders perform the male dance in male groups while others dance solo, but many male dancers who perform the solo dance become leaders. They are respected because of their creativity and passion. In the same way, women performing the male dance solo are leaders owing to their creativity, passion and personality.

The post-war period has been characterized as a time to overcome differences related to gender. In the world of Awa Dance, however, gender difference has been reinforced by movements and costumes. The Female Awa Dance seems to have been created to encourage the division of dancing roles according to gender. But the female Awa Dance is appreciated in its own right because of its visual attractiveness. Female leadership and the male dance solo performed by women were reactions to the fact that Awa Dance suppressed individuality for the sake of visual attractiveness. The male dance solo performed by women and female leadership were born out of the effort to make Awa Dance more individualized.

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