

THE SONG OF AKAMATA: LIFE HISTORIES OF THE ISLANDERS, IRIOMOTE, OKINAWA

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There are two sacred festivals in the Okinawan Islands that, although they continue today, have not yet been filmed or documented: Uyagan-Sai of Ogami Island, Miyako; and Akamata of the Yaeyama Islands, which I attempted, on one notable occasion, to film with an Arriflex camera. The result is this rather peculiar work that did not actually achieve its main objective.

Once a year, during June of the lunar calendar, wearing a wild red wooden mask and covered in leaves and vines, Akamata appears from the sacred cave known as Nabindo. He visits the village founder's house in Komi to bless the villagers and promise a good harvest for the coming season.

In July of 1972, I arrived at Komi with my filming crew, having traveled by Sabani, a kind of small fishing boat. Although 73 families had occupied the village in 1960, only 17 families remained. Most of the young people had left for Tokyo or Kawasaki, and each year an additional few families had also emigrated to Ishigaki Island or Naha. With such a small village population, I was doubtful that Akamata would be held.

At midnight of the first day of the festival, I was called outside, where I was surrounded by several young men with sickles. They returned to me a bottle of sake I had presented them with in honor of the festival, and then threatened me, shouting, "We never gonna let you shoot Akamata. Never! If you do, you'll be found murdered." Their parting shot, "If we ever allow your filming, it's the end of the village," made me even more curious about why Akamata made them so excited and energetic. What magnetic force made people come back to the island to join Akamata?

Due to these developments, instead of filming Akamata, I decided to document the life histories of the villagers and the ways of life of the people who had emigrated from Komi. I rallied my frightened crew and began a daytime visit to a family by asking them to let us take a souvenir photo. They liked our request, even though the camera was my 16mm Arriflex. We also voluntarily joined in the work of the village community, drank together, and sang together, with the camera and recorder turned on.

Before completing souvenir photos of all 17 families, I began to understand the fairly complicated relationships among the villagers. For instance, there were conflicts between native and newly introduced religions. After the photos had all been taken, we visited ex-islanders live in Ishigaki and Naha in order to ask why they had left their native island. I found that these ex-islanders living in the cities maintained the same values they had cherished in their native village. It seems that Akamata still lives in their minds.

The sacred masked Akamata, covered by leaves and vines, does not appear at all in "The Song of Akamata." Nonetheless, this film succeeded in documenting and unmasking the real lives of the islanders.

Duration: 82 mins, **Medium:** DV, **Year:** 1973, 2006 (revised), **Production:** Yugyoki
Location: Komi, Iriomote, Okinawa, Japan

Keywords: Conflict between native and newly introduced religions, Leaving native island to emigrate,
Life histories of the villagers, Secret festival