

## “Amami Folk Song Awards”: Challenges for the future

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For more than 10 years I have been attending the “Amami Folk Song Awards” sponsored by the *Nankai Nichinichi Shinbun* every year—I watch the entire show from start to finish. A long time ago, when it was hosted over two days, I watched both days from morning until evening. When I tell others this, they are usually impressed, saying that I must have a great deal of patience. Perhaps it might be better to say that they found it somewhat ridiculous. However, I love to listen to the *Shima-uta* (in my articles, *Shima-uta* designate Amami folk songs whereas Shima Uta indicates a particular song sung by THE BOOM), so even if I’m tired of sitting, I’ve almost never been tired of listening.

I’ve heard many opinions about the “Amami Folk Song Awards,” ranging from those saying, “we need them” or “we don’t need them,” or that “they’ll attend” or that “they won’t attend.” I think that they were all reasonable opinions in their own right. However, I personally have looked forward to it every year, so I hope that it will continue.

The “Amami Folk Song Awards” was formerly called the “Amami Folk Song Newcomers Tournament.” The objective was clear. It was to find a new singer. The folk song festivals held by the leading figures of the *Shima-uta* at the time have become too familiar and lost a sense of freshness. The first tournament was held in 1975. The winner was TSUKIJI Shunzo, still unknown at the time in 1979. As is now well known, Mr. TSUKIJI won the “Japanese Folk Song Awards” and became the best folk singer in Japan. This was a major incident in Amami at the time.

There were more and more voices who wanted to see the second and third incarnations of the best in Japan, and from the following year onwards, the “Amami Folk Song Newcomer Tournament” was then called the “Amami Folk Song Awards” as a prelude to the “Japanese Folk Song Awards.” The *Shima-uta* content in Amami then transitioned at once from the discovery of new talent to “the best folk song in Japan.” The “best in Amami” was just a passing point. The ultimate objective was to be the “best folk song in Japan.”

However, after Mr. TSUKIJI, the second incarnation of the best in Japan did not appear so readily. It was in 1989 that TOHARA Mitsuyo finally won the coveted crown. It had been 10 years since Mr. TSUKIJI won the award and the following year, NAKANO Rikki became the youngest in history to become the best in Japan. *Shima’chu* (Amamian people) finally found its moment to shine once again, but the all-important “Japanese Folk Song Awards” was abolished in 1992 due to the bursting of the bubble economy. The “Japanese Folk Song Awards” disappeared, but the “Amami Folk Song Awards” remained. However, its role as the prelude to the best folk song in Japan disappeared.

The prelude to the best folk song in Japan has now been handed over to the “Folk Song Folk Dance Amami Union Tournament.” So, what is the objective of the “Amami Folk Song

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Awards”? It feels that the “Amami Folk Songs Awards” have reached the present day without properly discussing this question. To begin with, it is very difficult to choose only one person for the grand prize among hundreds of people, including the qualifiers. I suspect that the people involved in the “Amami Folk Song Awards” are also quite miserable over the current situation.

In an era where the diversity of evaluations has become commonplace, why should we choose the best based on uniform evaluation criteria? Furthermore, a scoring standard can be shown for figure skating, but there is no equivalent in the “Amami Folk Song Awards.” The person coming in at second place does not properly understand what was wrong with them to put them in that position. This would leave those who choose, those who are chosen, and even those who were not chosen in a miserable state.

It is not that I am criticizing the system; it is because this is not a problem that can be resolved with a simple criticism. On the contrary, the problem of the “Amami Folk Song Awards” seems to be inseparably linked to the fundamental question of “What is the most important thing for *Shima-uta*?”—a question that is completely different from the one about enjoying the best folk song in Japan.

Is the reason why the “Amami Folk Song Awards” have been so controversial that *Shima’chu* has been released from the curse of being the best in Japan, and that the people have begun to seriously consider the question of “What is the most important thing for Amami?” It is unclear if this question has a conclusion. However, the exchanges discussed here will never be wasted for *Shima-uta* and for Amami’s future.



Stage of “Amami Folk Song Awards”