

Kijimun's Monologue —No.11—

Topic: *Wakaubī* (The Water of Youth)

Keywords: *wakaubī, hanagumi, hinukan, Ubinadī*

Haisai and Haitai!

It has been cold recently, though I hope everyone is doing well. “*Kisaragi*” is the classical Japanese name of February and it is the month we have New Year's Day under the lunar calendar (except for this year, we had New Year's Day on 31st of January!) In prewar times, there were some New Year's Day customs that families in Okinawa followed. Families carried out the traditional duties before the evening of New Year's Eve (*Tushinu Yuru*) for example, completing purification of their house, decorating the gate with pine branches, placing offerings such as colored papers, *hanagumi* (rice washed and sanctified as an offering to the deities), charcoal, *konbu* seaweed and money on the altar or *tokonoma* alcove. Then, before the dawn of first cockcrowing of the year, the youngest boy in each family went out to obtain buckets of water (*wakaubī*) at a community common well. <image.1>

People in some regions of Japan also followed such a custom where boys fetched *wakaubī* on New Year's Day because it was assumed to be a manifestation of their faith in the moon. In the world of Japanese mythology, the moon is believed to possess the power of immortality therefore it is regarded as a god and an object of worship. So along with the start of a new year, people drank water that was given by the god of the moon and prayed for their longevity. Also, the water that the boys drew was thought to be sacred as though it dwelled mystical forces. During the time when many people were struggling with their domestic finances, the sacred water could be a valuable reward for children whose water was believed to be worth buying.

The family members made a pot of hot tea with the water that was brought from the community common well and placed it on the altar or *hinukan* (an arrangement of religious objects in a designated area of the kitchen to offer a prayer for a god of fire). Families gathered together to pray for their health and vitality in the new year in front of the family altar as they groomed themselves in their best Sunday clothes. Then, they exchanged a new year's greetings with each other while relishing a cup of tea made with *wakaubī*. Also, in some regions, there was a ritual ceremony where families offered a prayer for their babies' healthy growth. The ceremony called “*Ubinadī*” was performed by families running a finger, which was soaked in *wakaubī*, across the babies' forehead three times.<image.2> It seemed that the morning of New Year's Day in old days was more solemn than New Year's Day we have today.

After the ritual greeting ceremony had been done, some fun time awaited the children. Families grouped together and visited their relatives' homes one after another. There, children received *Otoshidama*, (New Year's gift of cash Japanese children receive from adults). Then, they rushed into penny candy stores to get toys for playthings such as *menko*, (a game of slapping a pasteboard down on the ground in order to turn over that of one's opponent), or *ohajiki*, (Japanese version of Tiddlywinks). <image.3> New Year's Day was therefore one of the most enjoyable events which everybody looked forward to, as it's described in the song “*Oshōgatsu*” (New Year's Day).

If you are interested in Japanese traditional folk ceremony on New Year's season, wouldn't you like to know where you can find the materials? The materials can be found in Okinawa Collection Room at University of the Ryukyus Library. Please feel free to use them!