

## A Sacred Drink

Awamori features in many traditional Okinawan ceremonies and social occasions. It is offered at sacred sites of worship called *utaki* and at family graves, and to household Buddhist altars. It is also served at weddings, and plays an important role in summer ceremonies of ancestor worship.

During traditional Ryukyu funerals in the past, small flasks of awamori were placed on the body of the deceased, which was laid in a coffin and interred in a tomb. After several years, the tomb was opened and the awamori was used to ceremonially wash the bones. These were then put in an urn and returned to the tomb. Sometimes, the awamori, by then well aged, would be drunk as part of the ceremony. Even today, Okinawan mourners sometimes pour awamori on the cremated bones of relatives.

A popular Okinawan tradition known as *otori* began as part of New Year ceremonies in the Ryukyu court, in which awamori was served to the king and nobles in turn. Over the centuries this developed into a custom practiced all over Okinawa. Participants sat in a circle and took turns drinking and giving toasts. The custom has declined in many parts of Okinawa, but the island of Miyako, some 300 kilometers southeast of Okinawa's main island, is still famous for its *otori*. There, the drinking of sacred alcohol is an expression of reverence toward the ancestral culture, and embodies wishes for good health and friendship.