

Susan SERED, *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 352 pp. \$60.00 cloth, ISBN 0-1951-2486-3. \$19.95 paper, ISBN 0-1951-2487-1.

PRIZE-WINNING ISRAELI ANTHROPOLOGIST Susan Sered has published her third book. However, compared to her two previous books, this work is very problematic.<sup>1</sup> In *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, Sered included the Ryūkyūan religion in her comparative study of historical and contemporary religions that are “dominated by women” (SERED 1994). It being the only state-religion led by female priestesses, which—unlike the other religions led by women—does not seem to be engaged in defending female superiority (in religious affairs) against male superiority (in politics), Ryūkyūan religion was intriguing enough for Sered to want to dedicate her next research project entirely to it.

Subsequently, Sered learned some Japanese and settled on an island called Henza with her family for a whole year to conduct fieldwork. Because of her year-long fieldwork, she feels her methods to be superior to those of others, including Japanese and Okinawan scholars, who allegedly spend no more than two weeks in the field (22).<sup>2</sup> However, it seems to have eluded Sered that all serious researchers of Okinawan culture build up a close and lifelong relationship with the islanders whose lives and culture they write about, visiting them frequently over periods of twenty or even thirty years.<sup>3</sup> Sered—not being able to communicate in Japanese—recruited the help of a native Okinawan woman who had relatives in the village, and that of a local man who was a self-professed “expert” on Okinawan culture and history and who had lived in Chicago for 30 years. She actively chose to ignore the vast knowledge of many male and female Okinawan and Japanese scholars who published their findings only in Japanese for the following reasons: “Henza priestesses do not have a literate tradition or a corpus of sacred texts; the books that have been left unread by them (and by me) were written by outsiders or by members of the Okinawan (mostly male) elite” (20).

Herself an outsider, Sered nevertheless tries to draw upon the profound knowledge of renowned Okinawan and Japanese scholars such as Higa Masao, Tsuchi Takashi, and Akamine Masanobu “through lengthy discussions with sociology and anthropology professors at the University of the Ryūkyūs” (20). (The meagre outcome of these discussions will be illustrated below.) Sered did cite some of the older studies mostly published in the 1970s and 1980s by American, European, and Japanese scholars—as long as their work

<sup>1</sup> *Women As Ritual Experts* (Oxford University Press, 1992) won the National Jewish Book Award, and *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (Oxford University Press, 1994), won the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion.

<sup>2</sup> A thoroughly positive review by HARDACRE (2000) of this book also states that two weeks is the preferred length of fieldwork for Japanese anthropologists working on the Okinawan islands (p. 756). This review reveals how a reader not familiar with Okinawa in particular, or with how Japanese scholars work, can be misled by Sered’s problematic book.

<sup>3</sup> Even Western scholars like Patrick Bcillevaire, Arne Røkkum, and Josef Kreiner have visited the Ryūkyūs innumerable times while continuously publishing on various aspect of the culture. It should also be pointed out that all three of them are not only fluent in standard Japanese, but also understand the local vernacular to some extent.

was available in English. Most of the cited literature deals with feminist anthropological theory or cultures of the surrounding areas of mainland Japan, Korea, and the islands in the southern Pacific, even though the book is not meant to be a comparative study.

The problems arising from this choice of informants and literature are aggravated by Sered's choice to give more weight to the comments of her informants, without having critically reflected on the credibility or personal involvement of those people. Nor does Sered show any awareness that the literature about Okinawa on which she relies might be outdated or marked by some sort of bias—male, elite—a point which she does criticize on a global scale but ignores when citing convenient literature such as that which includes Mabuchi Tōichi's outdated theory of "shifting dualism." Her own Western bias is clearly revealed in her unreflected use of the terms "power" and "leadership," both of which are manifested differently in Okinawan culture, as described below.

The reader to whom the Ryūkyūs are unfamiliar will find the content frustrating, as Sered does not bother to introduce either the cultural or historic setting, nor does she provide basic data about Ryūkyū religion.<sup>4</sup> A discussion of the differences between the various religious specialists is put off until the end of the book (Part IV, Chapter 10: Priestesses, Yuta and Ogami People). As Henza's cosmology shows as much "divine dis-order" as Henza's sociology (Chapters 1 and 2), crucial topics such as the foreign nature of ancestor worship, or the worship of the hearth deity (火の神 *hi-nu-kan*), or function and characteristics of a male deity incorporated by a priestess who plays an important role in fishing rites (140), etc., are touched upon lightly wherever appropriate, but without going into the necessary details. Background information on the various priestesses' roles is not given in the main text, but is only introduced in an endnote (255, note 11). It seems that the label "divine dis-order" only serves to cover up Sered's inability to find out the relevant details about the social and religious roles of the heads of senior households of specific clans as well as the links of certain clans to the Royal Family in Shuri—information easily found in Japanese in a printed village history book that is available in the archives of virtually all Okinawan towns.

This book easily reveals, to those who have studied the Ryūkyūs, Sered's shallow understanding of some of the basic characteristics of Ryūkyū culture and religion. Professor TSUHA Takashi has published an interesting article (1995) on whether or not the *norō* 巫女<sup>5</sup> were allowed to marry. My own research showed that there is a reason for a *norō* not to marry, which is true particularly of the first *norō* of Henza: she was a concubine of the king Shō En, the founder of the second Shō Dynasty of the Ryūkyūs (WACKER 2000, p.

<sup>4</sup> Sered defends this choice with the following words: "anthropologists have no need to privilege the past. Yet the present does... rest upon past patterns and experiences, and so far as it was possible within the parameters of this study, I have noted issues of historical change, usually through the eyes of contemporary villagers. I leave it to others to document Henza history in a more orderly fashion" (21).

<sup>5</sup> *Norō* are the lowest-ranking priestesses of the state hierarchy, but the highest-ranking priestesses in the village.

180). Professor HIGA Yasuo, a specialist on the Okinawan kinship system, has published an article on the brother-sister relationship (1991), but Sered dismisses the idea of the cultural relevance of the brother-sister relationship, which is known to scholars of Ryūkyūan religion as *onarigami-shinkō* おなり神信仰 (the belief in the “Sister-deity”)<sup>6</sup>—and to which my Ph.D. thesis is dedicated—with the following words:

Contrary to reports of earlier anthropologists... I found that most women do not seem to feel particularly close to their brothers, nor do they expect their brothers to help them; they report much more extensive contact with their sisters. (100)

In a note Sered adds, “My guess is that the decline of the brother-sister relationship is a fairly recent phenomenon and does not characterize all Okinawan villages,” then gives an example of Noriko Kawahashi’s research in the northern part of mainland Okinawa (267, note 12; KAWAHASHI 1992, p. 84). However, KAWAHASHI’s theories on the characteristics of Okinawan priestesses, their “being kami-sama themselves” (i.e., the identity of certain women with a certain kami [1992, pp. 135–36]), have been fully integrated into Sered’s own peculiar line of argumentation: “[the] priestesses role which I interpret as the embodiment or actualization of divine presence” (11). Sered claims that “Okinawan kami-sama do not really ‘do’ or ‘act’. Their significance is in their presence rather than in their authority or actions.... The same is true of priestesses” (129), but cannot avoid mentioning that the priestesses say prayers, make offerings, eat of the offerings, and bless people or buildings (133). Such contradictory statements about various aspects of Henza religion abound throughout the book. Sered, even though she is aware of the priestess being a member of the clan she was born into, ignores the fact that this is synonymous to being the sister of a clan member. This is all the more surprising, as she herself relates at least one legend that is unmistakably about a “sister-deity”: the “Tale of the Ashtray Rock” (121), in which a younger sister picks up a giant rock to scare away foreign warriors and tells them that her brothers are even stronger, but unfortunately abroad at the moment. Another, even more rare element of *onarigami-shinkō* is presented in an additional tale (122–23), where a sister being left by her brothers to die on a rock in the ocean, curses them and their offspring.<sup>7</sup> Sered, having dismissed the relevance of the sister-brother relationship, is blind to the fact that both of these stories are excellent proof for the relevance of the sibling relationship, and cannot but interpret them as evidence of the cultural importance of the absence of men.

In short, Sered’s shallow understanding of Okinawan culture and religion,

<sup>6</sup> According to my theory “*onari*” originally meant “woman,” and all Ryūkyūan women were to some extent “holy women.” This is another linguistically possible interpretive translation of the term “*onari-gami*,” which I prefer to the narrower meaning that was introduced when the patrilineal clan-system was introduced from the seventeenth century onward.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on curses as an aspect of *onarigami-shinkō* see my Ph.D. thesis (WACKER 2000). A summary in English is to be published soon in the proceedings of a symposium held in Bonn in 1998, edited by Professor Josef Kreiner.

which is due to her neglect of the Japanese language and previous research in Japanese, leads to misinterpretation, and not only in the case of the above-mentioned legends. Her emphasis on being “*yasashii*”—which is a Japanese concept and word—and her interpretation of the gender egalitarianism professed by her informants—cannot lead her to a meaningful theory on the role of women in the Ryūkyūan religion. What her informants meant when they stressed the equality of men and women is nothing else but the fact that within the cultural framework of the Ryūkyū, men and women change dominating positions: men traditionally dominate in the political sphere, women in the religious sphere—without having almighty power over each other.

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