



Isabelle Prochaska-Meyer, *Kaminchu: Spirituelle Heilerinnen in Okinawa*

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ISABELLE PROCHASKA-MEYER'S *Kaminchu* is an ethnographic work based on extensive fieldwork conducted between April 2005 and March 2007 and aims to describe the current situation and praxis of female spiritual healers called *kaminchu* in Okinawa. Prochaska defines *kaminchu* as “a person who, when consulted in cases of individual problems, conducts spiritual rituals through communication with *kami*, ancestors, and other supernatural beings” (97). Prochaska’s focus in the analysis of *kaminchu* is on their sacred places. Many of the traditional sites where *kaminchu* had held prayers were destroyed or relocated during two phases of intense modernization in Okinawa’s recent history. Yet in the wake of the “Okinawa boom” of the 1990s, many of these sites were revived to cater to the large number of Japanese tourists interested in spiritual aspects of Okinawan culture. Prochaska consequently examines the function these sites had originally, and the consequences their destruction and revaluation had for *kaminchu* and their clients.

Prochaska’s introductory chapter (1–23) contains all the elements one might expect in a solid introduction. She maps Okinawa and defines “healing” as the restoring of order where there is—often, but not exclusively, physical—disorder.

“Spiritual healing,” that is, the amelioration of disorders caused by metaphysical agents or causes, is seen as complementary to, rather than a rival to, other forms of healing. She explains the goal of her research, summarizes previous studies, and illustrates her methodology, whose key elements were long periods of participant observation and qualitative interviews.

The first two chapters following the introduction expound the historical and religious background of today’s spiritual healers. Chapter 1, “Einführung in die (Frauen) Geschichte Okinawas,” covers the history of the Okinawan islands from prehistoric times until today—the neolithic Shell Mound Period, the era of *gusuku* castles, the First and Second Shō Dynasties of the Kingdom of Ryūkyū with their frequent embassies to China, the drastic changes when the islands as “Okinawa prefecture” became part of the Japanese nation-state between 1872 and 1879, the disastrous final year of the Pacific War, the nearly three decades under US administration, and the time since the islands’ reversion to Japan in 1972. Throughout the chapter Prochaska includes sections on religious history, such as the establishment of a hierarchical system of priestesses under Shō Shin (r. 1477–1526). She especially highlights the sometimes very harsh criticism raised against spiritual healers by men—and later also women—inspired by Confucian ethics and ideals of a modern and rational society. Despite repeated attempts since the seventeenth century to eliminate female spiritual healers and male diviners by exhorting against them, punishing them and their clients, and destroying their sacred sites, their traditions survived. The tradition of female spiritual healers has even gained new vigor since the 1990s, when it came to be regarded not so much as an outdated, fraudulent superstition, but rather as an important part of the Okinawan cultural legacy.

Prochaska deliberately entitles her second chapter, “Zur Religion Okinawas” (“About Okinawan religion”), as she quite sensibly decides not to give a comprehensive account of all aspects of religion on the Okinawan islands but to focus on three aspects that are essential to both Okinawan religion as such and her own study. Her three foci are women’s roles, ancestor veneration, and nature. She begins the chapter with a very brief summary of the terminological discussion about the applicability of “religion,” “folk belief,” and “folk religion” for Okinawan religious traditions without, however, a conclusion as to her own preferences.

Since time immemorial women have played a key role in Okinawan tradition, although former assumptions that the islands had been structured matriarchally have been rejected as unconvincing. The main concept governing women’s central position is that of the *onarigami*, often translated as “sister goddess,” that is, the belief that a sister’s spiritual powers protect the brother from dangers (at sea) and consequently a household head’s wife’s or sister’s spiritual powers protect the family. In the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries this belief led to the establishment of a central and hierarchical system of priestesses (*norō*) in charge of certain rituals for the sake of the kingdom, the district, and the villages respectively. Parallel to this system existed local spiritual healers formerly referred to with the now derogatory

term *yuta*, who were consulted in cases of individual illnesses and other personal problems. Despite apparent differences between *noro* and *yuta*, closer investigation has revealed striking similarities between them, such as their initiation process. This suggests a common origin between the two and the possibility that, among those young women exhibiting signs of spiritual powers, those who had the necessary social position could become *noro* whereas the others had to become *yuta*—a lowly and highly criticized position.

The second element of Okinawan religion Prochaska explains in detail is ancestor veneration. Imported from China in the late fifteenth century, ancestral tablets, their veneration, and especially the correct form of their transmission from one generation to another became important elements of Okinawan religion, and important pillars in support of genealogies based on patrilineage and primogeniture. Mistakes in this genealogy and insufficient veneration of one's ancestors were—and often are—diagnosed as causes behind inexplicable illnesses or misfortunes.

Okinawan religion is often said to be based on nature worship but, as Prochaska points out, it is not nature as such that is worshipped in sacred spots called *utaki*—usually natural groves that are nearly untouched apart from a small shrine, fireplace, or table necessary for conducting rituals and prayers. Rather, *utaki* are sacred spots in locations of allegedly historical significance for a family's or village head's initial ancestor and thus sites of communal commemoration rather than nature worship. Other sacred sites are springs and wells central to communal and ritual village life and certain locations in private houses, most significantly the kitchen fireplace next to which the hearth deity, the deity most intimately connected to family life, is venerated.

In her third chapter, “Kaminchu in der Gegenwart,” Prochaska finally turns to present-day spiritual healers, first introducing the exact conditions of her fieldwork and the three *kaminchu* who became her key informants. The remaining chapter is devoted to the processes of calling, initiation, and training of contemporary *kaminchu*.

Kaminchu typically do not choose their profession but go through a time of physical and mental disorder that is at long last diagnosed as *kamidaari*—a divine calling comparable to the often quoted shamanic illness—by an experienced *kaminchu*. Many *kaminchu* are, in retrospect, said to have shown signs of spiritual powers during their childhood (*saadaka 'nmari*). Although most women fear the private and social consequences, they have to accept their calling and enter into an often extended period of training usually under the auspices of one or more experienced *kaminchu*. Their period of training is marked by dreams and visions, several themes of which appear to be almost standardized: pilgrimages to many sacred locations important to their lineage and village, rituals for the sake of their own ancestors, and practical instruction in the performance of rituals. Most *kaminchu* gradually develop their special fields of expertise. Most frequently it is the vision or dream of a document received from a deity which signals the completion of the period of

training after which the new *kaminchu* begins recruiting and attending to customers.

Prochaska's fourth chapter, "Cosmology," describes five key elements of belief guiding a *kaminchu*'s life and work—first of all the deity, often a remote ancestor, that acts as a *kaminchu*'s protective spirit and often determines her main locations of veneration. The most important concepts are those of ancestral spirits and living people's souls (*mabui*), both of which can affect people adversely. Although Eliade postulated trance and ecstasy as key elements of Shamanism, little of these elements may be found in Okinawa, although the exact means by which deities inform *kaminchu* vary individually. Multiple rites are required because it is believed to be very difficult for the newly dead to travel to the world beyond. Inadequate performance of these rites is often identified as the reason behind inexplicable illnesses. Other important possible reasons for such illnesses are the loss of one's soul through accident or shock, roaming spirits unable to rest in peace, disrespect for deities' places of residence, and impurities or negative forces around one's own house.

Kaminchu conduct prayer rituals for themselves, as well as consultations and rituals for their clients, in order to rectify disorders with metaphysical causes. Prochaska recounts three of these rituals in some detail in her fifth chapter, "Spirituelle Praxis," after introducing some of the main offerings, altars, and dates for rituals. Interaction with clients—mainly middle-aged or elderly women—begins with consultation in front of a *kaminchu*'s altar during which the *kaminchu*'s protective deity informs her of the client's problems, the underlying causes, and the rituals necessary for their amelioration. Some of the rituals, such as *mabuigumi* (reinstalling the soul of a living being after an accident) and *nujifaa* (informing the soul of a newly dead person of its new status) are performed whenever necessary. Other rituals, such as the purification of the client's house and estate, are conducted at certain times of the year. The correct location is of importance for all of these rituals as, for instance, lost and dead souls are believed to remain where they were lost or died, and hence must be guided on from there.

Prochaska's final chapter, "Diskussion: Die Bedeutung spiritueller Heilung," is a brief discussion of the significance of spiritual healing: the therapeutic function of *kaminchu*, the mainly female clients, and the importance of Okinawa for *kaminchu* and vice versa, as *kaminchu* use Okinawan language and their rituals are conducted at and refer to locations of significance for Okinawan individual, local, and regional history.

Prochaska's book is an anthropological study, a solid ethnography written for an audience largely unfamiliar with Okinawa's history and religion—both of which differ from those of the rest of Japan, as Prochaska explains. The introductory chapters, especially that on Okinawan history, are well researched and interesting to read, yet one might wonder why a study of contemporary spiritual healers needs such an extensive historical introduction. Prochaska shares many passages from her intensive interviews and provides a wealth of detailed descriptions and several colored

photos of sacred sites, prayers, rituals, and offerings. The strength of this book is, thus, its empathetic and yet systematic and comprehensive presentation of contemporary Okinawan spiritual healers.

Readers familiar with Japanese and Okinawan history and religion may not find much that is really new, and I personally would have appreciated a more extensive discussion and scholarly evaluation of some of the issues Prochaska raised, such as a reevaluation of sacred spots and the impact of Japanese tourists searching for genuine Okinawan spirituality. However, considering that it is very many years since William Lebra, Sakurai Tokutarō, and others published their monographs on Okinawan shamans, this reliable and extensive report about spiritual healers in present-day Okinawa in a language accessible to Western readers was urgently needed.

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