

Monika WACKER

## *Onarigami*

### Holy Women in the Twentieth Century

This paper intends to show how the belief in *onarigami*, that is, the spiritual power of women, which gave the Okinawan women an important social and political role in the dual rule characteristic of the kingdom of Ryūkyū, is still relevant today for the rebuilding of Okinawan women's identity. The ambilineal descent groups recruiting members from both the father's and the mother's side was ideal in fostering an egalitarian society, albeit with a rather strict division of labor, with opportunities to wield power open to both sexes, for the women as state or village priestesses. The need to investigate the matter from an historical point of view is underscored by the recent publication of two works, which will be reviewed here, by a female and a male, a Western and Japanese scholar respectively, who both interpreted Okinawan material without taking the local history into account. Based on her own research, the author shows the roots of the belief in *onarigami*, traces the steps of historical decline of female religious power throughout the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, and discusses the revival of the identity of women as *onarigami* towards the end of the last century.

KEYWORDS: *onarigami* – *kaminchū* – *yuta* – *fi nu kan* – Kudaka Island – Unai festival

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IN NOVEMBER 1995 I was on my way to one of the numerous festivals in the Okinawan calendar, the Tanetori Festival on the little island of Taketomi in the Yaeyama group in Okinawa Prefecture. It was not my first visit to Okinawa, or to this island,<sup>1</sup> but this visit impressed upon me how deeply immersed even modern women are in traditional religious festivities. There were a lot of vacant seats on the plane to Naha but the plane to Ishigaki was almost full and so were the little motorboats ferrying the masses from Ishigaki harbor over to Taketomi. Luckily I had booked a room in a little guesthouse early enough, as the festival drew the attention of scholars and journalists alike. During the festivities I met Mrs. N. (fifty years old), a government employee of the Okinawan prefectural government and old acquaintance of mine, who lives on mainland Okinawa but was born on Taketomi Island, and had come to fulfill her ritual duties at her natal place.

Here Mrs. N was fulfilling her role as *onarigami*, a female ritual specialist for her natal family's rites. *Onari* (or *unai*) used to mean "woman" or "female" in the ancient Okinawan dialect, *kami* (also *kan*) is identical to the standard Japanese term for "deity." So *onarigami* can be translated to "female deity" or "divine woman" (WACKER 2001a, p. 64). As we will see in the following, these women also are thought to have the power to bless or curse their male kin. As such, her performance and her brother's subsequent gift of rice cake and rice were elementary parts of agricultural rites, while also strengthening the bond between the siblings.

The Tanetori Festival, of which the sister's prayers and the brother's gift to her is an important part, takes place in the tenth month of the lunar calendar, lasts for four days and centers on the sowing of seeds and prayers for their growth. The traditional crop was millet, but later rice was also cultivated by the inhabitants of Taketomi on the east coast of Iriomote Island as the soil on their home island was not sufficiently fertile. Such agricultural rites are held almost everywhere in the Ryūkyūan islands. What distinguishes the festival of Taketomi is that it is combined with elaborate entertainment: dancing, singing and Ryūkyūan-style kabuki plays. This strong emphasis on entertainment seems to derive from the days of *nintōzei*, during the seventeenth to nineteenth cen-

1. During my stay in Japan on a grant by the Monbushō (1990–1992) and Kurume University, Fukuoka Prefecture (1992–1996), I spent approximately six months off and on in various places on the Ryūkyūan Archipelago, including Hateruma, Ishigaki, Iriomote, Okinawa, Izena, and Kudaka, between August 1991 and March 1996.

turies, when taxes were collected annually by an official deputy of the king, who also had to be entertained appropriately.

For my purposes I will concentrate on the agricultural rites, their participants, and locations. In the following I will briefly describe the background of traditional Okinawan society and religion dating from the heyday of the kingdom of Ryūkyū before returning to the postwar prefecture of Okinawa and the situation of women as religious specialists under the rule of Japan.

### *Priestesses and Shamans*

Proper studies of Ryūkyūan culture including prolonged fieldwork did not commence until after World War II, when both Japanese and Western folklorists and anthropologists began to discover the remnants of a seemingly declining religion. The fact that women play an important role in Okinawan religion, however, has been known to scholars of Japanese folklore ever since the works of Okinawan-born Iha Fuyū were published in the 1920s (IHA 1989 [1926]). Around that time Yanagita Kunio, the founder of Japanese folklore studies, visited Okinawa and reported his findings in his *Kainan Shoki* and *Imōto no chikara* (YANAGITA 1925 and 1926 respectively). Other early Japanese scholars include ORIGUCHI Shinobu (1925). One of the first Westerners to report on *onarigami* was Edmund SIMON (1914), whose opinions were strongly rooted in the theories on matriarchy then prevailing. I will later demonstrate that such a matriarchy cannot be proven for Ryūkyū at all.

The great master of social anthropology of the southwestern islands (the Ryūkyūs and Taiwan), MABUCHI Tōichi, pointed out that women—especially sisters—had the power to bless or curse their brothers or other male relatives (1964, p. 79ff.). This belief in *onarigami* became the basis for the hierarchy of priestesses who wielded religious power during the days of the kingdom of Ryūkyū.

More information on the *noro*, the state priestesses (called *kuni gami* 国神 on the island of Kudaka) on the lowest echelon of this hierarchy is provided by Robert SPENCER (1931). The heyday of a well-structured state religion occurred during the sixteenth century. At that time priestesses all over the country—who were from Amami to Yaeyama in the late sixteenth century—were united into a hierarchy led by a female relative of the king, the *chifijin ganashi mē*, who sometimes was his sister, sometimes a cousin or an aunt, but quite often his mother.<sup>2</sup>

The country was divided into three parts, each headed by a priestess (*ufu anshirare*) who lived in or near the capital of Shuri. All the local state priestesses, the *noro* (or *nuru* in Okinawan dialect) were installed by the respective

2. Data obtained by the author from the royal genealogies to be found in MIYAGI 1979, p. 120, and WAKIGAMI and ARAGAKI 1983, pp. 249–52.

*ufu anshirare*, reported to her, and sent her the taxes they collected from the villages at certain festivals. The *noro* were on the lowest echelon of the state hierarchy but they were responsible for a number of village priestesses (*nigan*), each leading their own group of villagers (referred to as “cult group” in this paper) in prayer. In the Miyako and Yaeyama groups of islands the village priestesses were called *chikasa*. They were controlled by a regional high priestess (*ufu an*) in Ishigaki and Hirare, the capitals of those two archipelagos, respectively, who in turn answered to one of the *ufu an shirare* on the island of Okinawa.<sup>3</sup> All of these women were entitled to yearly stipends from the regions they governed, and obtained grain from fields that belonged to them and were tilled by the local population. They also received gifts from the court.

On the village level these *nigan* and *chikasa* presided over the village ritual organization and led all the rites including the initiation of new members while the *nuru* as a representative of the state was a guest.<sup>4</sup> The members of the village ritual organization themselves seemed to be representatives of the various households or kin groups. There were, however, big differences between the village ritual organizations depending on the region, even from island to island and village to village. The village ritual organization members were mostly women, and in some villages, such as Shiraho on Ishigaki Island in the Yaeyama Archipelago or in places in the Miyako Archipelago, they were even limited to women. On the main island of Okinawa and surrounding islands, some men were eligible to become members as they were accorded ritual duties or enacted the roles of certain deities upon their yearly visit from the Other World by virtue of being brother to the *nigan* (*nitchū*), or because their family had played some important role in local history.<sup>5</sup>

On Okinawa Island, where the patrilineal clan system began to spread among the peasants during the eighteenth century, the clan priestesses (*Okode*, *kudii*, *kudingwā*) were usually limited to women. They worshipped the ancestors of the clan—the ancestress was called *onarigami* and the ancestor *wekerigami* in Shuri.

All of these women were eligible to become priestesses by virtue of being born into certain families, usually the founding family of a village, or a separate priestess lineage established through some historical bond with the founding family or the royal lineage. In the case of some of the *nuru* and some higher priestesses, the right to become a priestess was transmitted matrilineally, that is, from mother to daughter, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century

3. More details can be found in MIYAZATO 1990, pp. 71–75, or WACKER 2001a, pp. 59–61.

4. Personal communication from the late Ōshiro Shigecko, *nigan* in the village of Ōgimison Janagusuku during fieldwork in 1993 and 1995.

5. For details on the cult groups of Kudaka see SAKURAI 1979, pp. 157 ff., for Izena compare IZENA SON SHI HENSHŪ INKAI 1989, pp. 297 ff., for Hateruma compare OUWEHAND 1985, pp. 170 ff., and for Shiraho compare MABUCHI ed. 1977, pp. 300 ff.

(MIYAGI 1979, pp. 175–78). If there was more than one candidate, the new priestess was usually selected by divination with rice grains.

The strong tendency towards female religious specialists is even more obvious on the level of the household. The daily rites in the house for the hearth deity (*fi nu kan* 火の神) and prayers at the ancestors' shrine are usually performed by the eldest woman in the house, the mother or wife of the head of the household, whereas the monthly rites before the ancestors and others within the agrarian cycle are most often performed by a sister of the household. Even then the first god to receive offerings and prayers on such an occasion is the hearth deity. This duty, too, is fulfilled until death, and only then is it passed on to her daughter-in-law, the next eldest woman in the household. She also takes care of the rites in her younger sons' houses, or at least teaches her daughters-in-law how to perform them.

The hearth deity is the most important god(dess)<sup>6</sup> in the house, protecting all its inhabitants. In order to be able to do so, the deity needs to know everything about their lives, so important changes are reported to it regularly, such as birth, marriage, moving houses, and death. It is enshrined even in modern houses on a shelf on the northern wall of the kitchen in the form of a censer, with a vase with a *susuki* branch, a bowl for offerings of salt, rice, and some sake. Originally there were also three conical stones from the beach or the fields symbolizing the deity. On the island of Izena, for example, these would have to be replaced by a new set upon the death of the household head, whereas in other locations, the traditional earthen hearth was destroyed and rebuilt upon the death of the eldest woman.

The most important part of the sanctuary, however, is the ashes. A newborn child is introduced to the fire deity and receives a mark of ash on its forehead. Upon marriage, the groom may be introduced to the fire deity of the parents of the bride, or the bride may take some ashes from her birthplace's fire deity censer to her new home when moving. After death some of the ashes are tossed away, as the deceased no longer needs protection (FURUIE 1994, pp. 90–133).

In contrast to these rites, the spiritual protection by the *onarigami* was—during the heyday of the kingdom—given most often by the eldest sister (Yae: *shā bunari*) in the family. As stated earlier, on Taketomi Island, for example, the *onarigami* return to their native place at least once a year for the Tanetori Festival in the tenth month of the lunar calendar. Prior to her arrival, her brother's wife prepares one big rice cake in the shape of a loaf and several smaller ones, which all are decorated in the living room in front of the alcove (*tokonoma*) where the *onarigami* also keeps an incense burner for ritual use. On the first day of the festival her brother ritually sows some seeds. On the second day the

6. Depending on the area or village, the deity might be perceived as male or female.

inhabitants observe certain taboos so as not to disturb the growth of the newly-sown seeds. Then, early in the morning on the third day, the *chikasa* pray at a certain shrine for the seeds to grow into strong plants and then cut off one end of the loaf-shaped rice cake to which only they are entitled. Later that day, the priestesses perform the same rite at the founding houses of each of the three villages on Taketomi Island while the *onarigami* each return to their native house to perform this rite for their brothers. The rites in the houses end with a festive meal and the *onarigami* also receives rice grain and flour in gratitude for her prayer.

Women not only function as priestesses but also as “shaman” (*yuta*)<sup>7</sup> in traditional Okinawan society. The difference between the two kinds of religious specialist is as follows. *Onarigami*, who are, for example, members of the village ritual organization, village priestesses, and the clan priestesses (*okode*), perform their rituals usually for a certain group of persons, related through ties of blood and/or earth. They are usually selected for their post through the gods but have little official training, and trance is not a prerequisite nor is it a part of their performance. They embody the gods or ancestors during certain rites without trance. They never are paid for their services. *Yuta*, on the other hand, are also usually women but are in general not related by blood to their clients. Clients might even travel far to seek the advice of a famous “shaman.” The *yuta*’s advice is predominantly solicited in cases of severe illness or prolonged bad luck for an individual or his/her family. The *yuta* herself mostly has experienced severe bouts of chronic illness accompanied by hallucination and so on. Through this experience, the ancestors communicate to her and call on her to become a *yuta*. Trance is not always a part of her performance, but occurs sometimes when the ancestors of her client or some god speak their will through her. Diagnostics of a *yuta* usually reveal that the ancestors might want more regular services and offerings, the ancestral tablet of a certain member of their clan to be transferred to a different clan or branch of the clan, or a certain living member of the clan to become a priestess, and so on. *Yuta* have been instrumental in strengthening the patrilineal ideology among former peasants, especially after World War II, and helped clear the identity of many a person of Okinawan origin—alive or dead—according to the rules of patrilineality (see ADACHI 2001).

There also were male “shamans” or “sorcerers” called *ichijamā* in the Yaeyama group of islands, usually wise men skilled in the use of the Chinese calendar, which they consulted for matchmaking or determining the proper day for certain important projects. We can clearly see, however, that it is the women who come into close contact with the divine and even become divine themselves (*kaminchū* 神人), as Noriko KAWAHASHI aptly puts it (1992, p. viii).

7. Here the originally Tungus word “shaman” is only used in quotation marks, as the characteristics of a Tungus shaman are not all found in the Okinawan context (compare VAJDA 1964).

But how does this role of woman as chief ritual specialist fit into Okinawan society as a whole?

*The Role of Woman in Traditional Okinawan Society*

Traditional Okinawan society consists of ambilineal kin groups called *wēkā* on Okinawa and surrounding islands, *harōji* in the Amami Islands, and *utsīza māri* in the Yaeyama Islands.<sup>8</sup> These kin groups comprise all the offspring of a couple and unite even cousins of first and second degrees. Membership is attained at birth and lasts until death. Marriage does not change the status of a woman within this group, but adds a new branch—that of her husband—to her personal kin group. A woman belongs to this group as a daughter, wife, and mother.

This is fundamentally different from the patrilineal clans called *munchū*, which were introduced in the seventeenth century among the nobles and taken up by the rural population of mainland Okinawa towards the end of the eighteenth century, where they became known by the name of *hara* (HIGA 1983, pp. 9–13). Here the marital status and role are an important aspect of a woman's membership. As a daughter she is born into her father's clan and retains membership as a sister there until death. As a wife she obtains an opportunity for additional membership in her husband's clan, but she is finally accepted only as a mother—preferably of sons—and gains the right to be buried in her husband's clan's tomb and revered in the ancestors' shrine (*butsudan*) in her son's house.

Takaesu has published a study on the implications that this double membership in two clans has in a village in southern Okinawa (TAKAESU 1992). In this case women who marry outside the village return for all the ancestral rituals and agricultural rites to pray in their own homes and the main house of the clan. They also pay a certain amount of money into a fund to cover the costs of the rites (O. *usakadī*, J. *osake dai* お酒代) just like all the other members of the clan, men and unmarried women. At O-bon, they also visit all their relatives of older generations in their *wēkā*, but are very aware of the differences between patrilineal relatives, members of their clan, and matrilineal relatives who belong to different clans.

All the priestesses from the various levels of society, discussed earlier in this article, derive their legitimacy from their birth into certain families or clans. The position is held until death and can only be inherited by a daughter or sister from that family. Wives of clan members can only participate in the rites as helpers, for example, for cooking and serving meals. They do not have any rit-

8. This section is a summary of the pertaining chapter (pp. 97–99) of my Ph.D. thesis (WACKER 2000).

ual functions. Therefore the horizontal bond between brothers and sisters as the offspring of a couple remains valid throughout their lifetimes and is only dissolved after the sister's death, when she is buried in her husband's clan's grave. She is only revered as an ancestress, however, if she has given birth to children, preferably sons. The horizontal bond between the spouses has no meaning within the patriclan. It is the vertical bond with her son, which justifies the wife's posthumous membership in this clan.

Lastly I would like to look at what happens to the status of women and children when marriage fails. Traditional marriage in the old days of Ryūkyū involved several steps and could be terminated anytime. During the first stage, which could last for several years, a man would sleep in his love's parent's house during the nights and might even father her children, who would become members of their father's clan nevertheless. After the official marriage the couple would either move into the man's parents' house or found a new household. If, by chance, this marriage did not work out—reasons could be that mother and daughter-in-law did not get along, or the bride did not work to the satisfaction of her in-laws, or she might be barren—it could very easily be dissolved. The woman would then return to her parents' house and might easily remarry later. If this couple produced any children, they would retain their membership in their father's clan and possibly be raised by their grandmother. However, if a daughter had been born in her matrilineal grandparent's house, she might also return with her mother and gain membership in this clan. Due to the strict patrilineality sons never changed to their mother's clan.

### *The Spiritual Power of Woman: Blessing and Curse*

We will now look at the ideological background of Okinawan women's role in autochthonous religion.<sup>9</sup> Why is it that women pray to the ancestors and the gods, including the hearth deity? Why do they take care of the spiritual needs of their brothers' families as well as their own?

According to the belief in *onarigami* all Okinawan women are imbued with spiritual power called, in the Okinawan language, *shiji* (or *seji*; J. *reiryoku* 靈力), but those that become priestesses on any level of society are born with an exceptionally "high spiritual power" (O. *shiji takai umare* シジ高い生まれ). According to the *Omoro Sōshi*, a collection of ancient Ryūkyūan songs compiled in the eighteenth century, this *seji* is sought and obtained from the Other World situated in the skies (*obotsu kagura*) or over the seas (*nirai kanai*). These thus empowered state priestesses not only use it to protect the king, his sailors and soldiers at war, but also endow the king with these powers to give him the abili-

9. This section is a summary of the pertaining chapter (pp. 105–114) of my Ph.D. thesis (WACKER 2000).



ties to rule over the other noblemen and the people of the islands and to protect them from any foe (TAMAGUSUKU 1991, pp. 4; 12; 14–17). In these songs the *seji* is invisible and can only be inferred from its consequences. However, in folksongs and legends in various regions of the Ryūkyūs the *seji* can be seen in the form of a butterfly (KOJIMA 1983, p. 146; HOKAMA and SAIGŌ 1972, *Omoro Sōshi* Chapter 13, song no. 965) or a white bird (HARING 1964, p. 45). In a legend from Kuroshima Island in the Yaeyama group the woman appeared to lift the sinking ship of her brother with only her hand, and with the help of some friendly shells which filled all the holes in the bottom the ship soon was repaired and returned safely home (UEMATSU 1971, p. 219).

There is even a legend to explain the habit of sisters to give their brothers a piece of cloth they have woven themselves (O. *tisāji*, J. *te nugui* 手拭) to be worn as a talisman during their journey:

The Bisshi Utaki (holy grove) on the coast of Miyako and the Yabishī reef are so dangerous, for the ships are connected to a pair of sister-brother deities. As the brother is angered whenever a ship crosses his field of leeks, he stirs up the seas. His sister, ever working at her weaving loom, calls him to distract him with a beautiful new pattern she has just created.<sup>10</sup>

However, this *tisāji* also serves a similar purpose when given as a present from the bride-to-be to her groom-to-be. Other talismans include a lock of the sister's hair and the *senninbari*, an embroidered belt which was widely used during World War II.

Both the *Omoro Sōshi* and the legends mostly tell of such positive magic. Black magic is only mentioned once in the *Omoro Sōshi*, when the spiritual power of a high priestess (*akaraseji hijiweruseji*) is called upon to confuse the Japanese soldiers (*Omoro Sōshi* Chapter 3, no. 96; HOKAMA and SAIGŌ 1972, p. 51). However, Mabuchi found several legends about angered sisters cursing their brothers. There is one pertaining to the island of Taketomi and the role of the sisters in agricultural rites, which is especially interesting with reference to the Tanetori Festival:

The coral island of Taketomi, in the Yaeyama Islands, is devoid of irrigation water by which to cultivate wet rice, so the islanders must depend on millet (*setaria italica*) and sweet potato. On the other hand, Kobama Island, to the north of Taketomi, abounds in wet rice fields that are irrigated by water springing from a hill that rises high in the central part of the island. A tale of Taketomi relates that once there was a well-forested hill in the southern part of this island, from which came water to irrigate the wet rice fields. Each year an elder brother failed to invite his married younger sister to the *i batsi* [rice-

10. According to UEMATSU (1971, p. 206), this is found in the *Miyako Shinden*.

cake] ritual...and instead gave her rice bran or crushed grains of rice. Becoming angry, the younger sister threw the hill to Kobama Island by scooping it up in her paddle used for kneading boiled sweet potato dough. Since then there has been no irrigation water available on Taketomi, while Kobama Island has been favored with water issuing from its central well-forested hill.

(MABUCHI 1964, p. 81)

Women are considered to be born with spiritual power, as is shown in another legend from Taketomi Island, in which a five-year-old sister is possessed by a deity and blesses a toy boat her seven-year-old brother had built (NAKAIMA 1984, pp. 19–21).

Most of these legends center on the sister's protection of her brother on his seafaring journeys, most likely on missions initiated by the king to trade in China and Southeast Asia. They also give a hint as to why the sister was preferred to other female relatives, such as the wife or mother. Just as the female deity of Bisshi Utaki on Miyako was working on her loom, in most legends the sisters, who have to save their brothers from drowning, drowse off while weaving and send their souls to save their kin. However, their mothers wake them abruptly and disturb the mission, which results in only one brother of two, or in some cases either the woman's father or her brother, being rescued whereas the other is left to die (KOJIMA 1983, pp. 428–36). In fact, sleepy weavers would not have been uncommon, considering the heavy work load of a woman during the *nintōzei* period. Women worked in the fields during the day and spent the evening hours at the loom to produce the cloth which was, together with rice, part of the tax burden payable to the Lord of Satsuma.

A song from Kumejima illustrates what happens when a man prefers his wife over his sister (KOJIMA 1983, p. 435). A childless couple and the man's sister travel together by ship. On their way home the man feels that his sister is in the way and throws her overboard in order to carry on the journey with his wife alone. His sister is enraged and curses the boat, causing it to sink immediately. This is a good example of black magic, but the song also endorses the patrilineal ideology that appeared later: A sister belongs to the same clan as her brother while his wife is a member of a different clan.

But what if a man has no sisters? Can any other female relatives take on the duties of an *onarigami* or is a sisterless man deprived from spiritual protection? The answers to these questions can differ depending on the various regions of the Ryūkyūan Archipelago, but an excellent example of possibilities can be found in a paper by UEMATSU Akashi (1971, pp. 198–200). Here she introduced quantitative material from two villages in Northern Okinawa, Dana on the island of Iheya and Bise on Motobu Peninsula, on the relationship between an *onarigami* and the relative she protects and for whom she performs rites. In both villages most relationships of that kind were between a sister and her

brother (Dana 82.6 percent, Bise 60.3 percent). However the surrogate relationships show marked differences. In Bise the patrilineal parallel cousin (father's brother's daughter) is favored over all the other female relatives including matrilineal cousins, mother, patrilineal aunt (father's sister), wife, and even patrilineal parallel cousins once removed. In Dana, however, the role is taken on most often by a man's wife (6.5 percent), followed by the patrilineal parallel cousin (4.3 percent). Mother, sister-in-law, and grandmother each make up only 2.2 percent of the *onarigami* surveyed in Dana. The latter two were not to be found in Bise at all, while in Dana there were no examples of matrilineal relatives. Of course these patterns may very well depend to a high degree on who is available, as we will have to take into account the impact of changes in mobility and attitude towards traditional religion.

KAWAHASHI (1992, p. viii) relates a case in which a wife and mother not only regularly prays for the health of her husband and children, but also performs healing rituals for them in the case of sickness or injury. However, she might very well be an exception, as she is also a rather high ranking priestess within the local village ritual organization. Another case of women praying for their husbands and children, which is even integrated into the official initiation rites for *onarigami*—the only such rites to be found in Okinawa until 1978—is that of Kudaka Island. The Izaihō rites only take place once every twelve years and initiate all the young women who were born on Kudaka, are married to local men, and are living on the island into the village ritual organization, which is also an age group system.<sup>11</sup> The hymn sung during the rite in which the newly initiated *onarigami* shares a bowl of food with her eldest brother does stress the sister-brother relationship with the following words (TAKAHASHI 1991, p. 200):

*Tāmāgāe nū ūbūgānī, ūrittmōchī*  
*īshikīyātō yutikīshi*

The changed great goddess descends,  
she is united with her brothers.

However, in a number of other songs to be sung during other parts of the *Izaihō*, the sister-brother relationship goes unmentioned while husbands and sons are blessed (SAKURAI 1979, pp. 175–76; 184–85; 189; 194; 205; 208; 211):

*fusati bukui uni unji bukui*

Blessing the husband, blessing the children.

11. In 1990 the cult group members decided to discontinue the rite because there were no eligible young women in the age group between thirty and forty-one to be initiated. All woman of this age group residing on the island at that time had not been born there, and therefore no one could be initiated into the cult group.

These findings hint at the very strong possibility that originally wives and mothers were involved to a much higher degree in religious rituals than sisters. The data suggests that the sister-brother relationship became more and more important under the influence of state formation and the introduction of the patrilineal clan ideology from the seventeenth century onward. This would also account for the important role of sisters of the head of the village's founding family as village priestess in the early days of Ryūkyū. This served as a model for brothers of other priestesses' lineages becoming members of the village ritual organizations and attendants to the villages' hearth deities, such as in the villages of Izena, Nakata, Shomi, and Jitchaku on the island of Izena in later times (IZENA SON SHI HENSHŪ IINKAI 1989, vol. 2, pp. 277–300).

#### *Women in Modern Twentieth-Century Okinawa*

The above illustrates how women made up a hierarchy of priestesses consisting of several levels from the household to the state and the kind of perception of the role women play in this society. The heyday of this *norō* system—as it is widely called—was during the sixteenth century, but after the annexation by the fief of Satsuma and subsequent strengthening of Confucian state policies the power of the state priestesses was gradually reduced, while “shamanism” was officially banned as superstition. As early as 1611, Article Three of the Fifteen Articles Decree dictated by Satsuma ruled that women were no longer eligible for state offices, especially if the offices were accompanied by land rights. Furthermore, a highly effective system of *zaiban* 在番 officials was introduced by 1640, representing the state on every inhabited island. The strong links between the court and the outlying islands, which had been effected through the hierarchy of the state priestesses, was now transferred into the male sphere. The high ranking priestesses were gradually stripped of their functions and rights. In 1667 it was decreed that the regional priestesses of Yaeyama and Miyako (*ufu an*) would no longer travel to Shuri on important occasions, such as the enthronement of a new king. Instead they would be represented by a male official. The gifts they formerly received directly from the king on such occasions continued to be handed over to them at the local offices until 1768, when they were excluded even from these formalities and the gifts were delivered to their homes (MIYAGI 1979, p. 150).

In the nineteenth century the state religion was only a shadow of its former self but still functioned quite well. Another and much stronger break came with the land reform of 1903, when, after the demise of the kingdom and integration of the Ryūkyūs into the state of Japan as Okinawa Prefecture, the land became property of patrilineally organized families. This deprived the village priestesses of their income. The higher echelons of the priestesses' hierarchy had already broken down when the kingdom was converted first into a *han* (fief) and then

into the prefecture of Okinawa at the beginning of the Meiji Era. Yet the *nuru*, *nīgan*, and *chikasa* continued to fulfill their religious duties, and will continue to do so as long as there are women eligible and willing to take on the duties.

World War II, with its high toll on civilian lives, also diminished the numbers of the priestesses dramatically. Since then Christian and Buddhist missionaries have also attracted the interest of younger women (and men) from the indigenous religion. Active participation in the village ritual organizations seems to be on the wane. My survey on village ritual organization members on Hateruma Island in 1992 revealed that at least for that island, only a few women aged sixty and older were still active. In these village ritual organizations of the five villages of Hateruma, only the role of the priestess remained clearly defined. Other special roles had already vanished by the 1980s when OUWEHAND (1985) conducted his thorough fieldwork. However, I also witnessed two initiations of women aged from their mid-forties to mid-sixties into the village ritual organization of a mountain village in northern Okinawa during the first half of the 1990s. The extent to which the indigenous religion is kept alive is dependant on the village and the individual inhabitants. The more colorful festivals like the Tanetori Festival of Taketomi will certainly survive, even if in the course of time the truly religious parts may die out for lack of qualified priestesses. With this current state of affairs in mind, I would like to look critically at some recent publications on the subject.

My experience and findings, outlined above, seem to be antithetical to what some other scholars nowadays perceive. Susan Sered's experiences during her year-long fieldwork on the island of Henza, east of mainland Okinawa in the 1990s are summarized and discussed in her book *Women of the Sacred Groves*,<sup>12</sup> where she concludes: "it is the absence of gender as a significant symbolic category, more than the absence of gender as pragmatic category, that reflects, reinforces, and grows out of women's religious pre-eminence in Henza" (SERED 1999, p. 229). However, her conclusions are based more on some remarks by modern inhabitants of an island characterized by being disrupted from traditional life than by thorough historical studies, which she even explicitly considers irrelevant to gender studies, although she does take up vague references informants make to historical incidents, such as a king visiting the island and fathering children with local women who then became the ancestors of a certain clan (SERED 1999, p. 57). As we have seen before, this kind of information is important when doing research on women and religion in Okinawa. More thorough investigation into the matter would have made clear that the king

12. For reviews, see WACKER 2001b and KAWAHASHI 2000. More favorable comments can be found in HARDACRE 2000 and KREINER 2000–2001, pp. 6–8. There also was a "A Declaration of Concern" about Sered's book, signed by Western, Japanese and Okinawan scholars alike, kindly published by Professor Taira Kōji in *The Ryukyuanist* No. 54, Winter 2001–2002, p. 5.

referred to was none other than King Shō En (1415–1476) (HIGA 1992), the founder of the second Shō Dynasty who, before ascending to the throne in 1470 wandered over the island of Okinawa as he made his way from his birthplace on the island of Izena to the then capital Urasoe.

Higa Chōshin lists the Henza *noro* as offspring of King Shō En. Although it was only during the reign of his son, Shō Shin (1465–1526, coronation 1477) that the state religion was installed, Miyagi and Nakama state in their research materials (MIYAGI, NAKAYAMA, and TOMIMURA 1990), that the first Henza *noro* had been a concubine to Shō En. Sered could have discovered more about this if she were able to speak the Japanese language more fluently and read Japanese material on traditional culture, a language skill the usefulness of which she explicitly denies (SERED 1999, p. 20–21). She even notes without questioning the origins of this arrangement particular to this one priestess: "...[the fact that] the *noro* inherits her position matrilineally means that villagers continue to recognize the matrilineal descent principle, thus preventing the institutionalization of pure patrilineality" (SERED 1999, p. 81). However, as we have seen above, matrilineal descent never was the rule for Ryūkyūan society, but where it was to be found it had its origin in a connection with the court.

It is common knowledge, however, that culture is not stable and from the historical outline presented above, we can imagine that quite a few of the characteristic phenomena witnessed during fieldwork in the late twentieth century might be understood more easily if local history were taken into consideration.

Even the data Sered relates contains some hints of women's role as *onarigami* on Henza, such as "The Tale of the Ashtray Rock":

In the ocean to the west of Henza Island there was a huge rock shaped like an ashtray. One time samurai from the mainland came and wanted to have a war here. They had heard that there was someone here named Henza Hatara (lit. Strong Man Henza), who is so strong that he can carry an ito (large measure) of rice as far as Naha (the capital). Because he was so strong, they said, "Let's go fight him." So they came here. Henza Hatara had a younger sister, and those men asked her, "Is Henza Hatara home?" but he was in China on business. She said, "What are you here for?" They said, "In Okinawa there is no one stronger than Henza Hatara, and the three of us want to fight him." The sister said, "Just a minute, why don't you rest and have a smoke." And she brought that big ashtray-shaped rock and put it in front of them. They asked her, "Is your brother stronger than you?" "Yes, he is stronger than me." And those three people thought to themselves, "Even the sister who is a woman is strong, so Henza Hatara must be very strong." And so they said sayonara and left. The ashtray rock is big, made of heavy land rock, not of light ocean rock. Usually people couldn't carry it, but she carried it. The men came here to

make a war but got scared because the woman who carried the rock was so strong. (SERED 1999, p. 121)

This is clearly a story relating how a sister protected not only her brother but also the island from war. Another legend Sered summarises clearly demonstrates the sister's (*onarigami*'s) power to curse her brother:

[F]oreign noblemen single out one village woman for her beauty and thereby incite the most serious social rupture imaginable—her brothers take her out to a rock in the ocean and leave her there to drown. Before she dies, she announces that all of the children born into their houses will be ugly.

(SERED 1999, pp. 122–23)

Both legends clearly mention the sister-brother relationship, the sister protecting her brother or cursing him, but Sered—having dismissed the relevance of this relationship—cannot but interpret them as evidence of the cultural importance of the absence of men, which in turn is the basis for her statements in a section entitled “Are Men the Boss” where she even admits: “Clearly not in the economic sphere, where women dominate local commerce and have provided most of their family’s food.... Clearly not in the social sphere, where more women than men engage in communal interactions. Clearly not in the religious sphere where women are the acknowledged leaders” (SERED 1999, p. 89).

In some of her comments Sered even contradicts her conclusions herself, as when she states: “it does seem that being a clan *kaminchu* [a priestess] should be viewed as a life stage for a significant portion of Henza’s women. This life stage...brings a certain amount of status and economic resources” (SERED 1999, p. 88).

All in all, Sered’s shallow understanding of Okinawan culture and religion, 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. So this book neither contributes new insights on the important role women play in Okinawan religion even today nor does it solve the question in a satisfactory manner whether that role is gender-based or not. While Sered denies the meaning of gender in the women’s dominant role in religion, her data clearly speaks for a meaningful concept of gender in *Ryūkyūan* and modern Okinawan society.

A similar approach is used by Yoshinari concerning the historical age of rites and beliefs without making much reference to the history of the kingdom of *Ryūkyū*. He discusses the religious sociology while never touching on the special status Kudaka Island had within the *noro* hierarchy being directly governed by the highest ranking priestess (*chifijin*). To him the male age group organization implies the fishermen’s organization as it became in modern times. But what about the historical fact that the men of Kudaka used to sail the tribute

ships to China and trade ships to other places of Southeast Asia? Deep sea fishing as a main source of income only started in the Meiji Era, as YOSHINARI (2001, p. 176), correctly quoting Tanigawa, states. However he ignores the historical fact that fishing originally occurred in the lagoons and just outside of the coral reef (NAKAMURA 1964, pp. 67–68), which was not nearly as dangerous as the involvement in overseas trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The belief in *onarigami* originally had very little to do with protecting the men while pursuing the trade of deep sea fishing, but can certainly be linked to the flourishing overseas trade.

All the rites Yoshinari investigates to prove his theory that female predominance in religion is not a basic and old element of Okinawan culture contain clear signs of being influenced by royal and Confucian ideology. The *usudēku* dancing, usually performed by women (*shinugu* in Ada, *unjami* in Aha, *yōkabī* ritual on Kudaka), is part of the entertainment provided for visiting officials from Shuri, just like the dancing and theatrical performances on the third and fourth day of the Tanetori Festival on Taketomi Island. *Usudēku* dancing by men during the *tēragami* ritual on Kudaka is unique and demonstrates the odd character of the rites themselves. Another strange point of this ritual is the way the gods are welcomed into the village: On Kudaka it is the god of the Dragon Palace (O. *Ryūgū shin* 竜宮神)—not a traditional deity of Ryūkyūan religion—who is escorted by the male leaders of the male age group organization (*sōruiganashī*) from a holy grove, a religious sanctuary that traditionally only women are allowed to enter during ritual times. At Shinugu in Ada the god Amamikyo—the ancestor of the royal house—is escorted by the men from the hills to the village in the morning, but one of the afternoon rites enacts ritual rowing performed by the village men on land using a long log with several ropes attached to it, which then is crashed three times into the thatched roof of the village shrine (O. *asagi*).<sup>13</sup>

Looking more closely at the rituals Yoshinari describes as proof that the belief in *onarigami* is not part of the basic Okinawan worldview, we discover the opposite: The *onarigami* is the basis on which the state religion with its hierarchy of priestesses was built in the sixteenth century. Its main religious leaders are the so-called *kaminchū* (literally “holy people”) which comprise *noro*, *negami* (根神), and *nichū* (根人) but not the *sōruiganashī*, who are only to be found on Kudaka. Their ritual function and rites certainly were grafted onto the religious system quite late in history, perhaps in an attempt to gain protection directly from a god and no longer have to rely on female relatives, which comes close to making the belief in *onarigami* unnecessary and outdated. This could well have happened in the eighteenth century under the growing

13. Author's unpublished fieldnotes, Aug. 1995.



influence of Confucian ideas and the de facto rule of Satsuma on the southern tip of Kyushu. The historical records clearly show how the political powers of women were gradually reduced (MIYAGI 1979, p. 150), while men were entrusted more and more with religious activities, for example, those of the *sōruiganashī* of Kudaka. However, the examples Yoshinari uses to deduce his theory are rather peculiar, as Kudaka has a closer ritual link to the royal family and state religion than other places in the Ryūkyūan archipelago.

The state religion under the leadership of the priestesses still continued to function until the end of the kingdom in 1873, but with the death of the last generation of *nīgan*, *chikasa*, and *noro* it seems now to be dying out. However, modern Okinawan women know about their important historical roles as religious specialists supporting the politics of the men. During the age of the Ryūkyūan Kingdom, they were an important factor in uniting the archipelago, so that we can justly call this an era of dual rule. Men were active in overseas trade and foreign politics, while women backed their politics through their religious activities. After World War II many of the younger people joined Buddhism or Christianity. Compared to a woman's social and political power during the kingdom of Ryūkyū, the situation under American rule (1945–1972) and Japanese rule continues the trends started under Satsuma rule (1609–1873). Like other women throughout the world they were instrumental in rebuilding society after the war and still work actively in the agricultural and tourism sectors, but their voices have rarely been heard in political and economic discussions. Not all women accept this role with a shrug of their shoulders. After all, women as wives and mothers, and as workers, have concerns for not only their own wellbeing, but also for those of their families, companies, and communities. They want to voice their concerns and help to build a peaceful society, in which the different needs of all members are respected.

One way that Okinawan women have found to express their views and needs originated in the Unai Festival (literally “Women’s Festival”), which was first held in 1985 after a group of women working in the field of mass media attended the Third World’s Women’s Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya. Very inspired by the workshops and discussions, they returned to Okinawa and in November that year they organized the First Unai Festival with workshops and exhibitions of various women’s organizations in Naha. Today this festival has a tradition and the organizing committee is supported by the City of Naha and the Okinawa Times Publishing Company. So the spiritual strength and indirect political power of the *onarigami* now has found a modern form under a similar name: *Unai* is no longer a purely religious power, but a secular one that in 1987 managed to get a female representative elected into the council of the city of Naha (YUI 2002, pp. 5–7).

In other areas of Okinawa female religious specialists take the lead in female groups—as the memories of the belief in *onarigami* linger on—and rally, for

example, against plans for a military base in the vicinity of their homes, as in Nago and surrounding villages like Henoko (compare INOUE 2002, p. 254) in their preparations for the local vote in 1997.

Contrary to the idea of some feminist scholars, it is not true that women are always oppressed in patrilineal societies. Nor is the belief in *onarigami* a male invention to serve some political purpose, as Yoshinari suggests. The case of historical Okinawa—the kingdom of Ryūkyū with its state religion led by women—is a good example of men and women building together a prosperous society without one sex completely dominating the other. The aim of the Unai Festival is precisely this arrangement of two complementary male and female areas in society, which are mutually dependent on the other in fulfilling their respective social roles for their own welfare. This is more than just a traditional division of labor: both men and women were able to use power—spiritual power in the case of women—to influence other people. Ryūkyūan traditional society is a good example of what social anthropologists call an egalitarian society. When the power of men was strengthened while that of women was reduced in the seventeenth century, that is, the balance between the powers of the sexes began tipping toward the male side, the prosperity of Ryūkyū declined, and nowadays it has come to be the poorest prefecture of Japan, fighting for a little more autonomy from the central government in Tokyo, an area with an historically different society. In the annual Unai Festival the spirit of *onarigami* still lives on! Reviving their traditional identity as *onarigami* in the modern context is the Okinawan way to equal opportunities.

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