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Spatial Characterization of Human Temporality in the Ryūkyūs

Introduction

Scholars dealing with the traditional folk culture of Japan, and in particular with problems of cosmological representations, seldom omit reference to the Namei Shotō (Southwestern Archipelago), commonly known as the Ryūkyū Islands—whether on a comparative basis, or in search of a past that has been preserved. The degree of cultural kinship between mainland Japan and the Ryūkyūs is a moot point which I will not tackle in this paper. Let it just be said, however, that in the domain of cosmology, has been emphasised by numerous authors (see, for instance, Ouwehand 1964: 85 ff.), there are obvious links between the concepts found in both places of a ‘far-away’ land (land of the dead, moku, or land of the primeval deities, ne no kuni, as known in mainland Japan, and arai-kamai, as known in Okinawa), or between the various ritual traditions of visiting deities (marebite) related to those concepts.1

Though traditional Ryūkyūan culture and society have slowly vanished for many decades, one is nevertheless left with a complex and diversified picture of ancient cosmologies. In this respect, it is worth noticing that rites appear to last longer than explicit beliefs and representations, so that, when memories fail, the observation of rites may still provide relevant information about bygone times.

1. For a parallel with the tradition of visiting deities on mainland Japan see Laurence Cailler’s discussion of the Ricefield God (in the present volume).

In connection with the bare fact of the geographical isolation of these islands, the weak influence of organized Buddhism surely accounts for the rather well-integrated aspect of village cosmologies in the Ryūkyūs, as recorded during the present century. Yet on the whole, discrepancies between local concepts, even on the same island, should not be underestimated. Here one cannot neglect to mention the name of Mabuchi Tōichi, whose comparative analysis of local traditions has proved very stimulating (Mabuchi 1968, 1980).

However, the subject I will be dealing with departs slightly from the usual approach to the relationship between space (i.e. symbolic orientations) and time (i.e. annual rites) in cosmologies. Here, I wish to restrict myself to some aspects of the way in which human temporality is figured in space—or, rather, ‘characterised’ since one is not dealing simply with a material space but rather with space that is symbolically oriented also. The general intention of this paper can be summarized by indicating that it gives support, in my view, to Durkheim and Meuss’s statement (1969: 74) that ‘La considération des temps est parallèle à celle des espaces’.

I will mainly be making use of data collected on Tarama Island during a stay of sixteen months (from March 1978 to July 1979). This small, round island, which is only twenty square kilometres in area, is located midway between Miyako Island and the north-east and Ishigaki Island to the south-west. It has received influences from both regions. Tarama is a one-village island, with clustered dwellings; its population, which has been steadily decreasing since the war, now falls below 2,000.

I will successively consider observances occurring on three levels of space: inside the domestic unit, in the neighbourhood, and in the village—or island—taken as a whole.

From Birth Onwards

Briefly, as can quite commonly be seen all over the Ryūkyūs, houses (kara, 納) in Tarama have a quadrilateral shape with two main front rooms. Most frequently—according to folk orientations—they face south (or sometimes east), but in reality they face south-south-west. Outside, the yard of the house is surrounded by a stone wall which also opens towards the south. The kitchen stands on the west side of the house, sometimes as a separate building. Due to its nature and function, it is essentially a women’s place, where the fire-deity is honoured (fū su kamī, 夫の神). Guests (usually male) are entertained in the first and most honorific room, on the east side of the house (most often the greatest
dignity seems to be attached to the north-east corner, but in Tarama there is some ambiguity between the north-east and south-east corners). Further to the west, the second room is used for meals and daily activities. When a house has been inhabited for several generations, there is its own altar for ancestor worship, built in the back wall of the second room. Outside, located in the north-west corner of the yard, there is a pigsty and a privy, which formerly had a ritual significance with regard to purification and fecundity.

From a static viewpoint, the Ryūkyūan house is a sort of microcosm which reproduces in the course of everyday life the cosmic hierarchy between east and west: the east side is superior (wa, in Tarama dialect) to the west side (stā). Heat, sunlight and masculinity are the main attributes of the east side, and their opposites—humidity, darkness and femininity—are those of the west side. From a dynamic viewpoint—that is to say, taking into account the meaning of certain rituals—females and the fire deity connect the west side of the house compound to the east side of the cosmos, displaying an instance of hierarchical reversal. Under Taoist influence the fire deity is conceived of as a go-between, reporting, at least once a year, near the end of the last month, the deeds of humans to the ‘deities of Heaven’ (tin nu kam, 天の神), thus ensuring protection to the household. Moreover, the fire deity seems to be akin to the primeval deities belonging to the ‘far-away land’ on the east side (for details, see Beillevaire 1982). Until recently, the bringing forth of a child took place at the rear of the kitchen. The placenta was buried behind the house, in the north-west corner. In Tarama, four days afterwards, occurred a ceremony (fugu wusu, Japanese kyūjūkki) for the selection of a name for the new-born child (yūrabi nā, 腹名, or ‘domestic name’). I cannot here go into all the details of this ceremony, but the process of selection was of a divinatory kind, where first the fire deity, then the ancestors, would be asked to express their preference. On the same day, the mother carried the baby in her arms through the house and out into the yard through the door on the east side. There, she introduced her baby to the sun deity (uputeda gana). One may think of this quick and early move from west to east as an epitome of a person’s destiny from birth to ancestor-hood or kam-hood. This blunt statement calls for an explanation. But first, a few words are needed about what Lebra (1966) termed the ‘life-sustaining human spirit’ (mabou in Okinawa). In Tarama village this kind of ‘soul’ or vital principle, akin to the Japanese tama or tamashiki, is honoured, or taken care of, on a small altar with an incense-burner located in the first room (in traditional houses on Tarama there are very few tokonoma, viz. the slightly raised ‘sacred dais’ commonly found in Japanese country houses). It is called mabou, but also referred to in conversations as manmori, or ‘protective kami’. The mabou comes to inhabit the body for life, and leaves it at the moment of death. There seems to be a closer relationship between the head of the house and the mabou than with other members of the domestic unit.

Two main eschatological opinions, loosely related, coexist among Tarama islanders. One is the belief in the reincarnation of a deceased person whose name has been given to a descendant of either sex in the male line (that is, the mabou is supposed to be reincarnated). The other possibility is for an ancestor to merge eventually with the kami (deities) of the cosmos who abide in ‘Heaven’ (tan), or more precisely on the horizon towards the south-east, a place commonly called nira-kara on other islands. In Tarama, however, the nira-kara, or nika in local dialect, is seen as a dreadful place located deep beneath the surface of the island and inhabited by kami whose function makes them reminiscent of the Greek nòtos. According to the opinion of some villagers, the ‘spirit’ of people who have just died would remain there for a short while during the liminal stage of funerary rituals.

The ‘career’ of an ancestor starts from the day of the funeral. The corpse lies in front of the altar for ancestor worship, or kamidana (神棚, also called butsudan). On that day, that is, the west side of the house is laden with pollution, and food for the participants has to be conveyed out of the house from the kitchen to re-enter the house via the first room. In Tarama it is customary to put under the pillow of the deceased a small bag containing ashes taken from the incense-burner of the mabou altar. The coffin is carried outside into the yard through the inferior side of the entrance-way (the opening in the surrounding wall, being barred by a recessed wall [itsupei], is divided in two ways—east and west, superior and inferior). From that day on, the deceased is remembered by means of a tablet (ipvs, 神牌) on the kamidana, and by a long series of rites. The mabou of the dead is sometimes deemed to reside in the tablet itself. Usually thirty-three years after the burial (though this may vary a great deal), a last rite (nyu ninki, 大祭) is held, implying the ‘deification’ of the ancestor—literally his elevation to the status of kami, or ubudatti (大祭) (although in fact the word kami is used for younger ancestors too). The tablet is then destroyed, or the name of the ancestor simply removed. However, these now anonymous kami-ancestors are still revered on the kamidana, but on the right side (facing it)—that is, towards the east, in a special part with a separate incense-burner (for a similar observation, see Newell 1960). Elsewhere in the Ryūkyūs, a similar place for deceased ancestors is found in the first room. The existence of an ubudatti section of the ancestral altar bears witness to the fact that a house has reached the status of ‘stem-house’, or yō musu (顕尊; musu yō on Okinawa, a term with sociological implications somewhat different from the Japanese honke).

Much older ancestors, termed suzgam (Japanese sujigami), are given particular attention in some houseyards. Their altar is situated in the eastern part, most often in the north-east corner. These ancestors are sometimes said to be the founders of a domestic line of so-called shika, or people of ‘gentry’ status

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3. On this point see for instance Yoshida’s description of the kamidana ritual on Tokunoshima (in the present volume).

4. This hierarchical scheme opposing east and west exerts a wide influence on the behavior of villagers. For instance, three days after the funeral, women and children related to the house go to the north beach and clean the soil with clothes belonging to the deceased; on their outward journey they have to take a western (stā) path (that is, western in relation to the village), whereas they come back home on an eastern (adō) path.
It is difficult to check this assertion, because former shizuka were surprisingly numerous in Tarama (over 50%, probably illegitimate descendants of court officials sent on duty or exiled on the island). What remains beyond doubt is the seniority of these houses (大屋根, upa yu muta). Whether or not a privilege of status—and as a consequence of deeper genealogical memory—these wazgam are granted power of protection against disease, sterility, and malevolent spirits.

In Miyako, according to the Dictionary of Okinawan Cultural History (Maeda, Misumi and Mzaamoto 1972: 39), protective yashikihami, or ‘deities of the residential site’, termed tokulgan or tokunushii, are also honoured in the north-east corner of the houseyard (associated with the ‘direction of the tiger’, tsara na pa, Japanese tora no b, as derived from the Chinese zodiac). Evidence of the transformation of ancestors into yashikihami can be found in several places in mainland Japan (for an example from Miyazaki prefecture see Yonenura 1976: 180). In Tarama the protective power of wazgams is clearly exemplified when a house is situated along the north-west corner of a cross-roads. In this situation the south-east corner of the yard of the house becomes a weak point through which there can enter the sacred but also deleterious energy of the yu nusu (owner), originating from far away in the ‘horse direction’ (午の方, uma na pa); entry to this part of the yard thus has to be prohibited. However, if the house is entitled to have an wazgam altar, it is placed in the south-east corner, and its protective power removes the prohibition on the use of the area.

To summarize, in opposition to the cosmic life originating from the east (or also from the south-east, according to folk orientations in Tarama; see Beillevaire 1982), which is the home of the primeval deities, human life starts from the west, on a mundane level. However, during a person’s lifetime, his or her vital principle belongs to the eastern part of the house. Death is followed by a movement back to the west, but gradually the ancestor, unless reborn, moves east again, and tends to merge with the cosmic kami.

5. Literally translated, yu nusu means ‘master of the yu’. According to Origuchi Shinobu, the early meaning of yu (Japanese yu, as in tokyu) was ‘grain harvest’, ‘grain’ (see Ouechand 194: 88). Each year, during the Susan Upinaka festival, the yu nusu visits the realm of humans, bringing renewed fertility and prosperity.

6. The agete house of priestesses mentioned by Yoshida Teijo in his paper on Tokushinmihima (in the present volume) shows another instance of the symbolic superiority of the east side in the ordering of houses.
are nowadays administrative sub-units or aza. This division runs right across the island territory, north and south. Each aza consists of four buraku or wards. It should also be added that there are six main shrines (utaiki, Japanese utake) for the whole community. Although in the course of ordinary life the symbolic meaning of this bipartite division is not so overt as in other villages of the southern Ryukyu (Sakishima), it nevertheless reveals itself in certain ritual contexts, such as the Sutsu Upunaka and the Hachigatsu Odori festivals, at which times the west side of the village stands as primary and feminine, the east side as secondary and masculine.

The festival of the Sutsu (or Shitsu) Upunaka is the climax of the annual ritual cycle, and marks the renewal of the agricultural year. It is held around the end of May, on the 'water-days' of the Chinese calendar—formerly when the millet harvest was completed. The word sutsu (善), cognate with sutsu in modern Japanese, conveys the meaning of a transition or change between two seasons (and of a bamboo knot also). Upunaka (大村) means 'big', or literally 'great middle', also referring to the turning of the year. The word shitsu is not uncommonly used in the Ishigaki area as a term for festivals with a similar general significance, but with very different ritual proceedings.

On the second and most important day of this festival, the priestesses of the community (詔, tsukata) proceed from west to east, in the southern outskirts of the village. On sites revered by tradition are set up four ceremonial stands, each belonging to a pair of wards (buraku). The first site, Nagashigawa, from where the procession of the priestesses starts, obviously possesses more prestige than the other three sites. In fact, the first site is related to the two westernmost wards of the oldest part of the village. While they walk from one camp to the next, the priestesses ask for the fertility power (男ます) to come down and bless the earth. In the four camps, all the ceremonial arrangements face east or south, save for the last ceremony on the third day, when the participants turn to the west. At that time, the secular order is reinstated and malevolent spirits warded off. During the ceremonies that are held at each camp on the second day, as well as on the route between these camps, the leading priestess is always the one in charge of the village shrine, called Ungusuku Usaki, where the tutelary hero of the whole community is worshipped. This half-legendary, half-historical character is worthy of some further remarks, but some enlargement of the context is needed first.

The myth of origin of the Tarama islanders relates the story of a brother and a sister who, very long ago, luckily escaped a tidal wave that drowned all the other villagers. The brother and the sister innocently became husband and wife, and after some initial failures begat the forebears of the present-day villagers. This story is but one version of a mythic theme widely found in the Austronesian area. Records of the same myth have been made elsewhere in the Ryukyu, especially on the island of Hateruma where, in a manner more conspicuous than in Tarama, the myth frames the local symbolic landscape (and particularly the bipartite division; for a detailed analysis see Suzuki 1977: 26–8). In Tarama, this myth is called the Bunaze Myth, from the word bunae, meaning 'sister'.

The safe retreat that prevented the Bunaze couple from being drowned is a low hill located to the west of the village. Within a short distance from there, just on the boundary of the dwelling area, can now be seen a small sanctuary dedicated to the couple; it is deemed propitious against sterility.

After this rapid encounter with mythical beings, let us pass to the second act of local history—associated with the famous (and better attested) character called Ntabaru Shungun. The villagers say Ntabaru came from Amagawa (Ama well), the oldest part of the village, but in fact he might have been the son of an official dispatched from Miyako Island. Around the year 1500 Ntabaru, still in his teens, killed seven hooligans of the village. Then, by means of trickery and strength, he carried out the political unification of Tarama Island (prior to that time there had been three separate clusters of habitations). But the greatest feat in Ntabaru's eventful career took place when he sided with Nakasone from Miyako, and helped suppress the rebellion fomented on Yonaguni Island under the aegis of a local chief, Ustura. The victory substantially contributed to ensuring the hegemony of the Kingdom of Shuri over all the Ryukyu Islands, and Ntabar received the title of Tuyume as a reward for his services. (The Kingdom of Shuri, on Okinawa Island, had previously been known as the Middle Kingdom, before it gradually superseded the two rival kingdoms on the same island.)

This brief historical outline will be sufficient to further an understanding of the symbolic setting. As mentioned above, Ntabaru was living near Amagawa, in the western and dominant part of the inhabited area. Ntabaru's presumed descendants share in their first name the character shun (春, meaning 'spring'), and thereby form the Shun Uzu (the Shun 'clan'), the largest aza in Tarama. Nowadays, they still maintain special links with the western half of the village, and form a significantly higher proportion of the villagers who reside there. To that side also belong the two main shrines (utaiki) dedicated to Ntabar. The first and oldest shrine has been previously mentioned in connection with the Sutsu Upunaka festival. The second, called Tarama Jinja, was built at the beginning of this century, under the pressure of the growing nationalist ideology that favoured the unification of Shinto shrines. It is used both as an ordinary utaki for

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7. It is worth noting that the rite of 'rejuvenating water', clearly connected with the renewal of the year, still occurs in Tarama during the Sutsu Upunaka, while it takes place as the lunar New Year in the main island of Okinawa.

8. In the Ryukyu, sisters are supposed to be endowed with a protective spiritual power over their brothers' destiny, a power which is termed mairi (mari and ban are the same word). However, in Miyako and Tarama this attribute nowadays seems to be lacking, and the interpretation of past data is a matter of discussion. Anyway, in Tarama as indeed throughout the Ryukyu women play the foremost part in religious activities. This notable feature of Ryukyu culture first pervaded court life as well as peasant life, but from the seventeenth century is recorded at court under the pressure of Confucian ideals.

9. Actually there is a genealogy showing how certain domestic lines branched off from some remote scion of Ntabaru in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.
parishioners living in the western wards and, on official occasions, as a shrine representative of all the villagers. For this purpose, the memory of Ntabaru was reactivated by electing housewives from the domestic line of his most direct descendents (as claimed by the villagers) to be the priestesses in charge of this shrine. But yet another small sanctuary, located to the west, bears Ntbaru’s name. It is in the surroundings of this sanctuary, called Ntabaru Ugan, that each year, in autumn, there commence the other great festival, gathering together the whole village. This festival, the Hachigatsu Odori, is a dramatic and colourful performance relating the surrender of the local chiefs in the southern Ryūkyūs. In olden times, the festival was held when the task of collecting taxes had been completed.

The festival lasts three days. On the first day, it takes place in Ntabaru I’gan.10 On the second day, it is continued in the eastern part of the village, in a place where the house of Ntabaru’s concubine is said to have been located. On the final day, the festival is performed simultaneously in both places. Despite its more profane appearance, the general signification of the Hachigatsu Odori, like the Sutsu Upunaka, is to call for abundance and prosperity. In this context too, the fact that the festival is started on the first day by villagers from the west side is definitely considered a token of its historical and ritual pre-eminence. People think of this side as the muta (母) side—the root or stem-side—of Tarama village. It should also be observed that the shishi (獅子, ’lion’), performed at the start and close of each day’s performance, is female on the west and male on the east.

What can be concluded from this cursory presentation of ritual organization on Tarama Island?

First—although this is hardly a discovery in the Ryūkyūan context—the east–west axis is of the utmost importance for the annual renewal of fertility. On Tarama, it manifests itself during the Sutsu Upunaka as a procession, leading village representatives from west to east, and invoking the participation of every ward and shrine. The complementary division between east and west also finds expression in the Hachigatsu Odori. In both cases, the west side draws prestige from initiating the festival. A comparable procession, welcoming the  yii ( Tits, jāngai) and moving from west to east, can also be observed on Taketomi islet, near Ishigaki (Ishigaki 1976: 81 ff.). But in many other villages the east–west duality operates by means of a fixed context between representatives of each side of the village (a boat-race or a tug-of-war). Most frequently, the west side has to be the winning side. By this symbolic victory, the west side acts on behalf of all the villagers as a receiver or purveyor of the fertility and prosperity annually bestowed by the deities from the outer world (usually the ‘far-away land’ to the east). Though this is without any doubt the dominant spatial perspective in Ryūkyūan culture, I am aware that data from other places are not always perfectly consistent with this schema: in practice, it is necessary to pay attention to the local topography (see Mabuchi 1968).11 Nevertheless, my purpose here is restricted to the linking of Tarama’s specific customs with the broad outline of Ryūkyūan concepts of space.

Secondly, the data from Tarama indicate that the Ntabaru legend and history take root in, or coalesce with, a pre-established symbolic pattern of space. This is not the only instance of such a tendency. Related to the aforementioned rites of bisection in villages of the main island of Okinawa (the tug-of-war), it is also the case that crests of the former royal house of Shuri are borne by representatives of the west section (Muratake 1975: 307). Note that here, however, the west side occupies a dual role: it stands for the feminine and worldly (whence the presence of the royal crests), but its worldly status makes the west side the actual intermediary—like women—between this world and the outer world represented by the east side of the villages. More similar to the case of Tarama, at least two other places give evidence of the intermingling of history with spatial symbolism. In Hateruma, where the east–west polarity is quite pronounced, the children of a personage similar to Ntabaru, who happened to die while fighting for the king of Shuri, were granted the charge of three shrines as a reward for their father’s deed: following their rank of birth, the eldest brother and sister received the west shrine, the brother and sister coming next obtained the shrine situated in the middle, and the youngest pair the east shrine (Suzuki 1977: 33–4). Moreover, in Komio, on Iriomote Island, shizoku (people with ‘gentry’ status) inhabited the south section of the village (Miyara 1973: 168). Here, the village is divided between north and south. During the festival of the red and black masks (akamata-kuromata) incarnating visiting deities, the black mask of the begetter deity is an attribute of the south section, and consequently was previously worn by shizoku villagers.

Conclusion

Two notions of time are commonly held as primary and opposites (see Leach 1961): the notion of a repetitive or ‘cyclic’ time, based on periodic events such as seasons and the growth of plants, and the notion of a time that slips away, or ‘linear’ time, referring to the uniqueness of each human existence, the succession of generations from a founding ancestor, or the irreversible course of history. From this analytical standpoint, birth and death fit either with the first or the second notion, depending on whether one chooses a subjective or a collective approach. Contrary to this dualistic presentation I have tried to show how, in Ryūkyūan society, these diverse sorts of events, whether recurrent or not,

10. In the morning, before the performance starts, villagers from the west side pay a visit to the Bunaze sanctuary.

11. But, whatever its topographical expression, one should bear in mind the pervasive existence in the Ryūkyūs of the complementary opposition between male and female elements, and between village divisions.
individual or collective, all tend to be concretely expressed within a symbolically oriented and encompassing space. No original concept of time is involved here. The perception of time displayed in Ryūkūshū folk culture might rather remind us of Aristotle's concept of a substantial time linked to physical movements or changes. This 'human temporality' consists precisely of such physical changes intervening in human life or in the natural environment, but also of invisible changes in culturally significant areas such as the incorporeal existence of the ancestors. In Ryūkūshū society (though presumably other specific examples could be found elsewhere) these changes are symbolically materialized as movements within space. History too, which is related to the development of a centralized kingdom, seems to some extent to be grafted onto the traditional spatial and cosmological pattern. In short, this oriented space can be described as a kind of mnemonic device embracing in lasting form different aspects of human temporality.

REFERENCES


