

WOMEN IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE RYUKYU ISLANDS; STRUCTURE AND STATUS

Introduction

The Ryukyu Islands, having for centuries enjoyed some kind of independence, are now part of Japan. Inspired by the work of Yanagita Kunio, Japanese folklorists have started to record some of the surviving traditions of the area, not only for their intrinsic interest, but also for the light these may throw on the culture of 'mainland' Japan. Works in Western languages are relatively few, and the area has been largely neglected by social anthropologists.

The Ryukyu archipelago includes more than seventy islands, of which the largest is Okinawa. They are scattered along an arc of about 700 miles lying east of China, between Kagoshima Prefecture (in southern Japan) and Taiwan. Korea, The Philippines and island groups of the Pacific are within reach by sea. Storms and coral reefs made sea travel hazardous until recently; despite this, Okinawa's position gives it great strategic significance. While this has opened the Ryukyus to a variety of cultural influences and useful trading contacts, it has also exposed them to less benevolent incursions.

Ryukyuan have long been aware of the vulnerability of their small islands to violent forces from both the natural and the human environment. The poverty and unpredictability of resources and a history of intervention from foreign powers has not only fostered a sense of the fragile and transient quality of life, but has also encouraged a conciliatory approach in external relations. The values of co-operation and mediation are respected in dealings between villagers, between Ryukyuan and foreigners, and between mortals and supernatural beings.

While Ryukyuan culture and social structure are closely

related to that of the rest of Japan, significant differences can be seen in the development of religious traditions. In particular, women have long held a special position in the Ryukyus; they traditionally have a dominant role in dealings with the supernatural. Indeed, in many contexts concerned with the sacred women are traditionally regarded as superior to men. This contrasts with the relationship commonly seen in neighbouring regions of the Far East.

While the indigenous religion is by now obscured in large part by successive overlays of ideas from overseas, certain traditions have evidently been maintained from early centuries. One such is the ritual pre-eminence of females, expressed in their nearly exclusive hold of the traditional religious offices, and in the belief in the spiritual ascendancy of the sister.

Today the ritual superiority of females is qualified or restricted in its scope. Historical events have mainly brought a dilution of the authority of women, and their power and freedom in general has been eroded.

This paper is concerned with the religious and the secular status of women in the Ryukyus, with reference to the structural role played by women in that society. In particular, the focus will be on the part women have been regarded as playing in the broader structure encompassing both the mundane and the supernatural worlds.

Religion and the Status of Women

There has been extensive cross-cultural research devoted to the association between women and religion.¹ Ryukyuan material can usefully contribute to this fund of information, and may be particularly pertinent to two empirical observations noted in that research concerning the status of women:

(i) Over much of Asia and Africa there is a high correlation between religious localism and the status of women. The 'world religions' usually value women as inferior on several counts, and, as areas converted from local religions to world religions, women tended to suffer from lowered status (where high status is defined here as involving such factors as the possession of more property, marital and inheritance rights, access to jobs and education, more mobility and general freedom).

(ii) The way woman is conceptualised in terms of a society's religion has an intimate association with her secular status.

¹ See for example Janet Zollinger Giele and Audrey Chapman Smock (eds.), *Women: Roles and Status Countries*, New York: John Wiley 1977; J. Hoch-Smith and A. Spring (eds.), *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*, New York and London: Plenum Press 1978; E. Boulding, 'Women as Role Models in Industrializing Societies', in M. Sussman and B. Cogswell (eds.), *Cross-National Family Research*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1972.

The favourable social status normally found alongside religious parity is maintained even after that religion has lost much of its relevance to everyday life in the changing society. Smock writes, '... religious symbolism retains considerable potency in shaping evaluations of women's nature even after these images have otherwise ceased to embody compelling truths.'²

Today in the Ryukyus the official religions are supposed to be Buddhism and Shinto, as is the case all over Japan. Yet, in reality, it is common to find in the same village (perhaps in the same individual!) beliefs and practices linked to both these persuasions, along with those characteristic of the indigenous religion. At the same time, one might see people consulting a local shamaness or a Taoist fortune-teller. Christianity has made few real inroads, but a blanket dismissal of all the various beliefs as superstition would not be rare. This last might come even from a man who keeps in his wallet a piece of cloth given to him by his sister as a protection.

The Ryukyus offer to the observer the opportunity to examine religion and the position of women both synchronically and diachronically. A cursory survey indicates that, as the predominant religion becomes less local, so the religious status of women declines. This decline seems to be linked with progressively less direct contact with the supernatural.

Closer examination shows this summary scheme to be oversimplified, partly because of the interaction of different religious styles. Not only is there great regional variation, but also there is a significant element of ambiguity in the way women are regarded (ambiguity is an element which commonly emerges in studies of religion, of women, and of Japan). A structure that is dynamic or tolerant of ambiguity may be more suited to accommodate the status of women in Ryukyuan society than one which has fixed terms, rigidly defined.

Mythological Beginnings

The origin myth of the Ryukyuan people illuminates the study of Ryukyuan women, for the principal versions reveal structural features which are echoed in traditional Ryukyuan society. The myth, as set down in the Ryukyu Shinto-ki, is as follows:³

² Giele and Smock, *op.cit.*, p. 388.

³ The Ryukyu Shinto-ki ('Account of the Ways of the Gods in Ryukyu') was written at the request of the Okinawan leaders by a Japanese priest, Taichu Ryotei (see Shunzo Sakamaki, *Ryukyu: A Bibliographical Guide to Okinawan Studies*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1963, p. 23).

Two deities, brother and sister, built huts side by side. After a while Amami-kyu, the woman, became pregnant by her brother, Shineri-kyu. This took place with the aid of a passing wind, not through sexual intercourse. Three children were born. The eldest, a son, became the first ruler; the second, a girl, became the first priestess; the third, another boy, became the first commoner. The establishment of these first settlers was ensured by the bringing of fire from the palace of the Dragon-god at the bottom of the sea.⁴

The pairing of brother and sister in this story has some aspects which are characteristically Ryukyuan. The original sibling deities are equal in status, and enjoy an intimacy which borders on incest.⁵ The first two offspring are brother and sister, each with high status and authority in the secular and the sacred realms respectively. This type of sibling partnership could be seen in the traditional Okinawan state, with a similar, complementary sharing of temporal and spiritual authority operating at all levels of society. At the head was the ruler and the high priestess; under their authority came regional governors and priestesses and their assistants at increasingly local levels. At one time these positions were to be filled by male and female siblings. Even at the level of the family unit it was a man's sister who should deal with spiritual matters, while he concerned himself with temporal welfare.⁶

⁴ Contact with the dragon-god (*ryugu*) is a theme found in myth from many parts of Japan (cf. Cornelius Ouwehand, *Namazu-e and Their Themes: An Interpretative Approach to Some Aspects of Japanese Folk Religion*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1964). Both the dragon-god and the supernatural realm itself - often placed under the sea or the earth - are viewed with ambivalence in the Ryukyus. They are mysterious and feared, but also the source of good things. There is a suggestion of a similar ambivalence attaching to people regarded as having spiritual power.

⁵ Masako V. Tanaka (*Kinship and Descent in an Okinawan Village*, University of Rochester, New York: Ph.D. Thesis 1974) sees a structural overlap of the brother-sister relationship and the husband-wife relationship, as expressed in origin stories and in Okinawan social structure. The Ryukyans themselves will say of a happy marriage: 'they are as happy as brother and sister'.

⁶ The complementary division into spiritual and temporal welfare, seen to by females and males respectively, is not supposed to be clean-cut. Males do have a (small) part to play in ritual affairs, and women have a very large part to play in household economics. Without their labour, survival in the Ryukyus would probably have been impossible.

According to this source, women had charge of the valuable hearth fire, as indeed they still do. This duty has both practical and spiritual significance, for associated with the hearth is a supernatural being (*fii nu kang*) of much importance in the traditional religion of the Ryukyus. That this fire was said to have come from below - or beyond - the sea is significant. It suggests contact between women and a supernatural source, whereby women could keep and use a powerful element for the good of their community. Furthermore, it may refer to the actual importation of cooking and other skills from overseas.

The origin myth suggests that the status of women may not be considered in the same terms as that of men. There appears to be a kind of structural imbalance, which can also be seen in other versions of the myth.⁷ While there are two male offspring, a ruler and a commoner, only one girl is born, a sacred specialist. Tanaka (*op.cit.*) notes that this difference in rank is comparable to the structural non-equivalence of brothers that is found in Ryukyuan society (and expressed, for example, in matters of succession within a lineage). In contrast, there is no distinction made in the myth between women with spiritual authority and those without: the one daughter is a priestess, and there is no mention of a strictly secular female role.

Traditional Ryukyuan society echoes this structural asymmetry. While there was a lack of social mobility between commoner and noble classes, which were differentiated in temporal terms, every woman was regarded as having the potential to contact the supernatural realm, and as having sacred power to some degree. In other words, *all* women were religious specialists, and all had a part to play as mediators on behalf of particular males, and of the community as a whole.

Historical Background

In contrast with many of the regions studied by anthropologists, Japan as a whole has accessible a rich, recorded history. In the Ryukyus, historical developments have had direct and indirect effects on the religious role of females. When documentary records concerning the Ryukyus begin, there is ample evidence of a history of frequent and varied contact with overseas. Both Chinese and Japanese texts from early in the seventh century AD mention visits to populated islands that were probably the Ryukyus.⁸ In the following centuries there was an increase in

⁷ A second version of the origin myth appears in the formal history of Okinawa prepared in 1650. A translated abstract can be found in Charles S. Leavenworth, *The Loochoo Islands*, Shanghai: North China Herald 1905.

⁸ See Sakamaki, *op.cit.*

the frequency of these and other contacts, as trade came to contribute more significantly to the Ryukyuan economy. This intercourse centred on Okinawa, and its port, Naha, flourished. At some time during this period (and certainly before the late thirteenth century) Buddhism had been introduced into the Ryukyus. However, while mainland Japan was strongly influenced by Sino-Buddhist culture in the period AD 618-907, the Ryukyus received their main Chinese influence in the thirteenth century, when Confucianism was dominant. While these influences were mainly felt in the capital and by the nobility, they were also to penetrate into rural communities. Both Buddhism and Confucianism at this time tended to denigrate the status of women. While this factor may have actually inhibited the spread of Buddhism through the Ryukyus, the foreign ideas were to affect the position of women in local social and religious life.

In the early seventeenth century, the power of Japan was to dominate, even to oppress. Okinawa's relationship with Japan (that is, Japan north of the Ryukyus) has its beginnings in pre-history, and continues through times documented more or less reliably. An early, formal history of the Okinawan kingdom tells of the birth of the heroic king, Shunten, in the twelfth century. While the documentary source is itself clearly influenced by political considerations,⁹ the tale is relevant to the subject of this paper.

Shunten was said to have been the son of a lady of the Okinawan nobility and Tametomo, of the famous Minamoto clan.¹⁰ Tametomo deserted his wife and child in order to return to his native Japan. The story is revealing for a number of reasons. One is that it suggests the ambiguous quality of Ryukyuan contact with outsiders: Tametomo brought benefits, but also sorrow. Another feature of the account is that it puts a woman in the role of mediator; Tametomo's abandoned wife is the link between Okinawa and the outside world and the medium who bore a Ryukyuan hero. The woman is important, but not for her own sake.

One of the rulers of Chuzan (the central kingdom of the three into which Okinawa was at this time divided) to follow Shunten was Hashi. He unified the whole island and saw it prosper until his death in 1439. The next two kings were not so successful, but in 1469 the capable Sho En was installed, and appointed his sister as chief priestess. On his death the queen, Yosoidon (who had a reputation for strong-mindedness), wanted to see her young son take over the throne. Instead, Sho En's younger brother was made king. However, after about six months the chief priestess - now Sho En's eldest daughter - received a

⁹ See George H. Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*, Rutland and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle 1958, p.46.

¹⁰ There is actually no historical evidence that Tametomo ever visited Okinawa, much less sired a child there.

'divine message' advising the new king to abdicate. This he did, in favour of Sho Shin, the son of Yosoidon and Sho En.

Sho Shin's reign was long and prosperous, and he consolidated central control over the Ryukyuan kingdom. Among the measures he took was the reorganisation of the traditional Ryukyuan priestess system. This action added to his political security, partly because it brought the influential priestesses under the supervision of the Shuri court, and partly because it disrupted the traditional sibling-based alliance of temporal with spiritual power.

The Ryukyuan priestesses were powerful at all levels of society; indeed, Sho Shin himself may have owed his position to the influence of such women. Hitherto, the rank and prestige of the chief priestess was equal, or even superior, to that of the king himself.¹¹ Now her residence was removed from the palace enclosure, and was itself enclosed by high walls. There, with female attendants, she was supposed to devote herself to ritual duties for the good of the country, conserving her energy and avoiding pollution. In effect, this new arrangement would have eroded the woman's real political power and freedom. Later, the rank of chief priestess was placed below that of the king's wife.

As indicated above, it was previously customary for men of authority at all levels to be paired with a spiritual specialist, normally a sister. Sho Shin abolished the position of *chimi*, the priestess who was paired with a territorial lord (*aji*), tightening his control on the local lords by this interference with their support.

At the village level priestesses (*nuru*) were also found, with much influence in their communities. A certain number of these were confirmed in their office by the chief priestess, with the authority of the Shuri court. The king, or one of his local administrators, now assumed the responsibility of appointing the *nuru*, but did not try to interfere with the election of ritual specialists at the household level. Other appointments were made at intermediary levels in the religious hierarchy, and the whole structure came to have a strongly political flavour, along with the formal organisation on a nationwide basis.

While it is far from clear what constituted ancient religion in the Ryukyus, clues are to be found in surviving practices and in the *omoro* (archaic songs, often with a religious content). From these sources, it is at least clear that women were seen as having the potential for great spiritual power, and that a man's sister was traditionally able to help him by her control or influence over some sort of supernatural force or forces. Any man in a position of leadership would have been particularly dependent on this supernatural assistance for the maintenance of his own physical and charismatic power. Nakahara conjectures that

¹¹ See William P. Lebra, *Okinawan Religion: Belief, Ritual and Social Structure*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1966, p. 102. This work contains a full description of the material summarised in the following paragraphs.

originally these religious specialists (sisters) were shamans, who had undergone lengthy preparation for the task of controlling *shiji* (an impersonal supernatural power). With the formalisation of a national religion, within which such offices were subject to political or hereditary appointment, '... possessional shamanism gave way to a hierarchy of priestesses'.¹² This organisation itself came to be increasingly under the control of secular government, centralized in Shuri and composed of males.

Religious women were subject to a steady reduction in their status throughout the documented history of the Ryukyus, especially after the sixteenth century. They were devalued by the influences of Confucianism and Buddhism (both of which reached the islands through China and Japan, and which were felt most strongly in central Okinawa), and restrained by the secular intervention in their relationship with society. Women gradually lost their importance as mediators; as they became less likely to have shamanic characteristics, they could not contact supernatural forces so directly; at the same time, men were encouraged not to feel reliant on women in matters of authority. Ancestor worship, of such importance in both China and Japan, became organized around the patriline, and adopted features from Buddhist practice alongside indigenous traditions. A great complex of changes took place, affecting religious offices, rites, the treatment of birth, illness and death, places and modes of worship, etc. It all altered slowly, and most of the changes had implications for the status of women, previously so crucial to the structure of religious life in the Ryukyus.

The influence from Japan was not present simply because of geographical proximity. While the political arrangement between Okinawa and China remained undemanding, Japan had ambitions to consolidate the claims it had long been making on the Ryukyus. In 1609 a punitive force sent by the Shimazu family invaded Okinawa, which had little ability to resist. The following centuries saw a time of covert control by Japan, via Satsuma, during which time the Ryukyuan economy suffered and the rulership had but restricted power. In 1879 the Ryukyus were forcibly annexed as a Japanese prefecture. This condition still stands - to the satisfaction of most Ryukyusans today - apart from a period after World War II (until 1972) when the USA controlled the islands.

In the American battle for Okinawa, which inflicted heavy casualties on both sides, traditional settlements were seriously disrupted, and many of the religious office-holders were killed or left without successors. As the old religion fell into decline, so did the importance of women as religious specialists. However, most researchers still report a clear difference in the way women are regarded in the Ryukyus, as compared with mainland Japan. It does seem as though Smock's observation noted above

¹² Ibid.

holds out in this case - that a long tradition of high religious status is still finding expression in the positive way females are regarded in the society today.

Religious Specialists

In the household, in the local community, and in the old Ryukyuan state, women have been the prime actors in dealings with the supernatural. To some extent, every woman can be considered a religious specialist, even though her religious performance may comprise little more than tending the household hearth, providing occasional ritual services for her brother, and participating in community festivals or ceremonies. To fulfill this role requires no special course of training, no elaborate paraphernalia, and no unusual personal qualities.

As the spiritual specialist in the sibling pair the sister traditionally has high status. Her status is measured in terms different from those of her brother, for it rests in part on her predominance in dealings with the sacred and her power to protect him from evil influences. For her part, a sister should be able to rely on her brother for protection in secular life. A sister is regarded as having the power to bless her brother (and also the power to curse him), while he is expected to help her economically, if necessary, even after she is married. Children at the beginning of this century were still being taught to behave nicely to their siblings for these reasons.¹³

The spiritual power of the sister is called *unai-gami* (or some variant of this Okinawan term). Belief in it is found throughout the Ryukyus, although it has practically disappeared in the Miyako islands. However, in the Yaeyama islands and some parts of Okinawa there are recent reports of the sister returning to her natal family to take an important part in certain agrarian rituals. In other areas, she only has ritual significance during critical times in her brother's life.

The *unai-gami* has a significance greater than that of benefactor for her brother. A woman may assume this role for more than one brother, or just one; whichever is the case, her structural role does not end here. The sister, as *unai-gami*, corresponds in a sense to the original female ancestor (see above for an account of the myth). While her brother, in the same way, corresponds to the male originator, and, by extension, to the male ancestors in the patriline, she corresponds structurally to the lineage sisters. Despite the fact that, for Okinawans, the more salient aspect of the original couple is that they are man

¹³ See Toichi Mabuchi, 'Spiritual Predominance of the Sister', in Allan H. Smith (ed.), *Ryukyuan Culture and Society*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1964.

and wife, it is evident that the pairing can reasonably be regarded as expressing '... the complementarity of the male and female roles in agnatic contexts, rather than the personification of the real first ancestor and his wife'.¹⁴

Tanaka goes on to point out that women play a linking part in the structure of Ryukyuan society; not only, in being both wives and sisters simultaneously, do they join families within the community, but they link brothers with ancestors within the family. 'The *unai-gami* in this sense epitomizes the corporate unity of the household, or of whatever group she is the *unai-gami* of, because only through her do the members of the group have access to the source of supernatural power'.¹⁵

While women in the family can provide access to supernatural realms, as sisters and attendants to *fii nu kang*, the hearth-fire deity, the expert specialist in this field is the shamaness, *yuta*. Unlike the priestesses and the ritual specialists of the household, the shamaness works outside the context of any organisation or formal group. She still holds a major place in the rural communities of the Ryukyus, and is still consulted concerning the causes and remedies of misfortune. Since everything is attributed to supernatural causation, the shamaness has a crucial part in village life, and is often considered central to the treatment of ill-health (even since familiarity with modern medical science). Most families consult the shamaness at least once a year; Lebra found all social classes represented among her clientele, usually by the females of the household.¹⁶

The shamaness is addressed respectfully by her clients, and her role is well-established in Ryukyuan society; yet there is some ambiguity in people's attitude towards her. Lebra suggests that there may be some fear of her power, but also notes '... an impression of Okinawan ambivalence toward power figures in general'. The reference terminology itself may betray some ambiguity in the status of the shamaness. While the most commonly heard term is *yuta*, this has a derogatory connotation for the shamaness herself, who resents this name, and prefers the more general term *kaminchu* (*kami* person, someone with spiritual power), which is also used to refer to priestesses.

Although the shamaness has a well-established place in Ryukyuan society, there is ambiguity attached to her structural position, as well as to her status. She is able to act not only as a therapist, but as an agent of social control, for she is intimate with local society and with the individuals there in. Yet despite this centrality to community life, there are other

¹⁴ Tanaka, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁶ William P. Lebra, 'The Okinawan Shaman', in Smith, *Ryukyuan Culture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-8.

senses in which she is decidedly peripheral. Her very ability to make contact with supernatural forces or to take on marginal states of being set her apart from normal life. Furthermore, she may often have personal qualities at the present time or in her past that could be considered a deviation from the prevailing norms. Indeed, it is characteristic of the history of shamanesses that they undergo a period of extreme suffering, mental or physical, which is known as *taari*. This is regarded as a kind of supernatural insistence that the individual thus inflicted should take on the role of *kaminchu*, and only after this commitment has been made is there any chance of a cure. This traumatic period can be avoided if the individual is able to respond to earlier indications from the *kami* that she is destined for service as a *kaminchu*. To recover from the discomforts of *taari* it is necessary for the prospective shamaness to find her *chiji*, the particular *kami* who will enable her to carry out the demands of a shamaness's role.

Some shamanesses continue to suffer from ailments throughout their lives; Lebra found that the few male shamans he encountered were characterized by some sort of disability. Maretzki considered that shamanesses are typically disturbed personalities,¹⁷ and Lebra's studies confirm that shamanesses frequently have a record of intra-familial relationships that is at odds with what is considered socially desirable. However, this observer also noted that shamanesses tend to be more articulate and more intelligent than average, and that it is inappropriate to consider deviant a class of people who are so prevalent and so much relied upon.

There is some interaction between shamanesses and the other major category of religious specialist in traditional Ryukyuan religion, the priestesses. A shamaness may be called upon to advise in the succession of a candidate to the office of priestess, or may have a role as intermediary between the priestess and the supernatural on certain ritual occasions.

In the most ancient Ryukyuan settlements there may have been a less clear distinction between the priestess and the shamaness. Ceremonies seem to have taken place which were directed towards the supernatural power supposed to frequent the sacred grove (*utaki*). During these, a woman called *kami* or *kimi* mediated between the supernatural and the mortal world. 'The *kami* was at the same time the priestess when she said prayers (*otakabe*) to the power on behalf of the *maki*, and the supernatural power itself when she revealed, often in trance, the divine will (*miseseru*).'¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas W. Maretzki and Hatsumi Maretzki, *Taira: An Okinawan Village*, New York: John Wiley 1966.

¹⁸ Tanaka, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

This woman was likened to the sister-deity of the origin myth, and was ideally (and probably really) the sister of the 'big man' of the *maki* (the early village), providing him with her spiritual protection, so vital to his effectiveness and authority. This sibling pair would be of 'the house of the first settler' of the *maki*, and probably constituted the earliest *niigami* and *nitchu*. These titles are still preserved to refer to the senior woman of a village's founding lineage and her brother, respectively. The *nitchu* was in religious matters subordinate to female religious specialists, but in charge of the male religious assistants.¹⁹ 'The office of the *niigami* ... should be transmitted from the eldest daughter of the same house in the next generation!'.²⁰ This ideal pattern was not always adhered to; generations may have been skipped (since the office was held for life), or an otherwise appropriate candidate may have lacked sufficiently high ritual quality (*saa-daka*). This quality should be notified by divine agency, which may express itself through physical or mental disorder, or revelatory dreams, and would normally be confirmed by a shamaness.

By the fourteenth century, with the increased differentiation of the Ryukyuan society, there were many levels of male authority, each paired with a (sibling) female religious specialist. The *unai-gami* principle had been extended and adapted to the more hierarchical structure of society, creating priestesses of varying ranks. The king was paired with the *chifijing ganashii mee*, regional governors with *chikasa*, local hereditary lords with *chimi* and the village head with *niigami*. Within individual households, the head's role was complemented by that of a senior woman of the family who controlled domestic ritual affairs. When Sho Shin made his changes to the country's governmental and religious organisation, he altered both the structure and the status of the female priesthood. Not only did he restrict the power of the higher-ranking priestesses, but he demoted the *niigami* to the level of assistant of the *nuru kumui*, the official village priestess. She was often from a family politically favourable to the ruler, rarely from the founding house of the village. The demotion of the *niigami* would have affected not only her status and power, but also that of the dominant kin group in the community.

Priestesses clearly played a significant part in religious life before their office became an organised institution; they were able to rely on their local communities for material support before they were officially awarded lands and incomes to accompany their post. Even as part of 'state religion' and with a nation-wide organisation, the Ryukyuan priestesses remained an integral part of their community, essential to its ritual life

¹⁹ Lebra, *Okinawan Religion*.

²⁰ Tanaka, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

above the level of the household. Many *nuru* continued to hold real influence into the present century: '... in the town of Itoman the principal of the primary school, not a native of the town, stated that measures which he suggested, and which met the opposition of the townspeople, were accepted at once if he could get the local *noro* [*nuru*] to sponsor them'.²¹

However, by 1944, when the last high priestess died, there were few *nuru* left. Although Sho Shin's articulation of religious with temporal authority had given some *nuru* more power at the time, it was then that the *nuru*'s position became less certain for the long term. Instead of men being dependent upon women's spiritual power, religious women at this time became increasingly dependent upon political men. The Japanese overlords tried to suppress all kinds of female religious operatives, even attempting (quite unsuccessfully) to outlaw the *yuta* in 1736. However, neither the *yuta* nor the *nuru* were easily suppressed; both the independent, peripheral shamanesses and the organised group of priestesses, so central to community ceremonial, continued to exert strong influence. 'Satsuma's conquest would find its last barrier in the conservative female religious hierarchy....'²²

Direct political action has only been part of the foreign influence on the status of women in Ryukyuan religious life; also powerful have been the imported religious and social philosophies. Neither Buddhism nor Confucianism, as it reached the Ryūyū, said much that was favourable to the status of women. In Japan itself, Chinese ideas had a detrimental effect on the status of women.²³ Influential treatises published in Japan over the last few centuries exhorted females to be self-effacing and servile, and generally excluded positive consideration of any female role that could not be related in a subordinate fashion to men. According to certain Buddhist sources, women were an impediment to spiritual progress,

It was due partly to this contrast of view that Buddhism was slow to become popular in the Ryukyus, where people were accustomed to females having the dominant role in spiritual matters. Indeed, although there were some subordinate ritual posts which were traditionally held by males, men had a minimal role in dealings with the supernatural, and their presence was considered polluting in the sacred groves and at certain rituals. Slowly, and with the patronage of the Okinawan court and Japanese overlords, Buddhist temples became established in the Ryukyus. There were some anomalies: Takanoya, in 1896, commented that no local

²¹ R.S. Spencer, 'The Noro or Priestesses of LooChoo', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, series 2, Vol.VIII (1960), pp. 94-112; at p. 109.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²³ Cf. Joyce Ackroyd, 'Women in Feudal Japan', *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, Vol.VII (1959), pp. 31-68.

found it odd that Naze city had a female priest in its Buddhist temple, despite the fact that this arrangement was not found anywhere else in Japan.²⁴

The Buddhist religious officiants were normally male, and they often had low status in the traditional settlements.²⁵ Once the Japanese had firmly established themselves, however, the importance of Buddhism grew. Now most families have in their home a Buddhist altar devoted to their ancestors, and will often use the local Buddhist priest for funeral ceremonies, as in the rest of Japan.

Religious life in a typical Ryukyuan home today is an amalgam of indigenous beliefs with ideas or practices from Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. These contrasting approaches have brought with them an attitude to women that is fundamentally more negative to that previously held in the Ryukyus, and this can be seen in the detrimental effect on the status of women in general, and on the reduced dominance women have come to have in religious roles.

Concluding Discussion

In the structure of Ryukyuan society women have still an active place, a dynamic part to play; they are not defined solely by their relation to the society's male members. While the economic contribution of women in the Ryukyus has long been of great importance, this has not constituted the sole factor in maintaining their status, which is high in comparison with that of women in neighbouring societies. In accordance with Giele and Smock's cross-cultural observations cited above, in the Ryukyus high status in general for women has accompanied their pre-eminent role in religion, and has lasted even after that traditional religion began to decline in importance.

In both secular and sacred realms females are the traditional prime mediators. This feature may be central to the status of Ryukyuan women, a status which has remained high throughout periods of social change, yet which has its own ambiguities. These characteristics are possible because women do not have a unitary role in the society, and do not constitute the fixed points in structures which could be used to describe Ryukyuan society. Rather, the role of women here can include acting as religious specialist, economic provider, household representative, sister, wife and mother - obviously, this list is not exhaustive,

²⁴ Takanoya, translated in Douglas G. Haring, *Okinawan Customs, Yesterday and Today*, Rutland and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle 1969.

²⁵ Basil Hall, *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and The Great Loo-Choo Island*, London: John Murray 1818.

nor are its categories exclusive. Which role is most salient at any one time depends partly on the context, as determined by both immediate and long-term conditions.

A broad framework which can be used to discuss different levels of Ryukyuan society is a tripartite structure, where there is a middle term, which has a dynamic relationship to both the others. This mediatory term may not necessarily be a discrete category, but may also be included in one (or both) of the other two, albeit a peripheral inclusion.

Thus within village society, married women mediate between families; they connect their natal households with those into which they marry. The households themselves comprise female and male members, including the mediatory female herself. While she normally goes to live in her husband's home, she retains ties with her natal household, and there is some variation and confusion in the Ryukyus concerning which family she is part of from then on. These days she is usually buried and worshipped as an ancestor along with her husband. However, as Tanaka points out, 'The unity of husband and wife as it is expressed in the recent mortuary customs seems to be the result of the influence of the official Confucian philosophy, the objective of which was, among other things, to transform the Okinawan woman as a ritually superior, independent "sister" into an obedient "wife" in the patriarchal family.'²⁶ Despite such trends, women in the Ryukyus have managed to maintain a large degree of the influence and independence which accompanies this dual role in kin relations.

At a different level in the Ryukyuan universe women act as mediators, particularly if they are shamanic persons, but also if they hold some kind of ritual office, whether it be a state appointment or a domestic duty. Females are the traditional mediators with supernatural forces; they have this structural position, whatever the details of the structure as it is perceived by a particular observer (native or foreign).

During the course of history the details have changed in the structures representing the world as seen from the Ryukyus. Nevertheless, overall patterns have retained their validity, as have certain dominant themes in Ryukyuan culture. Co-operation is still an ideal which is valued, and the role of mediator still an important one. The more easily the traditional mediator can adapt to new circumstances, the more likely it is that she (or he) will survive with maintained status. As basic social institutions, such as the family and local community, undergo restructuring and revision of their needs, so the traditional priestesses of the Ryukyus have become increasingly dysfunctional. Lebra notes the contrasting response of the shamanesses: they

...lack any group or organizational affiliation, which permits them a greater degree of adaptability to change; and their function as therapists for many forms of mis-

²⁶ Tanaka, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

fortune, which are still believed to derive from supernatural causes, confers a sustained need for their services. Their successful survival during a period of extensive socio-cultural change does not, however, obtain from mere affirmation of traditional beliefs and values but from their ability to interpret and reformulate these in such a way as to make sense in terms of the contemporary cultural milieu.²⁷

Although a complete discussion of Giele and Smock's conclusions would be inappropriate at this juncture, the Ryukyuan material does prompt brief comment upon the association of religious parity (or better) with sustained high status in secular matters. First, it is clear that the spiritual ascendancy of females - particularly sisters - was recognized as having significant implications for the secular life of the community. For the males who considered themselves dependent upon women's influence on supernatural factors, it was worthwhile to allow women relatively high status.

Secondly, once established, high status can be a self-perpetuating condition, within certain limits. An individual, or a category of individuals, if she has power and influence, can create or work to maintain the social climate most favourable to herself. This advantage, however, is not a guarantee of success in a system open to intervention from outside. While the traditional priestesses did much to preserve the indigenous religion of the Ryukyus, this task became increasingly difficult in the face of unsympathetic foreign influences at all levels of society. Shamanesses seem to have been more successful, for they loosened the tie between their status and the old religion, adapting their skills to a role that could be more easily validated in secular terms, or at least in a religious terminology acceptable to a wider range of traditions.

Thirdly, it is evident that the general status of women *can* suffer from adverse influences, even when they still maintain a central role in community religion. This may result in a status that is ambiguous, or context-dependent, or that can no longer be simply described (since women may have retained certain powers, while losing others normally found in association with them). It is possible, however, that some echo of former high status may facilitate the resumption of high status at a later date, even where that later status is dependent upon a different set of factors. This possibility has been proposed by writers among the Japanese feminist movement, who draw attention to scholarly support for the notion that women in ancient Japan held considerable power, largely associated with their religious significance.²⁸

²⁷ Lebra, 'The Okinawan Shaman', p. 98.

²⁸ See for example Yoshiko Wada, 'Woman and Her Power in the Japanese Emperor System', *Feminist (Japan)*, Vol.I no.4 (1978), pp. 15-17.

Turning now to the correlation between religious localism and the status of women, the situation in the Ryukyus does appear to support this generalization. Once Buddhism had a hold on the islands, the position of women became less favourable, compared to that at the time when the local religion was dominant. This was due not simply to the negative attitude expressed towards women in the terms of the imported religion, but also to the combination of cultural factors that infiltrated the islands around this time.

Not least of these would have been the increased use of the Japanese language, especially for official and educational purposes. This put native women at a disadvantage, since they retained the habitual use of Ryukyuan for much longer than men, and are still more likely to use it than men. Ryukyuan, which is closely related to Japanese, was the language of the domestic arena and of the indigenous religion, both the domain of women. When the Japanese took over the Ryukyus at the end of the nineteenth century the local language and its dialects came to assume low status, as well as becoming less useful for secular achievement.

Considering the specifically religious aspect of religious localism there is the decreasing involvement of women in mediating with the supernatural, as the organisational base of the religion becomes less local. We may only speculate on the position of women in early Ryukyuan settlements, for which there are indications that the roles of sister, of priestess and of shamaness would commonly coincide in a woman of relatively high status. With the institutionalisation of a state religion, sacred affairs took on a less 'local' character; the organised religious officiants were less able to respond directly to the needs of their immediate communities, and were not regarded as having such direct supernatural access or control as were more shamanic figures. With the rise of Buddhist practice, women took on a distinctly subsidiary part in making contact with the sacred.

This progression can be traced in the Ryukyus, not only through time, but through the regional variation found at any one time. In a typical rural community, a family is likely to use the services of a Buddhist priest, to consult the local shamaness, and to join in festivals, of which the ritual is conducted by a traditional priestess. The prevailing systems of education and employment favour males, yet the Ryukyuan woman is likely to be making a contribution to the household economy equal to, or greater than, that of her husband. Japanese values still tend to reinforce the earlier Chinese principle of male superiority, yet '... there are numerous indications in daily life that women command a comparatively high degree of respect and power'.²⁹

Women may have initially assumed high status as the mediators between the world of the living, so vulnerable to misfortune,

²⁹ Naretzki and Naretzki, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

and the supernatural realms beyond. With the cultural erosion of their spiritual powers women saw their status suffer. However, in the structural microcosm of the local community women still play a mediatory role; as sisters and wives, they link families in a network of co-operation. In the social environment, restricted by its physical boundaries, it is still the Ryukyuan woman who epitomizes the continuity of the community through space and time.

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