

Ryukyuan religion: the centrality of women

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The present paper aims to briefly analyze some aspects of the role of women in the Ryukyuan religion, approaching, mainly, the conduction of rituals in different environments and “woman” as a symbol. In order to do so, first, it will be necessary to briefly introduce the creation myth and the history of Ryukyu, external influences and some of the characteristics of the local religion. Then, it will be explored the role established for women through history, in rituals held within the State, the community or the domestic environment, and, in this last case, mostly referring to the cult to the ancestors, in which it will also be mentioned the symbolism of the female in the religion. Therefore, it will be possible to analyze spiritual gender-related roles and symbols that have been associated with the women of the Ryukyu Islands.

The Ryukyu creation myth already approaches women’s centrality in spiritual matters. According to it, the god Shinerikyu and goddess Amamikyu conceived three children through a wind that touches Amamikyu. The first child, a boy, became the first king, the second, a girl, became the first priestess and the third, another boy, represented the origin of humanity (SILVA, V. H., personal communication, Aug 8, 2020). With that in mind, it should also be noticed that Ryukyuan culture and traditions are marked by great diversity within its territory, but, overall, those are composed by elements of the indigenous tradition and several influences - in different levels - from its neighbors, mainly, China and Japan.

Formal relationship with China dated back to the times when Ryukyu was then divided into three different kingdoms - Nanzan, Chuzan and Hokuzan -, but it became more intense after the unification, in 1429, under Sho Hashi’s rule (Kerr, 2000). This period was marked by the expansion of the flow of the principles of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. As for Japan, its influence over Ryukyu was increased after the invasion of the *daimiyo* from Satsuma - current Kagoshima-ken - in 1609, a time when Europeans were approaching - and colonizing - a part of Asia, thus, a concern to Japan. Satsuma, however, maintained the kingdom’s government, so it would be possible to take advantage from the commercial relationship with

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China, which caused a “distasteful blow” to Ryukyuan economy (Kerr, 2000). In 1879, in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), the Ryukyu Kingdom was formally annexed to Japan, becoming, then, the prefecture of Okinawa. Chambers-Letson (2014) states that, after the annexation, “the early twentieth century saw a series of Japanization programs that effected the erasure of Ryukyu’s history, language, and culture”, also, with the stigmatization and persecution of the shamans. In spite of this process and the violence that it was carried with, Ryukyuan culture and religion still have their own particularities, so “Okinawa does not suggest a mere provincial entity but rather a distinct culture evincing varying degrees of affiliation with neighboring cultures” (Lebra, 1966, p. 13).

William Lebra, in “Okinawan religion: belief, ritual, and social structure” (1966), points out that what he calls “Okinawan religion” could be seen as animistic², and, also, there is a major belief on reciprocity between humans and the supernatural, and, to obtain such reciprocity in a positive way, humans need to perform several rituals. Lebra (1966) emphasizes the focus on collectiveness in Okinawan religion, which is seen within different levels of the society: (i) the State - from 1429 to 1879; (ii) the community; (iii) the kin group and; (iv) family-household, and each environment has rituals that are followed for different purposes, reaching the respective matters for each level of the society organization, with those rituals were mostly conducted by women.

In this sense, it is relevant to point out the role of women as priestesses³ and shamans⁴. The priestesses were the whose main function was to communicate with their own *kami*, in behalf of the group interests that she represented. The shamans, on the other hand, “on the basis of preternatural powers possession, *seeing* and *hearing* are largely involved in determining the causes of misfortune and directing remedial action” (Lebra, 1966, p. 74), dealing with issues related to the family or the individual (SILVA, V. H., personal communication, Feb 9, 2021).

According to Lebra (1966), within the State, there was the chief priestess (*chifijing ganashii mee*), who usually was an elder sister or the ruler’s oldest daughter. The chief priestess was virtually equal in rank with the ruler, since the kingdom was organized for religious and political ends - therefore, there was a system where two complementary facets were observed,

² According to the Oxford Dictionary, animism is “1. The attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena. 2. The belief in a supernatural power that organizes and animates the material universe”. Retrieved from: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/animism>. Accessed May 21, 2021.

³ As will be noted, Lebra uses several nomenclatures for “priestess”, according to their ranks. More recent literature tends to name the priestesses as “kaminchu” and “noro” or “nuru”, according to their functions. (SILVA, V. H., personal communication, Feb 9, 2021)

⁴ Also known in the literature as “yuta”.

a religious hierarchy of females and a political hierarchy of males. The *chifijing*, alongside high-ranking officials, also headed the National Council of Ten, that determined the policy in religious matters. Other priestesses incorporated in the State's religious hierarchy, and below the *chifijing* were the *chikasa kumui*, *ufu su nu mee* and the *nuru*. The end of the kingdom and annexation to Japan resulted in the gradual disintegration of the State religion and loss of institutional power of those priestesses. However, remembering the division of different society levels made by Lebra (1966), the other layers also had their respective priestess, which means that the community and the kin group are supposed to have a priestess as a ritual conductor.

As for the shamans, they also have an important role, mainly in the cult to the ancestors, since it is believed that they are capable to summon and talk to the spirits, and also perform rituals to avoid a bad influence of the deceased's soul to the family (Baksheev, 2008). Regarding to the cult to the ancestors, according to Lebra (1966, p. 120),

Apparently, Buddhism did provide a more satisfactory system for handling the troublesome spirits of the dead than had existed previously; the indigenous religion, as we have seen, is largely concerned with propitiating the productive forces of nature and avoiding punishment or withdrawal of support. The fear of ghosts and misfortune they are capable of inflicting appears to be a deeply embedded trait, and surely a religion which offered ancestral tablets and ancestral rites and taught that the spirits of the dead, if properly worshiped, would become agents for good, afforded some measure of relief from that fear. The result has been that these aspects of Buddhism have been so woven into skein of Okinawan belief that their alien origin is barely recognized.

Even though all family members must pray for the deceased's soul in major events, Baksheev (2008), retrieving the information from the Okinawan Government (1992), states that the eldest woman of the family holds the responsibility on all the religious activities related to the ancestors' shrine (the *butsudan*), watching the lunar calendar to announce the next religious rituals, being in charge of the ceremonial food and its placing in the shrine, as well as praying for the family well-being in minor occasions.

The author, in "Becoming Kami? Discourse on Postmortem Ritual Deification in the Ryukyus" (2008), introduces the several *postmortem* rituals to be held by the family of the deceased, including offerings of prayer, food and drink on the household altar - which is passed through generations based on patrilineality - and annual celebrations, such as the *bon*, until the thirty-third year anniversary of the death, when the soul of the dead undergoes deification (Baksheev, 2008). One of the most important rituals to achieve deification is the *senkotsu*, the

bone-washing ritual, which is believed to be imported from Southern China, held in order to remove the pollution of death - in this case, the decaying flesh. Here, there is a correlation between blood/flesh, related to the female essence, and semen/bones, related to the male essence (Baksheev, 2008). In this sense, the bones would be the symbol of patrilineality and, according to locals “only bones are regarded as important. Flesh rots away, but bones are part of your ancestors, so you cannot throw them away” (*in* Baksheev, 2008, p. 315).

However, Samara Konno (2015) establishes an interesting link and interpretation when it comes to the usage of the word “pollution”, with its meaning as “what mixtures”, “what gets in touch with”. There is also the association with the profane (as the flesh and blood, related to the female). Then, there is the role of women in communicating with the ancestors and acting within the transition between the profane and the sacred, which is, acting in behalf of helping the deification process of the ancestors. It is also important to highlight what Baksheev (2008, p. 315-316) observes, that “the ‘androcentric ideology of the ancestral cult’ (J.L. Watson) of China was grafted onto Ryukyuan culture which is characterized by gender balance and the ritual superiority of women who were and still are responsible for the majority of rituals”.

Thus, it is possible to recognize that, in spite of this androcentric belief that supports the cult to the ancestors, the protagonism of women in religious matters is still present. Although it is possible to recognize a significant loss of institutional power of the priestesses after the end of the kingdom, until today women are the ones who have the important role to establish a connection between the material world and the spiritual one. Even after the entry of Confucian and Buddhist ideas of male superiority, the centrality of women’s part is still present when it comes to religious matters in the Ryukyus. It should be noticed that this does not imply the inexistence of gender-related oppression towards those women, as they still live in a patriarchal society, in which gender roles are established considering other aspects than local religion. Still, it should not be ignored that women occupy central positions in this sphere as protagonists in Ryukyuan religiosity.

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