

Chapter 3

Amami Island Religion - Historical Dynamics of the Islanders' Spirit -

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1. Introduction

Generally speaking, Japan's indigenous Shinto and exogenous Buddhism represent the majority religions in Japan. These religions have been recognized as the spiritual pillars of the Japanese. When compared with the history of religion in Japan, "Amami Island religion" can be considered unique for its history as well as for its distant location from mainland Japan. This is because the religious culture which has existed in various parts of the Amami Islands comprise a long-standing spiritual pillar of the islanders. In other words, the Amami Islands have enjoyed a religious culture of the Ryukyu legacy rather than that of mainland Japan. This religious culture informs the spiritual base of the Amami Islands today. For Amami islanders, Buddhism, of course, and even Japan's indigenous Shinto are nothing more than exogenous religions introduced from mainland Japan.

In light of the above, this paper divides the religious history of the Amami Islands into early modern and modern eras. Whereas the early modern era consists of the "Ryukyu legacy religious culture period" and the "Satsuma legacy Buddhism introduction period," the modern era entails the "exogenous religion introduction and missionary period" and the "present Amami Island religion." Finally, this paper describes the ways in which people believed these religions, including the "religion of the Amami Islands and its characteristics" in light of this historical background.

2. Amami Island religion in the early modern era

2.1. Ryukyu legacy religious culture and *noro* belief

A great deal of literature dealing with the history of the Amami Islands divides its history

into "*aman'yu*" (Amami period), "*aji'yu*" (Lords period), "*nahan'yu*" (Ryukyu kingdom period), "*yamaton'yu*" (Shimadzu controlling period) and "*america'yu*" (American controlling period). Records are only available from the Naha period onwards and it was the Ryukyu-dominated Amami Islands that welcomed the first unified regime. There are two theories concerning this period, one that it began in 1266 (SAKAGUCHI 1921, NOBORI 1949) and one that it began in 1440 (*Richo Jitsuroku*). The latter theory is currently the prevailing view. Accordingly, the Amami Islands in the Naha period are said to have lasted for approximately 170 years from 1440 to 1609.

During the Naha period and the reign of the second king SHO Shin (1477-1526) in particular, a centralized governance structure was established by the king whereby administrative officials "*ufuya*" were dispatched from Naha and given responsibility over the islands. "*Noro*" were selected to govern the appointment of the king and to control all religious services in each settlement. The wives, daughters or sisters of the *ufuya* were appointed as *noro*, with each generation of *noro* traveling to Naha to receive a "diploma (letter of appointment)." Kikoe-Ogimi, the sister of the Ryukyu king, reigned as the chief priestess of the *noro* group scattered around the dynasty.

This "*noro* belief" can be traced back to the traditional "*onari-gami* belief" of the Ryukyu / Amami region. In other words, at some stage the *onari-gami* belief that sisters spiritually protect brothers transformed into an explicit political view more suited to the age, namely, the *noro* belief that *noro* would govern settlements and the country. Given this background, King SHO Shin's clever, even manipulative, policy took advantage of the nature of the islanders, notably their susceptibility to the au-

thority of god and superstition; such a policy can be recalled in the legend of the fleeing Heike warrior of the 12th century. Regardless of what the Ryukyu king may have said or done, however, the point is that the *noro* also spoke with the words and the authority of the king, where people are said to have worshipped *noro* as they would the Ryukyu king.

The national centralized divine right system utilizing *noro* in this way lasted for almost 140 years and widely spread to all parts of the Amami Islands, not only to the Ryukyu kingdom. *Noro* single-handedly seized control of religious services as well as exercised political control through agricultural work and the collection of annual taxes in settlements across various parts of the Amami Islands. They also received top sitting positions. As the basis of a theocracy, the *noro* became deeply involved in all aspects of the lives of islanders. That is, islanders offered their rice and wine to *noro* and sought instruction in all aspects of life such as sowing, harvesting and childbirth. The *noro* wore white-sleeved dresses and were adorned with gold hair ornaments. Their clothing was comparable to those of powerful families and was admired by commoners and their daughters (Nazeshi-shi Henshuiinkai 1983a). In addition, even the wives of the highest-ranked officers were ranked below *noro* in the events presided over by *noro* (*ibid.*).

2.2. Ryukyu legacy religious culture and *Yuta* belief

Comparably, the *yuta* (shaman) were introduced to Amami Islands from Ryukyu during the Naha period. As mentioned previously, the wives, daughters or sisters of administrative officials were appointed as *noro* during the rule of King SHO Shin and were succeeded by next-generation females in the same family line or by female relatives. *Yuta*, on the other hand, are individuals who suddenly developed an abnormal mental state (although there were differences in the degree of abnormality between individual *yuta*) as a result of what was determined to be divine possession. It was unpredictable who would be possessed by god and when and where this possession would occur. The period from which *yuta* appeared in Ryukyu and Amami society is not clear. Incidentally, male *yuta* also have

existed as well as female *yuta*; further, one can become a *yuta* after studying the manners of rituals, such as praying and chanting the invocatory verses, under a master *yuta* for about three years according to her or his ability (YAMASHITA 1977, 1982).

A relationship between *yuta* and *noro* is also observed in old literature that describes *yuta* sitting below *noro* during *noro* rituals. However, the period in which both *yuta* and *noro* were involved in such rituals is unclear (*ibid.*). In contrast to *noro* who single-handedly seized control of settlement rituals and politics, *yuta* only dealt with personal problems and played the role of a so-called popular religious person who summoned the spirits of the dead and performed divination and exorcism. As such, the religious functions sought from *noro* and *yuta* were completely different. Nevertheless, they fostered the religious and spiritual unification of individuals and entire settlements during the Naha period.

The Ryukyu legacy of the *noro* and *yuta* beliefs, as illustrated in the *noro* theocracy and in the traditional magic of the *yuta*, are said to have formed the basis of Amami culture. However, upon entering the era of direct Satsuma clan control and particularly after their introduction of the brown sugar planting and purchase system in 1859 (Ansei 6), *noro* and *yuta* began to become the target of oppression from the clan. This is because the *noro* had claimed the island forests and wilderness as “*kamiyama* (god’s mountain)” and had forbidden land clearing by individuals without permission. In response, the clan, who envisaged increasing the sugar cane cultivation of various areas, considered the presence of *noro* and *yuta* as a significant interference to agricultural development (*ibid.*).

Oppression continued intermittently in the modern era where *noro* and *yuta* were considered as harmful age-old folk beliefs and superstition. *Noro* barely escaped this oppression and continued to exist for a period after the Second World War. However, the succession among and between women ceased; their existence as a theocracy eventually died out. *Yuta*, however, remained behind the scenes and escaped oppression. Today, new *yuta* have appeared, with some *yuta* carrying out their activities in the islands. Clients now visit the *yuta*

to ask about the fortunes of their family members in the new year. Others seek the *yuta* to discuss their worries about life and health conditions. In each case, clients usually offer the *yuta* money, bags of salt, and small bottles of *kokuto shochu* (sugarcane distilled spirit).

2.3. Satsuma legacy Buddhism introduction period

Following Ryukyu rule, the Amami islands were subject to direct control of the Satsuma clan for approximately 260 years from 1609 (Keicho 14) to 1871 (Meiji 4), heralding the Yamato period. The Satsuma clan immediately introduced Zen Buddhism to the Amami Islands, marking the introduction of Buddhism to the people of the Amami Islands. As a background to this, a religious inquiry census confirmed that an approved Buddhist temple was issued during the TOKUGAWA Shogunate for two reasons: first, to certify individuals as Christian or non-Christian; and, second, to understand the population of towns and villages and their efforts (TAKEDA 1976). However, as mentioned previously, folk beliefs (*norol/yuta*) had spread throughout Amami and Buddhism had not been conveyed like it had in the Japanese mainland. As a result, the Satsuma clan constructed Zen temples throughout the Amami Islands such as Amami-Oshima's Kannon Temple and Tokunoshima's Azumi temple (both of which are now in ruins) (Nazeshi-shi Henshuiinkai 1983a).

It should be noted that the doctrine nameplates currently found in Amami-Oshima Is. indicate that all the islanders believed in Zen Buddhism and belonged to the Kannon Temple (*ibid.*). However, rather than actually worshipping at Kannon Temple, many islanders continued to adhere to *norol/yuta* beliefs. In fact, many of the visitors to Kannon Temple were Shimadzu officials (NAGOSHI 2002). Essentially, it can be said that the Kannon Temple existed not for the islanders, but for officials visiting the islands from afar. Thus, the Kannon Temple served the function of providing officials with spiritual support and a place to pray for a safe return voyage to Satsuma.

That said, this doesn't mean that the introduction of Buddhism during the Yamato period was

completely unrelated to the people of Amami. Nor can the presence of Buddhist practices amongst the common people over a long period of time simply be devalued as a lesser religion. For example, folk customs roughly comparable to Buddhist practices remain in their own form. The mainland-style tomb system found in old existing tombs and the islanders' Buddhist practices observed in their daily rituals are evidence of such customs. For example, these rituals include the worshipping of memorial tablets on Buddhist altars, the burning of incense and the speaking of the Buddhist languages, "*Hohji*" (Buddhist memorial service) and "*Tattchu*" (a minor temple in the site of main temple). These Buddhist practices can be understood as having been actively incorporated, first, by island officials and influential people who were in contact with the Satsuma officials, and then gradually spreading to other people.

3. Amami Island religion in the modern era

3.1. The establishment of Shinto shrines and *haibutsukishaku*

Various religions from mainland Japan reached the Amami Islands along with the wave of modernization. The first wave included Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity, which were introduced relatively early in the Meiji era. The second wave was made up of new religions including Soka Gakkai, which became active following mainland Japan's post-war recovery. In other words, "the modernization of Amami Island religion" occurred together with the dawn of the modern era. It was a process whereby traditional folk beliefs, such as *norol* and *yuta*, came into contact with various religions introduced from mainland Japan, transforming into the religious culture of today.

Based on the above, the first exogenous religion to be introduced to the Amami Islands from mainland Japan in the modern era was Shinto, whose diffusion was supported by the religious policy of the Meiji government. Shinto shrines of various sizes were built throughout the Amami Islands, one after another following the construction of the Takachiho Shinto shrine in Amami-Oshima Is. in 1869 (Meiji 2) (Fig. 1). Meanwhile, all Zen temples were reduced to ruins as a result of the

haibutsukishaku (abolishing Buddhism and destroying Buddha statues) movement. As a result, all Buddhist monks returned to mainland Japan. The Shinto priests of the Takachiho Shinto shrine further implemented *haibutsukishaku* in the Amami Islands in the form of incinerating all Buddhist statues remaining on the island, pushing the heads off Buddhist statues and burning the Buddhist altars and memorial tablets for ancestors of commoners (NOBORI 1949).

3.2. Buddhist missionary work

Jodo Shinshu (or Shin Buddhism) was the form of Buddhism re-introduced to the Amami Islands after Buddhism had been eradicated through the *haibutsukishaku* movement (Fig. 2). Preaching locations were established in the city area of Amami-Oshima Is. in 1878 (Meiji 11). Missionaries also spread to various areas using the city area of Amami-Oshima Is. as a base (Honpa Honganji Kagoshima Betsuin 1925). However, it appears that these missionaries initially faced considerable difficulty. At this time, the impact of state Shinto in the Amami Islands had been strengthened following the oppression of Buddhism through the *haibutsukishaku* movement; Shinto shrines were being founded in various areas one after another.

The Amami Islanders didn't have a particularly good image of Buddhism at the time. They even seemed to resist the reintroduction of Buddhism in the modern era. One of the reasons for this is that, as already mentioned, Buddhism (Zen Buddhism) had only been the faith of Satsuma officials and hadn't provided the function of religious and

spiritual support for the common people in the past. Furthermore, Satsuma officials increased the production of brown sugar in the closing days of the TOKUGAWA Shogunate, thereby forcing hard labor upon the islanders. The officials asserted a dominant relationship, wherein the islanders were compelled to endure harsh living conditions. It cannot be denied that the islanders' feelings towards Buddhism overlapped with their negative experiences with and images of Satsuma officials. Consequently, the islanders, unlike others residing in different regions of Japan, didn't oppose the destruction of Zen temples and the thorough burning of Buddhist items through the *haibutsukishaku* movement. Given this background, it is no wonder that the Jodo Shinshu missionaries freshly deployed in the modern era encountered various difficulties from the islanders.

Jodo Shinshu gradually began to implement various charitable activities throughout the Amami Islands under these difficult circumstances. Many



Fig. 1. A shinto shrine in Amami-Oshima Is.
Photo: Megumi TAKARABE.



Fig. 2. Buddhism temple "Taishoji temple" in pre-war time (A) and post-war (B). Photo: Megumi TAKARABE.

of these activities were associated with women and children. They included women's association activities, women's colleges and kindergartens, and single mother household relief activities. The fact that the so-called house (family)-based "parishioner system" found in traditional mainland Japanese Buddhism did not exist in Amami-Oshima Is. is thought to be the background behind these activities (FUJII 1979, 1982). So, there was a need for Amami Island missionaries to devise methods of propagation whereby they became involved not only with temples, but with the wider community (KOUDATE 1989).

Meanwhile, local residents had a need for these activities. Although the Amami Islands had welcomed the modern era, education and welfare facilities had not been fully developed and the islanders' financially stringent living environment continued from the early modern period. In areas where the government provided little assistance, the various charitable activities slowly gained the support of the islanders. For example, the priests sometimes coordinated labor-management relations through the industrialization of *Oshima Tsumugi* (the traditional textile in Amami); they even became chaplains for the prison. Thus, opportunities for islanders to come into contact with the Buddhist doctrine through charitable activities increased, as did the number of islanders attending temples and adhering to the beliefs of Buddhism (TAKARABE 2011).

3.3. Catholic missionary work

Catholic missionary work began in the Amami Islands in 1892 (Meiji 25) following the re-introduction of Buddhism. There was no sense of resistance by the islanders, especially when compared to their aversion to Jodo Shinshu; rather, Catholicism, together with Western civilization, appears to have been accepted smoothly in the wave of modernization. At the time, a heavy burden was placed on islanders through harsh living conditions which involved offerings to *noro* and *yuta* as well as maintenance costs and forced labor during settlement rituals. When placed in this context, Catholicism became attractive as an escape from such a life.

In addition, in a trend of the modern times, Amami Island intellectuals were not satisfied with tradi-

tional folk beliefs. Islanders who challenged these superstitions and sought the religion and values of the West began to enter the Catholic faith. Moreover, the Catholic Church granted money to excellent students with college aspirations who would otherwise have given up hope as due to poverty. The Church assisted them in furthering their education in mainland Japan, with parents supporting their children's educational and spiritual interests. The fact that missionaries boldly employed local residents and provided them with salaries to build churches made them very welcomed in the settlements. So, it cannot be denied that the overwhelming financial power of Catholicism was attractive to the impoverished Amami Island residents in this way. From the outset, then, Catholic missionary work was vigorously performed throughout the Amami Islands. Catholicism soon gained prestige from the islanders who built churches in settlements one after another.

However, a Catholicism denunciation campaign commenced from around the early Showa period. At that time, churches were attacked, priests were repatriated and believers were harassed. Increasingly, moreover, the Amami Islands had become important as a fortress for defense given the growing geopolitical and military tensions in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. As there was already a significant number of Amami Island Catholics, the presence of their missionaries and their believers proved to be an annoyance for the military authorities and Amami Island leaders who tried to keep the "peace" by extremely oppressing the practice of Catholicism (KOSAKAI 1984, ANZAI 1984).

Although the presence and role of priests temporarily subsided during the war period because of Japanese military oppression, Catholicism rapidly recovered in the Amami Islands following the war. Namely, the Amami Island Catholics leveraged the islanders' experience under United States military rule during the "*america'yu*" (American period: 1945-1953). The Catholics wanted to be included under the jurisdiction of the Capuchin Church in America and they wanted to work with Capuchin priests. Old church grounds and ruined buildings were returned to the church and majestic new

churches were built (Fig. 3). With the direct support of U.S. military, the number of Catholics increased beyond pre-war numbers (Catholic Church of Santa Maria Island 1991, Naze-shi Shi Hensan Iinkai 1983b).

In the post-war period, Catholicism actively tackled the problem of leprosy. Priests carried out activities, including putting a stop to sterilization and abortion amongst believers entering the faith, protecting children after birth and establishing facilities for fostering infants (SUGIYAMA 2007). At the time, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (now Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) applied pressure to stop this protection of lepers. However, Catholics consistently continued their relief efforts. It was in this way, with overwhelming physical and economic support since the American period, that welfare facilities were established throughout the Amami Islands and the foundation of Amami Island Catholic Welfare was revitalized. At the same time, the problems of leprosy and poverty were addressed (*ibid.*).

3.4. Soka Gakkai missionary work and present Amami Islands religion

The return of the Amami Islands to mainland Japan following the American period in 1953 (Showa 28) saw many new religions commence missionary work throughout the islands. Many Amami Island residents moved to mainland Japan in search of work during this period of rapid economic growth. Amami society changed dramatically as a result of the declining population and aging of settlements. Soka Gakkai actively operated and increased its number of followers in this period of social change in the Amami Islands by highlighting itself as a faith with more worldly benefits (INOUE 1982, NAKAMAKI 1982). Soka Gakkai has already built churches throughout the islands and is still actively carrying out activities towards the acquisition of new believers.

As described above, various religions such as Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity and even new religions such as Soka Gakkai, etc. have been introduced from mainland Japan since the modern age during the pre-war, post-war and rapid economic growth periods. Each religion has expanded

throughout the islands through missionary work. During a certain period before the war, Buddhism, Catholicism and Tenrikyo set up temples and churches based in locations as close as the old Naze Harbor. The area was even known as a “center of exogenous religion” (IKENO 1984). From this, Amami Island religious history in the modern era can be understood as part exogenous religion and as part missionary period.

Currently, Catholicism is the predominant religion of the Amami Islands followed by Buddhism and Soka Gakkai. In particular, the large number of Amami Catholics can be seen nationwide. The splendid prominence of Catholic churches and their close proximity to settlements suggest that Catholicism is deeply-rooted in the Amami Islands. However, given that Amami islanders have an equally deep-rooted belief in former Ryukyu religious culture as well as exogenous religions such as Catholicism, it is fair to say that the Amami Islands are in a period of “establishment and mixing of religions.”

4. Conclusion

This paper divided the early modern period of Amami Island religion into the Ryukyu legacy religious culture period and the Satsuma legacy Buddhism introduction period. The paper also characterized the modern period as the exogenous religion introduction, the missionary period and the present Amami Island religion. Each section of this paper likewise provided historical background about these significant religions. Specifically, Zen



Fig. 3. Catholic church in Amami-Oshima Is. Photo: Megumi TAKARABE.

Buddhism was introduced to the Amami Islands, which were until then (the Yamato period) free from Buddhism and primarily governed by folk beliefs. However, Zen Buddhism was primarily a religion for Satsuma officials visiting the islands from far away and, as such, Buddhism did not really reach the commoners. The modern period saw Shinto, Jodo Shinshu, Catholicism and, after the war, Soka Gakkai introduced from the mainland. Through missionary activities, these religions became established in Amami society, further transforming islander beliefs in the *norō* and *yuta*. And because there was no established religion, missionaries often considered the Amami Islands as an easy environment in which to advance their religious and political interests without inviting heavy criticism and resistance from the locals.

Nevertheless, Ryukyu folk beliefs existed in the absence of traditional Japanese religions. In other words, Ryukyu spiritual views and practices lie at the base of contemporary Amami Island religious culture. Japanese mainland Shinto, Buddhism and, subsequently, Catholicism and other new religions now form a multilayered, religious culture in Amami Island. As described above, Amami Island religious history has followed a unique course compared to the history of religions in the Japanese mainland. The religious culture of the Amami Islands has changed, at times rapidly and at other times gradually, with islanders actively negotiating their folk beliefs with exogenous religions since modern times.

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