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Solar Kingdom of Ryukyu: the formation of a Cosmivision in the Southern Islands of the Japanese Archipelago

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Abstract:

On the Okinawa Island, the largest of the island chain, the Kingdom of Shuri was established around the 15th century A.D. Its political ideology was characterized by a Sun ritual, and the king was worshiped as a child of the Sun. Women had a sacred role on these islands, and priestesses had the role of introducing sacred power from the Sun to the royal palace. In the religious thought of this kingdom, Kudaka-jima Island was the most sacred. This tiny island in the southeastern sea off the shore of Okinawa Island occupied an important position in royal rituals, including an enthronement ceremony of the highest priestesses who were close kin of the king. In the Urasoe Dynasty, predecessor of the Shuri Dynasty, it was possible to see the rising Sun of the December solstice behind the Kudaka-jima Island, and the ritual on the December solstice was probably performed for the rebirth of the king. During the proceeding Gusuku Period between the 13th and the 14th centuries, several castles were constructed there with gates that opened toward the June solstice. This custom was meant to introduce the strongest power of the Sun into the sacred place of the castle. On Kudaka-jima Island facing these castles, there is a folk belief in celebrating both June and December solstices. This paper traces the process in which a primary folk belief of the Sun had been transformed into a political ideology in which the king himself became the Sun, radiating the land and the people.

Keywords: Ryukyu (Okinawa) Islands, Shuri Dynasty, sun rituals, solstice

Introduction

The Japanese Archipelago is a long island chain, extending almost 20 degrees of latitude (from 25 to 45 degrees North). This north-south extension provides an interesting situation for the comparison of star lore and cosmology within the archipelago. In the “middle,” there is “Japanese” culture with a long history influenced by China

and the Korean Peninsula. A star lore and cosmology developed, based on the mixture of Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, and probably indigenous animistic folk beliefs (Dolce 2006; Sano 1994). On the other hand, in the “north” there is a hunter-gatherer group, Hokkaido Ainu, which has a rich star lore tradition that is mainly based on animism and has some relevance to those of ethnic groups in northeast Asia (Sueoka 1979). In the “south,” the Ryukyu Kingdom developed, which had maintained independence until the beginning of the 17th century. Their lore is built by the mixture of Chinese, Japanese, and indigenous traditions which probably include some Austronesian elements (Goto 2010, 2015). In this paper, I analyze the development of the sun worship that culminated in the Ryukyu Kingdom. I will trace the development of an ideology that placed kings as the children of the sun. I also attempt to relate this royal ideology to folk beliefs concerning the sun.

Ryukyu Islands

The Ryukyu Islands lie at the southern end of the Japanese Archipelago, between Kyushu Island and Taiwan. (Figure 1) The largest island of the Ryukyu Islands is the Okinawa Island where the Ryukyu Kingdom flourished between the 15th and the 19th centuries. The Kingdom extended its original trade relations to include China and Southeast Asia. Unlike the main Japanese islands, the Ryukyu Islands have been little influenced either by Buddhism

Figure 1. Map of Ryukyu Islands



or Shintoism. Their indigenous religion is based on shamanism until today.

The earliest human occupation of the Ryukyu Islands is now traced back to 35,000 B.P. and the oldest human remains in Japan so far have been found from these islands (Kaifu et al. 2015). Since 9,000 B.P. a ‘shell-mound’ period started, based on a foraging economy with distinctive pottery. By the period between the 10th and 12th centuries A.D., the foraging economy had shifted to an agricultural economy, and this marks the beginning of the Gusuku Period. *Gusuku* literally means ‘castle,’ and many castles were constructed throughout the islands. A *gusuku* was a residence and a fortification that included a sacred shrine and was constructed by local chiefs. In this period, social stratification was marked based on agriculture and domestication (Asato 1990).

Local chiefs in the 13th and 14th centuries competed with each other by trading with China and Southeast Asia to obtain prestige goods such as ceramics and iron

tools, and distributed them to their followers. Small chiefdoms were united into three kingdoms by the late 14th century into the Northern Kingdom, the Central Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. These three kingdoms were eventually united by the Central Kingdom and this marked the beginning of the Ryukyu Kingdom (Asato 1998).

The Ryukyu Kingdom consisted of three dynasties: the Urasoe Dynasty whose era was still in the Three Kingdoms Period; the First Sho Dynasty, between A.D. 1406 to 1468; and the Second Sho Dynasty, between A.D. 1470 to 1879. In 1879 the Ryukyu Kingdom came to an end, right after the Tokugawa Government was collapsed by civil war and the Modern Japanese era had started.

During the era of King Shonei of the Second Dynasty, the Satsuma Clan, the southernmost clan of Kyushu Island, invaded the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1609 (Asato 2006; Irumada and Tomiyama 2002). Then the Satsuma Clan subordi-

nated the Ryukyu Kingdom, but let it appear to be independent, since the *Satsuma* Clan wanted to take advantage of the imported goods from China and Southeast Asia that the Ryukyu Kingdom had obtained through trade. Along with this trade, the Chinese geomancy practice of *feng shui* and the calendar had been introduced. Also throughout the islands, there were situated marine affairs stations to watch the going and coming of ships (Irumada and Tomiyama 2002).

Omoro-soshi, a collection of chants compiled (between A.D. 1531 and 1632) by the Second Sho Dynasty is full of expressions of the King as the Sun. I examine the development of the thought of the king as the Sun in the Ryukyu Kingdom.

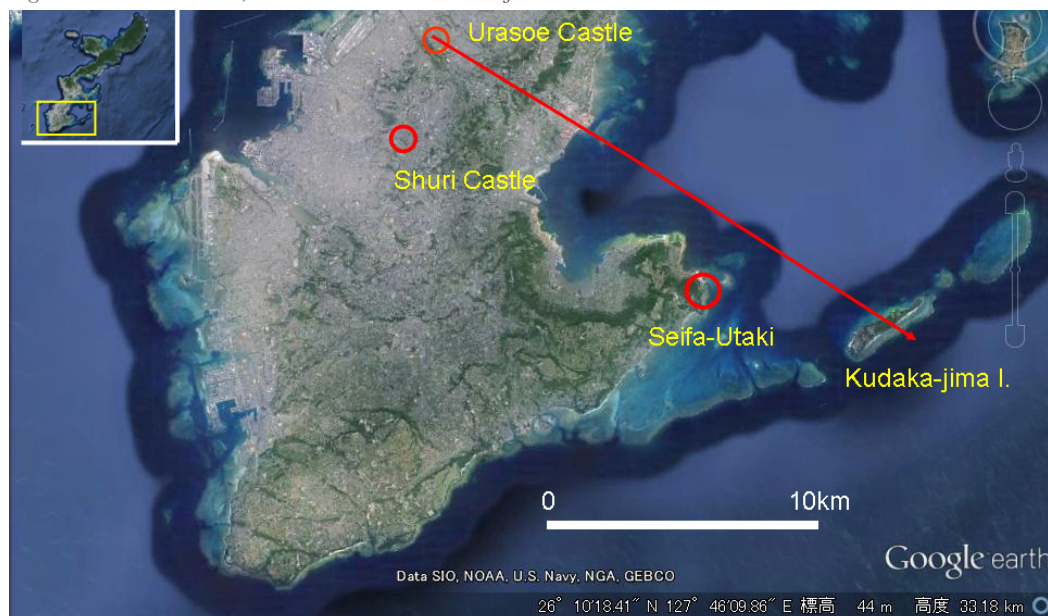
Three Kingdom Period and the Unification of the Islands

The Ryukyu Kingdom that united the islands in the 15th century originated in the Urasoe Dynasty of the Central Kingdom. Urasoe is located 5 km north of Shuri where the Ryukyu Dynasty was finally established. (Figure 2) Before coming to

Shuri, there were 10 generations in the Urasoe dynasty whose royal history was not linear at all. The Urasoe Dynasty consisted of three discontinuous lineages. The first king, Shunten, was said to be a son of Minamoto Tametomo, a legendary samurai hero. Legend has it that after being defeated by a rival samurai clan in Kyoto, Tametomo escaped by boat and arrived at the Ryukyu Islands. Then Shunten was born to him, and became the first King of the Urasoe Dynasty. His lineage continued for three generations, but Eiso became the 4th king by abdication by an emperor in favor of a more virtuous successor: *zenjo* (禅讓) that is the Chinese philosophy of ideal succession of the emperorship.

The final king of the Urasoe Dynasty, King Satto who lived in the latter half of the 14th century, was invited to Shuri Castle to construct a new capital: again *zenjo* succession. King Satto was succeeded by his son Bunei, but King Bunei was defeated by the Sho Clan. The Sho Clan then founded the Sho Dynasty at the beginning of the 15th century, and defeated the Northern and Southern Kingdoms,

Figure 2. Urasoe Castle, Shuri Castle and Kudaka-jima Island



uniting the islands. The First Sho Dynasty continued for 7 generations, and the Second Sho Dynasty continued for 19 generations (Asato 2006).

Solar Kingship from Urasoe Castle to Kudaka-jima Island

As already mentioned, the first King Shunten of the Urasoe Dynasty is said to have been a son of the samurai hero Minamoto Tametomo. On the southeastern end of the castle, there is a rock called Tametomo Rock (or *hanareji*, meaning ‘separated rock’ in the Ryukyu dialect). Looking towards the southeast from this rock, there lies Kudaka-jima Island, which is the most sacred island in the kingdom (Kojima 1987). (Figure 3) From Urasoe Castle, the December solstice sun is seen to rise behind this island. (Figure 4) In *Omoro-soshi* chants, there is a frequently used expression of *teda-ga-ana*, that means ‘the hole of the Sun.’ Since Kudaka-jima Island is a low island, when viewed from Urasoe Castle, the Sun appears to rise from ‘the hole

of the sun’ at the horizon of the sea (Wakugami 1992).

There is also a royal tomb, Urasoe Yodore in Urasoe Castle. This tomb was constructed by the 4th king of the Urasoe Dynasty, King Eiso (A.D. 1260-1299). King Eiso constructed this tomb and is often referred to as the child of the sun; he is the key person when considering the development of solar ideology of the dynasty. Legend has it that the wife of Chief Iso had a dream of the Sun coming into her breast, and she was pregnant the next morning. She begot a baby who later became King Eiso. When grown, he became the king by *zenjo* succession. Later kings of the Sho dynasty often referred to this King Eiso to ascertain their royal status of the solar dynasty.

The tomb consists of two spaces surrounded by stone walls under a high cliff. Going down to the tomb from the castle, we see Kudaka-jima Island from the descending approach. When going through the first gate, *Anshinmon* (or ‘dark gate’), we

Figure 3. Kudaka-jima Island, seen from Tametomo Rock.



Figure 4. December Solstice Sunrise seen from Urasoe Castle (Dec. 22, 2015).



come to the dark front yard. Before being destroyed in WWII, this yard was a kind of tunnel. If we go further through the second gate, *Nakamon*, (or ‘middle gate’), we suddenly come to the bright main yard surrounded by white shining coral rocks. Here lie royal tombs including the grave of King Eiso. The approach from the dark front yard to the bright main yard may signify the shift from the dark world of death to the heavenly world, *Nirai-kanai*, ‘full of sunlight.’ Interestingly enough, the Sun of the December solstice is seen to rise just in the *Nakamon* gate that connects the world of darkness to that of light. Seen from this tomb, the direction to Kudaka-jima Island appears to be the direction of the heavenly world (Asato 2006).

Kudaka-jima Island

Kudaka-jima Island was the most sacred island in the Ryukyu Islands. The size of this island is only 1.38 km² and its maximum height is 17.5m. (Figure 5) This small island is known for the ritual *Izaiho*

that has been held every 12 years during the year of horse. This ritual was last performed in 1978, and unfortunately ceased after that. A series of rituals were held for five days until one day before the December solstice, in order to initiate the priestess.

Kudaka-jima islanders consider that the direction of sunrise is sacred, since there is an ideal space, *Nira-hara* or *Nirai-kanai* from which gods visit the island. This place is also where ancestors live and the fertility of crops and sea food came from. As already mentioned, the Sun rises at *teda-ga-ana*, ‘the hole of the Sun,’ that lies toward *Nirai-kanai*. The islanders pray toward this direction, eastward. On the other hand, the Sun sets in *tida-banta*, which means ‘the cliff where the Sun hides.’

The islanders consider that the direction of this sunset is impure. Once a year, they put harmful insects on a model raft made of banana tree and ritually drift them to this direction in order to prevent a crop

Figure 5. Kudaka-jima Island



failure due to insect plague. On the island, there is a proverb saying that to make a wish, one should finish before the Sun comes to the culmination. The islanders consider that the Sun before noon has a stronger power, and after noon the sun loses its power. The islanders were rather scared of the Sun in the culmination at noon. The sacrifice of the dead and the ritual to remove harmful insects should be done in the afternoon. They also sacrificed the dead in this direction, and the dead were considered to follow the setting Sun. Both the Sun and the souls go through the underground or under the sea, and finally reach the *Nira-hara* in the eastern sea (Higa 1993).

Kaberu-hama Beach is located at the northeastern-most corner of the island. *Kaberu* means 'the field of the god,' and this is the place where the heavenly god Amamikyo first ascended. At this beach, rituals are held in February and June in the old calendar. The June ritual held on the solstice is said to be *miruku-gwati*, which means 'beautiful' or 'new' June. This is the time

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for the Sun to be reborn. On this day, god or probably the Sun-god descends on the small rock in the sea and then lands on this beach (Higa 1993). The rock is called *Ugan-jima*, which means 'the island for prayer.' The villagers said that the June solstice Sun is seen to rise behind this rock. The trail is extended from this beach southwestward to the village, and this trail is said to be the road of the Sun. I suspect that this ritual is to introduce the strongest power of the sun at June solstice to the village.

According to the creation myth, this island is the original place of wheat. Actually rice does not grow on this island. The legend has it that a white shining pot was drifting and beached on Ishiki-hama Beach, on the east side of the island. Once opened, the pot contained seeds of five crops, including wheat. The wheat was dedicated to the royal palace and after that the king visited this island to celebrate this event (Suetsugu 1995).

Another legend has it that the daughter of the founder of Kudaka-jima Island

served as a priestess in the royal palace. She was beautiful and loved by the king. She became his wife and got pregnant. But other women who were jealous abused her, saying that the lady broke wind and they laughed at her. Being ashamed, she returned to the island and begat a boy.

The boy, when becoming seven years old, went to the Ishiki-hama Beach and prayed to the gods. After seven days, a golden gourd drifted to him. He dared to see King Tamagusuku, the fourth king in the royal lineage founded by ‘the solar king’ Eiso (the eighth king of Urasoe Dynasty originated in Shunten), and dedicated the golden gourd to the king. He said to the king, “if there is a woman who never breaks wind and plants it, it will produce a lot of fruits.” The king realized his fault, and came to know that this wise boy was his son. The king adopted him as his successor, and the boy became the fifth dynast, King Seii. After that, kings came to visit Kudaka-jima Island to get the first crop of wheat and also to worship the Sun at this beach (Suetsugu 1995).

The legend of a shining pot or golden gourd drifting to the Ishiki-hama Beach, which is the place to pray for the sun, strongly suggests that the origin of wheat was closely related to worship of the Sun.

Pre-stage of Solar Kingdom

There are *Omoro-soshi* chants, saying that the gates of some castles were constructed toward the East and toward the ‘hole of the Sun.’ In a previous paper, I offered the interpretation of these chants to say that the sunlight penetrates the castle through the gate opened toward the Sun, and that the chiefs get sacred power from the Sun, leading to a flourishing country. I mentioned that the new gates of some castles appear to be directed to June solstice sunrise. In particular, I referred to Tamagusuku Castle, where the gate made of a natural cave

serves the same purpose (Goto 2011). (Figure 6) Here the June solstice Sun actually rises up in the gate (Figure 7), and today this phenomenon is used in the festival for the revitalization of a town. (Interestingly enough, the December solstice Sun is seen to set through this gate, if viewed from outside.)

Next, I refer to the archaeologist, Susumu Asato’s (2006) hypothesis. He found that the alignments of the palaces before and after unification tended to shift from south or eastward to westward. He determined that the palaces facing the south or eastward were often constructed before the unification reflecting the idea of introducing sacred power, *sezi*, from the Sun. On the other hand, after unification, the royal palace in the Shuri Castle faced westward reflecting the idea of the king himself being the Sun (or the child of the Sun), radiating sunlight toward the people.

Solar Kingdom in Shuri

After unification of the islands by the Sho Dynasty in the Shuri district of Naha City, there was a growing tendency to see the king as the Sun itself. *Omoro-soshi* is full of such expressions (Hokama 2000a, 2000b). For example:

In Shuri Castle lives a child of the Sun,
He built a beautiful stone wall.

[No. 217 song in Volume 5]
(Hokama 2000a)

Mentioned above, *teda* means the Sun, and *teda-ko* means the child of the Sun. *Teda* is a symbolic expression applied to king as well as local chiefs, but *teda-ko* is used only for the king. So originally, the Sun was a symbolic expression for someone with political power, but the child of the Sun was specifically used to mean king or paramount chief (Irumada and Tomiyama 2002; Suetsugu 1995).

Figure 6. The gate of Tamagusuku Castle, seen from outside.



Figure 7. June Solstice Sunrise at the gate of Tamagusuku Castle, seen from inside (June 22, 2015).



During the Ryukyu Dynasty, the historical record states that they performed the same ritual at the December solstice and the New Year. At this ritual, the king stood at the balcony of the palace and

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faced westward (Asato 2006; Irumada and Tomiyama 2002). The followers in the royal garden looked up eastward at the king symbolizing himself a Sun god. This ritual was of clearly Chinese influence, since before the ritual, the king worshipped the north direction, i.e., Polar Star and the forbidden city of Beijing, China (Ikemiya 1990; Maehira 1989). But I argue that its basic meaning must have been to pray for the rejuvenation of the king as the Sun, and this thought was inherited from the Urasoe Dynastic era.

When a king died and a new king came up to the palace for the first time, he passed through a particular gate, *Keiseimon*, which means ‘the gate for succession (of

the King),’ and *Bifukumon* that means ‘beautiful and happy gate.’ These gates were usually used only by women officials, but at the time of succession they were used by the new king. He passed from the eastern end of the castle through *Keiseimon* and *Bifukumon*, and moved westward to the palace. So the new king seems to have behaved as a rising Sun. Also when the king died, the coffin of the king was carried out through the gate located in the west side of the castle (Maehira 1989).

In addition, the *Keiseimon* appears to be directed toward the December solstice sunrise. Considering the azimuth and altitude of the Sun at 8:00 to 10:00 in the morning when the main ceremony was held, the gate corresponds to the direction of the December solstice sunrise. But unfortunately, the detailed description of the December solstice ritual does not mention the orbit of the Sun or these gates at all.

Dual Kingship

After unification of the kingdom, the ritual of receiving sunlight continued, and it was held by official priestesses. In the Ryukyu Islands, there is a traditional belief that women are more sacred than men: this belief is called *onarigami*, and this means that men are guarded by their close relatives, such as aunts or sisters.

Through the process of the establishment of the Shuri Dynasty, a gender division of the role developed: the king as a Sun to govern the kingdom and the women as priestesses to take a religious role. This is a type of ‘dual kingship’ that consists of combining the male political authority and female sacred power. *Kikoe-ookimi* is the highest priestess and she was *onarigami* to the King (Irumada and Tomiyama 2002).

In Shuri Castle, there is a sacred space, *Kyo-no-uchi*, where only priestesses could enter, and there they worshipped the Sun to introduce its sacred power to the king’s

palace and everywhere in the country (Suetsugu 2012). At certain times of the year, the priestesses opened the sacred doors to introduce sunlight into this space. Concerning this custom, there is an *Omoro-soshi* chant, saying “Let *Kikoe-ookimi*, the highest priestess and the king work in close cooperation to protect this country where the Sun is shining beautifully” (Hokama 2000a). The expression that the king as the Sun and *Kikoe-ookimi* work in close cooperation may symbolize the motif of a “primordial pair and sacred marriage (Hieros Gamos)” seen in the creation myth of the Ryukyu Islands.

There are differing opinions whether the Kudaka-jima Island was visible from Shuri Castle or not. But the Sho Dynasty settled the Benga Mine Utaki Shrine on the eastern side of the castle to worship the Kudaka-jima Island. They constructed a stone paved road for easy access by the priestess as well as the king to this shrine. In *Ryukyukoku Yuraiki (The Origin of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Volume 1)*, there is a description that the king worshipped Kudaka-jima Island from Bengataki Utaki Shrine (Suetsugu 1995). In the small shrine on this sacred place, we could see an epitaph of important kings of both the Urasoe and Sho Dynasties, such as, Shunten, Eiso, Satto and so on, suggesting continuous worship of Kudaka-jima Island for the Sun ritual from the Urasoe to the Shuri Dynasties.

Finally, I mention briefly the most sacred shrine of the islands. Seifa-Utaki Shrine is the most sacred shrine, since the succession rite of *Kikoe-ookimi*, of the highest priestess was held there. Seifa-Utaki is located at the opposite side of the Kudaka-jima Island. In particular, the sacred space behind the divided rocks was also the place to worship Kudaka-jima Island. The white sand collected from Kudaka-jima Island was spread on the ground to purify the shrine.

At the succession ritual, *Kikoe-ookimi* was supposed to arrive at this shrine around 9:00 in the evening. After praying at the three altars at midnight, she was supposed to sleep in a temporary palace in front of the shrine. In her bed, two golden pillows were prepared: one pillow for her and another pillow for the god, probably the Sun god coming from Kudaka-jima Island. They say that when the first sunlight coming from behind the Kudaka-jima Island, shines on the high place of the rock in the divided rocks it is a mark that the god descended to this shrine. Again this is the motif of a sacred marriage (Nakamatsu 1992).

Discussion

Solar kingship that sees the king as a child of the Sun does not seem to have been originally from the Ryukyu Islands. In the creation myth, the heavenly goddess Amamiku, or Amamikyo, descended to the earth or drifted to the island. She created the islands, and then settled the primordial seven shrines. Then Amamiku distributed the seed of crops such as rice on Tamagusuku, and wheat, millet, etc. on Kudaka-jima Island (Suetsugu 1995). So in the creation myth it seems the Sun did not play a particularly important role.

In a previous paper, I described a rich star lore among the Ryukyu islanders. In particular, they observe the rise of Pleiades in the eastern sky at dusk as an index to seed wheat. Also in indigenous belief, it is natural to see the east as the sacred direction for praying for fertility. The aim to obtain sacred power from the Sun was a widespread custom among the village folks as well as chiefly clans. I pointed out that the gates of some castle sites had been reconstructed to be directed toward June solstice for the maximum effect of sunlight. The mention of June solstice ritual is rare in the Shuri Dynasty Period; but there is one description in *Ryukyukoku Yuraiki* that

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on the lucky day around June 1st in the old calendar, the gates of the Shuri castle were opened in the early morning to introduce fortune. I suspect that this ritual is a remnant of “opening the gate eastward” (Naha City Education Board 1968).

In historical records and *Omoro-soshi* chants, the king who was the child of the Sun was often described as a heavenly god: “The Sun in Shuri and the Sun in heaven should be united together.” It seems that the king as Sun took the part of the heavenly god in the creation myth. In the Shuri Dynasty, the king himself became the Sun radiating for others with a sacred power, and the priestesses were continually supplying sacred power to the king. But once a year, the king himself had to be rejuvenated at the December solstice ritual that was inherited from the Urasoe Dynasty. It seems that the continual rebirth of the king as the child of the Sun had become the central theme of the royal ritual of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

Conclusion

After the unification of the islands by the Central Kingdom, there seems to have occurred a transformation of religious thought. I suspect that it was related to restructuring local beliefs in the Sun with the royal cosmology of the Ryukyu Kingdom. In this process, the worship of the December solstice and Kudaka-jima Island inherited from the Urasoe Dynasty was transformed into an elaborate royal ritual based on a dual structure. This resulted in the formation of a cosmivision that is significantly different from those of other parts of Japan.

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