

## REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Religion, Gender, and Okinawan Studies

RØKKUM, ARNE. *Goddesses, Priestesses, and Sisters: Mind, Gender and Power in the Monarchic Tradition of the Ryukyus*. Oslo Studies in Social Anthropology. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1998. viii + 281 pages. Illustrations, figures, maps, glossary, bibliography, indexes. Cloth US\$55.00; ISBN 82-00-12842-3.

SERED, SUSAN. *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. viii + 298 pages. Plates, appendices, references, index. Paper US\$19.95; ISBN 0-19-512487-1.

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, studies of gender and religion in Okinawan culture have continued to remain a fertile ground for many scholars. The two books, both written by social anthropologists, undertake very different projects despite their shared focus on the tradition of female religious specialists. They differ significantly in terms of methodology, location of field sites, and uses of history. The authors also differ from each other in their command of the languages (both written and spoken), and in their understanding of previous scholarship.

Røkkum's book is not easy, and is recommended for specialists in semiotics and Okinawan studies. Someone like myself, with a limited background in semiotics, will nonetheless find his analysis insightful and worthy. Methodologically, Røkkum bases himself on the studies of human consciousness and cognition proposed by Giambattista Vico and Charles Pierce. In addition, Røkkum frequently makes recourse to the body of classical social science, including the work of Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, Hertz, Hocart, van Gennep, and others. Although all these theories are by now classical, his analysis appears neither obsolete nor conjectural, but is well-grounded in history and ethnography.<sup>1</sup> His thorough treatment of the history of Okinawan religion is highly commendable and includes meticulous citation of works by foundational authors, such as Sakima Kōei, Iha Fuyū, Miyagi Eishō, and others, as well as essential historical documents such as *Nyōkan Ososhi* and *Ryūkyū Koku Yuraiiki*. Røkkum is not only well-versed in the literature on Okinawan culture and the history of its religion but also has a good command of the spoken vernacular of his field site, which is reflected in his use of indigenous vocabulary throughout the text.

Røkkum's monograph is the product of three and a half years of fieldwork on the island of Yonaguni, which lies at the very southwestern end of the Ryukyu archipelago. Røkkum focuses on continuity, or "modifications" in Vico's term, rather than on survivals of disappearing tradition. His observation thus holds that "the formalized encounter of priestesses and village councilors reiterates a pattern, by calendrical exactitude, of the sharing of

power, which once underpinned the order of a Kingdom” (252). In the two introductory chapters, Røkkum lays out essential themes familiar to many Okinawan specialists; first, the dualities of male secular leadership and female hieratic leadership as the essence of a Ryukyuan diarchic model of governance; and, second, the importance of cross siblingship or the brother-sister (*bigi-bunai*) dyad and the power of sister as spiritual guardian.

These are themes to which a number of Okinawan specialists have given attention in the past, but Røkkum’s careful treatment adds further illuminative dimensions to the research. Drawing on both historical and ethnographic sources, he convincingly demonstrates that “male-female duality is prototypical” in Okinawan society. Although the brother-sister dyad was during the course of history at times replaced by the husband-wife link, a cosmologically derived male-female complementarity was the center piece of social institutions; i.e., gender preference has remained unchallenged. He writes: “A semiotic argument of gender preference inheres in any replicative pattern of power. A gender model of governance in the Ryukyuan polity was characterized by alternation: between man and woman in functions at court and in functions of worship” (72). It was, then, a mythologically conceived role of sister as the “sister goddess,” which served as a model for this type of relationship. As Røkkum states, “only women can possibly have access to sacra” (72), and a sister assumes the metaphoric role of a tutelary goddess to the brother as well as to the king.

In the remaining parts of the book, Røkkum gives a detailed description of his field research, which shows beyond doubt that his theoretical interpretations are embodied in his ethnographic data and vice versa. Space does not permit me to go into the specifics of his ethnographic findings, but Røkkum’s book is an important addition to both anthropology and Okinawan cultural studies. One minor reservation I have about this book is Røkkum’s complex writing style that sometimes, especially where he presents theoretical arguments, hinders the reader’s understanding of the text.

Susan Sered’s *Women of the Sacred Groves* is based upon a year-long period of fieldwork on Henza Island, located near the east coast of the main island of Okinawa. This book is indeed quite problematic in that in many areas it shows a fundamental neglect of many basic themes of Okinawan research. For example, Sered hardly mentions the bond between brother and sister. She writes that her finding of “the absence of emphasis upon the brother-sister relationship differs significantly from earlier reports of the ‘spiritual predominance of the sister’” (267). However, considering the almost ubiquitous reports of the brother-sister relationship and the sister’s spiritual guardianship in Okinawa, Sered’s attempt to justify disregarding its importance just because she had never come across it in Henza is insufficient.

For example, Higa Masao, an expert on Okinawan kinship and religion, holds that the belief in the sister deity (*onarigami*) is the key to understanding Okinawan kinship and family structure and significantly distinguishes Okinawan culture from that of mainland Japan (HIGA 1991, 41).

On the back cover of the book, Oxford University Press introduces Sered's text by stating "[T]hrough in-depth examination of this unique and little-studied society, Sered offers a glimpse of a religious paradigm radically different from the male-dominated religious ideologies found in many other cultures." But Sered, it is worth noting, is not the first to offer such a glimpse. Indeed, the theme that Okinawa is one of the very few cases in which women hold religious leadership in both private and public domains has been known for some time to many researchers in both the West and East.<sup>2</sup>

A glance at Sered's bibliography, however, may well lead one to believe that this is indeed an original paradigm that Sered discovered. Anyone will quickly take notice of the fact that Sered is not aiming at a standard rendition of Okinawan studies. For all the major (and minor) studies on Okinawa written in Japanese by both Okinawan and Japanese scholars are missing from her text; instead, you find names such as Judith Butler, a post-structuralist feminist literary critic.

Sered quite candidly explains her positionality at the outset:

Although I had studied Japanese before coming to the field, when I first arrived in Okinawa, my knowledge of Japanese was perfunctory; with the patience and encouragement of villagers, it improved throughout the year. Because of my initially weak language skills, I made great use of a tape recorder: I would record conversations and then listen to them again, sometimes with the aid of an interpreter. . . . Given that the intellectual context for this project is the study of religion and gender rather than Japanese studies, my less-than-rudimentary Japanese literacy has not proven to be an overwhelming drawback. Henza priestesses do not have a literate tradition or a corpus of sacred texts; the books that have been left unread by them (and by me) were written by members of the Okinawan (mostly male) literary elite. Although there has been a school in the village for many years, the priestesses among whom I carried out my research do not seem interested in reading; they know how to read headlines and advertisements, but I rarely saw them reading a book or newspaper. As much as possible, I have tried to compensate for my poor Japanese literacy through lengthy discussions with sociology and anthropology professors at the University of the Ryukyus. (20)

This is a truly astounding set of remarks. Normally, Japanese researchers

working with native Okinawans would feel embarrassed and guilty about lacking verbal proficiency in Okinawan dialect (*hōgen*).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, contemporary Western scholars would and should also feel at least embarrassed about lacking proficiency in Japanese, relying on strengths either in the spoken or written languages, if not both. Sered, by contrast, is neither worried about her linguistic incompetence nor reserved about imposing her own ethnographic authority on the readers despite this obvious drawback.

A number of questions must be raised concerning Sered's attitude. First of all, it does not make any sense to publish a book-length monograph on Okinawa that contains no references whatsoever to the extensive accumulation of research on Okinawan culture and religion written in Japanese by both Okinawan and Japanese scholars. Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to Sered's scholarship. For example, there is a study on Japanese gender issues by a Western female researcher that completely lacks references to Japanese language scholarship. Ōta Yoshinobu, who also happens to be a specialist on Okinawan religion, raises criticism against this researcher's approach since it gives the reader the misguided impression that "within the Japanese scholarship a body of literature worth citing does not exist" (ŌTA 1994, 276). Ōta's criticism and my criticism of Sered, must not be relegated to being just chauvinist pride in having a native speaker's linguistic proficiency. Rather, as Ōta holds, the real problem with this line of scholarship is that it "marginalizes" Japanese or Okinawan scholarship, while it "situates the analyzer in the center of the academic forum" (1994, 276). One can point out here a colonialist division of labor between the "native" and the foreign (mostly Western) researchers.<sup>4</sup>

Harry Harootunian likewise questions the moral and political stance of a certain Western "Japan specialist" teaching at Harvard who believes that "it is pointless to read books in Japanese" when he has easy access to Japanese scholars who will give out any necessary information (HAROOTUNIAN and SAKAI 1999, 607). Judging from the above statement by Sered, one may well suspect that her attitude resembles this Western scholar, who simply treated the local intellectuals as convenient suppliers of information.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover it strikes me as ironic that Sered tries hard to legitimize her linguistic incompetence by reducing the importance of the existing literature to nothing more than products of outsiders and thus less credible interpretations. She implies that much of the previous assessment of gender and religion in Okinawa has been made by Japanese, American, European, or elite male Okinawan scholars who are all external to the villager's world. For example, according to Sered, their emphasis on the dualisms in Okinawan culture is a product of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, not something that they received directly from the villagers.<sup>6</sup> She states that, by contrast, her work

“focused more on village discourse and interactions and on villager’s own interpretations of rituals, even if those interpretations were idiosyncratic and transient” (236). Anyone could easily point out, however, that Sered is also an outsider, just like those scholars she dismisses. There is nothing that suggests the greater validity of Sered’s interpretations over, for instance, Røkkum’s, aside from her self-proclaimed ethnographic authority. The villager’s “voice,” which Sered claims to represent, only seems to affirm her own plea for the validity of her text and her presence in the field.

Since this is a lengthy monograph (278 pages including notes), it is beyond the scope of this review article to scrutinize and respond to each of Sered’s observations. There are at least several sections in which I suspect that her generalized conclusions are derived from rather peculiar examples. Her discussion of the divine illness of bleeding being the symbolic rupture of the body in chapter seven is one of them; it is hard to generalize that divine illness is always associated with the symptom of bleeding.<sup>7</sup> In the remaining part of this review, I will limit my critique to Sered’s central argument of the conspicuous absence of elaborate gender ideology in Okinawan religion, which indeed runs counter to many of the previous studies on the topic, including Røkkum’s.

Thus far I have reviewed Sered’s text rather negatively; this, however, does not mean a total lack of respect for her scholarship. Her award-winning book, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister* was extremely stimulating for a historian of religion like myself, and I have no doubt with regard to her excellence in the field of Judaism. In *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, Sered held that in female dominated religions, “women’s sphere is considered as good (if not better) than the male sphere, and women fully control the female sphere” (1994, 210). Sered’s search for a less patriarchal religion was no doubt one of the driving forces behind her study on Okinawa. This is nothing unusual. I myself was fascinated by the non-subordinate roles of women in the religio-cultural life of Okinawa. My Ph.D. thesis was an attempt to demonstrate that the Okinawan belief system exemplifies the significance of female-specific spheres, which affect the well-being of the whole society. Sered also earlier proposed that the female-dominated religions are characterized by a set of beliefs in the essential differences between men and women; in those religions, women as a category are considered to be more religious than men (SERED 1994, 196–97).

One may point out the danger of essentialist cultural feminism in Sered’s argument, but for the most part I agree with Sered’s assessment and believe that her thesis has strong relevance for the Okinawan case as well. In *Women of the Sacred Groves*, Sered’s standpoint is quite different, her aim being to “deconstruct” sex and gender. She contends that Okinawan religion

does not embrace or advance an elaborated gender ideology and that villagers offer no ideology to enforce gendered social roles, which means that differences between men and women are not thought to be meaningful or innate (9, 70). Thus, she maintains that the villagers are not normally conscious of the fact that their religious leaders are almost always women and that the villagers see “no existential link between womanhood and priesthood” (216).

Furthermore, according to Sered’s observation, the villagers neither articulate the statement “women dominate Okinawan religion,” nor do they proclaim that one gender (female) has better access to the superhuman realm or existence (178, 215). I find her assertion hard to take at face value, since we have seen the contrary in Røkkum’s study, for example. On this point, many Okinawan specialists would likewise find Sered’s contention unsustainable. Sered’s line of argument is countered by Tanaka Masako, a specialist on Okinawan women and religion who has done extensive research and fieldwork in northern Okinawa. TANAKA writes that the legitimacy of the priesthood, in the true sense of the term, resides in women’s hands because in Okinawa it is always women, not men, who can serve as the communicative link between humans and supernatural entities, including ancestral spirits. Men are not capable of performing ritual in the authentic manner without relying on women (1982, 239–40).

In short, Sered bases her whole argument on the presumed absence of gender as a significant symbolic category. Strangely, however, throughout the text Sered presents her interpretation that Okinawan priestesses are embodied divinities with the power to emit good spiritual energy, essentially the same thesis that I developed in my dissertation in 1992. Given the total absence of cosmological and ontological foundation, it is hard to account for this extremely rare phenomenon, in which an ordinary woman becomes an embodied divinity. Sered, however, only offers a surprisingly simplistic explanation to account for this extraordinary phenomena. According to Sered, this is a sociological role-based division. That is, women’s possession of religious leadership is a “function of what men and women do in specific contexts and not of what men and women are” (216). In other words, Sered links religious participation to conventional social roles, such as men tend to work outside while women stay home and thus have more time to spend on religion.

In chapter eleven, titled “Un-gendering Religious Discourse,” she spends tremendous energy trying to prove that women’s religious leadership is in no way related to “existential gender identities” but is only role-based. This is certainly a novel thesis, but I strongly doubt if it ever makes sense to impose a gender role based thesis, which does not differ much from the division of

labor model produced by industrial society, onto the understanding of female religious leadership in Okinawa.

Again, Sered's analysis of gender discourse becomes highly implausible. In chapter six, she lays out how priestesses are seen to have both divine and human aspects, having the special ability to connect to other divine beings and to bring about good spiritual forces for the villagers. Her description here has a striking similarity to what I explicated in my 1992 thesis, which she even quotes (131). Strangely, however, she discards the long sustained thesis of women's religious predominance in Okinawa by exhibiting "villagers accounts," and as a result she gives readers the misguided impression that the natives scoff at the belief in women's spiritual endowment (215). In other words, there seems to be in Sered's work a rather awkward grafting of two entirely discrete sets of observations. As was mentioned, she self-servingly discredits nearly all previous research, especially that on sister deities, which would have included indisputable evidence counter to her argument. If Sered were only able to read Japanese, for example, the work by Nakamatsu Yashū, winner of the prestigious Iha Fuyū Award, she would have been able to see that Okinawan villagers indeed acknowledge women's religious endowment and have deep respect for it (see NAKAMATSU 1990 and 1993).

Sered writes that female-led religions almost always explain women's religious predominance in mythological, essentialist, and ideological terms (229). Sered must have thought that she had at last discovered an anomaly to this rule in the Okinawan divine priestesses. Is it too much to say that Sered wished to find a gender irrelevant form of female-led religion, totally liberated from the dirty word of "essentialism," somewhere in the history of world religions?<sup>8</sup> In order to legitimate the validity of her findings, however, she could not help dismissing much of the important scholarship of the past, such as that of Nakamatsu Yashū, Higa Masao, Miyagi Eishō, Uematsu Akashi, and many others.

Sered indicates that since her primary interest is in gender studies not in area studies she can do away with the conventional knowledge needed for this kind of project. If she thinks she can justify her claim on account of her shared gender identity with her research object, she is misguided on this count as well. To privilege gender as the center of analysis without questioning the assumed essentialized nature of "woman" is a risky approach, as has been cautioned against by a number of postcolonial feminists. For example, VISWESWARAN points out the danger of using the terms "friend" and "informant" interchangeably with no reflection on the "intrinsic contradictions of power that are masked in such a slippage" (1997, 614). Røkkum's book, by contrast, although written by a male ethnographer, proves that a text based upon a solid scholarship in theory, fieldwork, and literature



review can go well beyond its narrow area of focus and speak to many.

Sered states at the outset that the parameters of her studies are “quite modest” focusing on the questions of gender and religion in the specific setting of one particular village (21). At the same time, she maintains that her findings are “consistent with those of anthropologists who have studied other Okinawan villages” (5). I do not know how to make sense of these statements. If this book were truly about a rather peculiar village called Henza at a very particular point in history going through a unprecedented process of secularization and modernization, her enterprise might be justified, but it is obvious that her aims are pan-Okinawan. All I can say is that this is not a “modest” project, but is a very bold and troubling one.

In concluding, I would like to warn readers less familiar with Okinawan studies against uncritical reception of monographs such as Sered's. There is indeed a considerable gap between her desire for a theory-framed argument and the ethnographic data she claims to have obtained from the field.<sup>9</sup> I would also like to ask Sered if she would tolerate a book on women and Judaism based entirely on secondary literature and fieldwork with no basic language skills. All in all, *Women of the Sacred Groves* poses a challenge to much of the existing scholarship on Okinawa and, in this sense perhaps, will stimulate further debate concerning gender, religion, and scholarly research in Okinawa.

#### NOTES

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1. For a positive assessment of Røkkum's work in German, please refer to the review by WACKER (1999).

2. Actually, my Ph.D. thesis was an exploration into this matter (see KAWAHASHI 1992). I must add that I was puzzled to find out that Sered refers to my dissertation nearly ten times throughout her text, but in the end criticizes it by outrageously asserting that “much of Kawahashi's argument seems to be based on the interpretations that she did not receive directly from the villagers” (276). For an abridged version of my dissertation, see KAWAHASHI 1998.

3. In the Prologue, she reveals to readers that her research was mostly conducted with the aid of interpreters, and the most crucial figure was an Okinawan male who had lived for an extended time in the United States.

4. On this point, Sakai Naoki's recent comment on the current state of Japanese studies and cultural studies is very suggestive. Basically, I think that what is at stake is our understanding of a putative object of study, which is neither the identity of the object nor its content; rather, it is always the self-representation of the speaker. This is one of the reasons why the great majority of Westerners still abide by the binarism of the observer as being of the West while the observed is a non-Western native. More than a few specialists in the West want to present themselves as the ones who process raw data, not the ones who provide it. In this form

of self-fashioning the colonial enunciative positionality remains intact (HAROOTUNIAN and SAKAI 1999, 608).

5. In some extreme cases, a foreign researcher may become resentful of the fact that the field site that he or she was introduced to does not preserve many of the old customs, and accuses the local intellectuals for not being cooperative.

6. See, for example, pages 216 and 236. One native anthropologist at an Okinawan university frankly said to me that it is a delusion to assume that the villagers would confide in a foreign researcher who lacks simple communication skills and is in need of a translator.

7. A well-respected anthropologist of Okinawan culture and religion, Kasahara Masaharu likewise pointed out this type of problem with Sered's earlier work on Okinawa (SERED 1995). With regard to Sered's rendition of the state of divine priestesses, KASAHARA comments that Sered tends to draw a large conclusion based upon a very limited encounter with the informant (1996). Despite Kasahara's criticism, SERED maintained a similar argument in a later work (1997).

8. Sered, in her concluding chapter, stresses that an ideology of gender difference creates hierarchy, and that the egalitarian nature of the village is maintained through deconstruction of essential gender differences. I would rather argue that differences per se do not produce oppression, but rather that differences give rise to subordination and domination when they are employed as a means to discriminate one against the other.

9. I am by no means suggesting that the problem with Sered's scholarship is limited to non-native speakers of the language only. Please see KAWAHASHI 2000 for a critique of the interpretation of the status of Okinawan women given by a female Japanese researcher.

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