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"This Is Not a Powerspot"

Heritage Tourism, Sacred Space, and Conflicts of Authority at Sēfa Utaki

The sacred grove Sēfa Utaki was one of the most important worship sites of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879). In 2000 it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and in recent years it has seen a dramatic increase in the number of visitors. The emergence of large-scale heritage tourism at Sēfa Utaki has caused tensions between various actors, including Okinawan pilgrims, spirit mediums, mainland Japanese tourists, and local authorities. The site is subject to competing claims, not least with regard to its spiritual significance and the question of proper ritual behavior. Contrary to most other UNESCO-listed sacred sites in Japan, Sēfa Utaki is not a religious institution, legally speaking, and therefore does not have its own clerical authority. This has led to different actors attempting to assert authority in various ways, as this article demonstrates. To some of them, the capacity to "feel" the spiritual power of the place becomes a marker of identity, distinguishing supposedly "authentic" Okinawan worship practices from such mainland inventions as "powerspot tourism." Sēfa Utaki is promoted widely as a "sacred site" (*seichi*), but there appears to be little consensus on what this "sacredness" entails. Some Okinawan tour guides and worshippers assert that the grove is a place of worship (*ogamu basho*) where rituals are conducted for the well-being of Okinawan society as a whole; according to them, overseas visitors and powerspot tourists fail to understand this crucial aspect of Okinawan tradition.

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Sēfa Utaki is a sacred grove located on the Chinen peninsula, in the southeast of Okinawa.[1] It is a small forest with impressive rock formations, containing a number of sacred worship sites (*ibi*).[2] These are recognizable by stone blocks, on which ritual offerings can be placed. The forest is characterized by lush subtropical vegetation, fragrant flowers, and impressive biodiversity; visitors are likely to encounter butterflies, spiders, birds, amphibians, and even mongooses or bats (see Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003). There is a small stone path leading to the different *ibi* and some signs with historical information in Japanese and English, as well as signs telling visitors not to step or sit on the stones that are used for rituals. The forest has no buildings other than a small office at the entrance, where visitors show their tickets and watch a short instruction video before they enter the forest. Further down the road is a larger visitor center with a parking space, ticket booth, restaurant, and souvenir shop. The road that leads from the visitor center to the forest is closed to ordinary traffic and lined with smaller restaurants and shops.

At this grove, rituals have been conducted since at least the early years of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879), probably longer (Wakugami 1982). It was one of the most important worship sites of this kingdom, closely connected to the ruling monarchy and the ritual-mythological system that provided it with legitimacy. After the annexation of Okinawa by imperial Japan in 1879, Sēfa Utaki lost much of its former significance, although it continued to be visited occasionally by groups of pilgrims. In the post-war period, the site was relatively unknown, seeing few visitors other than local pilgrims and spirit mediums. This has changed dramatically in the past ten years, however. Sēfa Utaki has acquired a prominent place on many tourist itineraries and is now visited by over 400,000 people annually (Shimura 2015, 83). In 2000, the grove was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, together with eight other sites in Okinawa associated with the Ryukyu Kingdom—including Shuri Castle, the iconic symbol of the monarchy's former grandeur and Okinawa's most-visited tourist site today (see Loo 2014).[3] Its World Heritage status has contributed considerably to Sēfa Utaki's current visibility and popularity and to the corresponding increase in visitor numbers.

The emergence of large-scale heritage tourism at Sēfa Utaki has led to an increased visibility of certain aspects of Okinawan history and culture—in particular, a growing awareness of the importance of sacred groves (*utaki*) in Ryukyuan worship traditions. In addition, it has had some modest economic benefits for the

nearby village community, although less than some may have expected. However, as this article demonstrates, it has also caused tensions between the various actors involved—local residents, Okinawan pilgrims, spirit mediums, mainland Japanese and foreign tourists, tour guides, shop owners, municipal authorities, and Japanese state actors—all of whom have different expectations and understandings of what the site represents and how it should be used. Although few of them would deny the importance of Sēfa Utaki as a "sacred site" (*seichi*), their understandings of what this term entails diverge considerably. Sēfa Utaki is subject to competing claims, not least with regard to its spiritual significance and the question of proper ritual behavior. Contrary to most other UNESCO-listed sacred sites in Japan, Sēfa Utaki is not a religious institution, legally speaking, and therefore does not have its own clerical authority. As a result, different actors not only claim access to the site but also attempt to assert authority, in different ways. Municipal authorities, for instance, declare certain areas off-limits (such as, until recently, the path leading to the *urōkā* sacred spring), while other parts of the grove (most notably, the *sangūi* worship site) are kept open to all visitors, despite the protests of Okinawan worshippers who wish to see it closed. Other actors have their own tactics for negotiating such spatial regulations and for reasserting authority. Thus, a tour guide may choose to "ignore" the sign saying access to the *urōkā* is prohibited when he shows around a foreign scholar, indicating that he has the power to decide who is allowed to enter. Spirit mediums may not be able to completely prevent tourists from entering the areas they perceive as the most sacred, but they do try to guard their ritual space, scolding people who come too close.

On the other hand, the fact that it is unclear who "owns" the site can also lead to impasses, especially when it comes to solving problems: while it is clear that the stone path leading up to the center of the grove is in urgent need of repair, local authorities are reluctant to commission the necessary restoration work, arguing that this is the responsibility of the national government because of the site's World Heritage status. And while almost everybody I have spoken to agrees on the need to implement measures to reduce the number of visitors, no such measures have been taken yet, as different stakeholders—the municipality, the local tourism association, shop owners, and the tour guide organization—have divergent opinions on the problem and its possible solutions.[4] Some local residents even blame UNESCO for the influx of tourists and the poor state of the forest, apparently unaware of the fact that UNESCO has limited means and is not directly involved with the management and maintenance of World Heritage Sites (see Brumann 2014; Logan 2012).

Although the majority of visitors today do not engage in ritual activities, Sēfa Utaki continues to be used as a place of worship by some visitors, who say individual prayers, make offerings, communicate with the deities, or simply wish to "feel" the power of the place and charge their spiritual batteries. As with places of worship in mainland Japan, Sēfa Utaki's attraction lies partly in its newly acquired status as a "powerspot" (*pawāsupotto*): a sacred place (*seichi*) that is believed to contain profound spiritual energy, providing visitors with "this-worldly benefits" (*genze riyaku*) such as good health and love relationships (see Carter 2018; Reader

and Tanabe 1998; and Suga 2010). However, some Okinawan worshippers reject the interpretation of worship sites such as sacred groves as providers of "benefits" to individual visitors—especially those coming from mainland Japan—pointing out that these are sites where rituals have been conducted for the well-being of the community, not for personal benefit. As I argue in this article, discrediting the practices and interpretations of "outsiders" is employed as a strategy by some Okinawans to assert the superiority of their own practices vis-à-vis those of mainland tourists and lay claim to a more "authentic" ritual tradition—despite the fact that their practices, too, were shaped in the modern period and differ considerably from Ryukyu Kingdom–period traditions.

In this article, I discuss some of the transformations that Sēfa Utaki has undergone in recent years, focusing on the period from its registration as a World Heritage Site in 2000 until 2017. I will analyze some of the tensions caused by the recent popularization of the site, looking at the consequences of large-scale heritage tourism on competing notions and uses of (sacred) space. Central to this is the question of authority, which is closely related to problems of autonomy and identity: who has the power to decide how Sēfa Utaki (and, by extension, Okinawan history and religion) is represented, and who controls the actual site? Ritual practice and spiritual experience are of profound significance, I argue, as they are used to differentiate between "proper" worshippers—those who can "feel" the site and act in accordance with it—and outsiders, who supposedly fail to appreciate its true value. It is important to point out, however, that the conflict of authority taking place at Sēfa Utaki is not merely a matter of disprivileged Okinawans trying to reclaim access to and authority over a sacred site that has been taken away from them by a colonial state. There are also some serious disagreements between different Okinawan actors, not least when it comes to ritual matters.

This article is based on two periods of field research (December 2016–January 2017 and June 2017), during which I paid regular visits to the forest, talked informally to tour guides and local residents, and conducted semi-structured interviews with local government officials, members of the tourist association, spirit mediums, and Okinawan scholars. It is divided into four parts. First, I briefly discuss the historical and religious significance of Sēfa Utaki. This is necessary for understanding the contested nature of the site today and for contextualizing present-day practices. Second, I discuss a conflict between tourists and spirit mediums that took place at one of its sacred centers (*ibi*), which I witnessed during one of my visits to the grove. This episode serves as a point of departure for analyzing some of the conflicting claims to religious authority made at Sēfa Utaki and the importance of sensory experience (i.e., "feeling") for asserting authenticity and otherness. In the third part I elaborate further upon this issue, discussing some of the ways in which competing interpretations of Sēfa Utaki's "sacred character"—a multi-interpretable term, which carries different meanings to different visitors—are related to questions of authority. Finally, I relate this analysis to a more general discussion of the impact of large-scale heritage tourism on the grove and to questions of power and agency—who owns the site, who controls it, and who gets to tell the stories about it. This provides some insights into the significance of heritage in contem-

porary Okinawa and the various issues of representation and spatial practice that are at stake.

Historical background

The Ryukyu Kingdom was established in the fifteenth century by Shō Hashi (1371–1439), who defeated rival warlords and unified the different regions of Okinawa, as well as other islands in the Ryukyu archipelago. It subsequently became an important regional trade hub and cultural center, adopting influences from China, Japan, and other parts of Asia. The Ryukyu Kingdom had a tributary relationship with China (initially the Ming, later the Qing dynasty); simultaneously, however, it was a vassal state of Satsuma, a domain in southern Japan (present-day Kagoshima). It remained largely independent, however, until the annexation by Meiji Japan in the 1870s.[5] Since the reign of Shō Shin (1465–1526, r. 1477–1526), the Ryukyu Kingdom was characterized by a distinctive division of power, whereby the king, who was in charge of worldly affairs, was assisted by a high priestess (*kikoe-ōgimi*)—his sister or another female relative—who was in charge of ritual affairs and relations with the world of deities and ancestral spirits (Smits 2000). This system of dual authority was replicated on regional and local levels, where worldly leaders were assisted (and, at times, challenged) by female ritual specialists called *noro*. The importance of Sēfa Utaki lay primarily in the fact that it was here that the *oaraori* ceremony was conducted: that is, the inauguration of a new *kikoe-ōgimi*. During the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom, in principle only *noro* associated with the royal institution could enter the grove; no other people were allowed entry, and certainly no men, with the possible exception of the king himself (Beillevaire 2007, 106). In addition to its importance as the location of the *oaraori* ceremony, Sēfa Utaki also had a prominent place in the *agari-umāi*: a pilgrimage to several royal ancestral worship sites in the south-eastern part of Okinawa Island, undertaken on special occasions by the king, the high priestess, and their entourage.[6]

The *noro* system was centered on local sacred groves known as *utaki*. It was here that female priestesses would come together to perform collective rituals on behalf of their community; in some places, these rituals are still conducted (Higa 2000; Kawahashi 2017; Nakamatsu 1990; Prochaska-Meyer 2013; Sered 1999; and Wacker 2000; 2003). These groves were typically off-limits to men and non-initiated women. Today, most *utaki* are open to visitors, although there are some notable exceptions—Kubō Utaki on Kudakajima Island, for instance, remains closed to anybody except for priestesses and, on certain ritual occasions, female spectators. Prior to the colonial period, *utaki* did not usually have any buildings; rather, the forest itself was seen as the site where the deity resided. This lack of human-made constructs has captured the imagination of Japanese scholars, who have interpreted it as an indication of the "primitive" or "primordial" character of Ryukyuan worship traditions, supposedly characterized by a close relationship between people and nature. Accordingly, contemporary Shinto scholars have equated *utaki* with Japanese shrine forests (*chinju no mori*), arguing that Okinawan *utaki* worship is similar to prehistoric Japanese shrine worship, which was likewise centered around

trees and sacred groves (e.g., Ueda 2004, 12–15; Umehara 1989; see also Rots 2015; 2017b). These ideas echo the social-evolutionist theories of the influential ethnologists Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), who believed that traces of "ancient Shinto" (*koshintō*) had remained in *utaki* worship (Okaya 2016, 89). By describing the Ryukyu Islands as a storehouse of ancient "Japanese" tradition—home to Japan's very own "people without history," to use Eric Wolf's classical expression (Wolf 1997)—these scholars contributed to the appropriation of Ryukyuan cultural practices within the modern Japanese national framework. Ultimately, this served as justification for the assimilation of these islands into the imperial state (see Morris-Suzuki 1998, 9–34, 69–72).

In 1879, the Ryukyu Kingdom was formally abolished. Okinawa and the western Ryukyu Islands were annexed, incorporated into the Japanese imperial state, and turned into Okinawa Prefecture.[7] Sēfa Utaki lost its function as the main site of ritual ceremonies associated with the Ryukyu monarchy and became village property (Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003, 30). However, as Patrick Beillevaire points out, the *agari-umāi* pilgrimage—which until then had been a predominantly royal affair—was gradually popularized, attracting new worshippers. As he writes, "the first manuals of the *agari-umāi* were published around 1900. . . . As it no longer had the function of upholding the authority of autocratic rulers, the *agari-umāi* now relied solely on the appropriation of its sites, myths and deities by kin groups of ordinary people associating their family ancestors with the island's primeval deities" (Beillevaire 2007, 114). Throughout the modern period, therefore, Sēfa Utaki has been visited by groups of pilgrims, often members of the same *munchū* ("clan") collectively visiting the site as part of the *agari-umāi*. Importantly, however, Sēfa Utaki was not home to a religious institution akin to a Buddhist temple, Christian church, or new religious movement, and there was no clergy possessing authority in ritual affairs.

Until the 1930s, state authorities did not have much interest in the site. Around that time, however, more ambitious plans were developed by the authorities to incorporate local traditions within the state Shinto system, and in the early 1940s many *utaki* were converted into shrines in a process referred to as *utaki saihen* ("reorganization of *utaki*") (Loo 2014, 105–109; Prochaska-Meyer 2013, 58–59). This led to a number of cosmetic changes, such as the erection of *torii* gates in front of *utaki* and, in some cases, the construction of shrine buildings. At most *utaki*, however, the incorporation into the state Shinto system came too late to have a lasting impact on local worship practices, which can also "be reasonably attributed to the resilience of the island's *utaki*-centered religion" (Loo 2014, 108). In 1942, plans were presented to turn Sēfa Utaki into a prefectural shrine, Sēfa Jinja. One year later, the *Jingiin* ("Institute of Kami Affairs," a government institute that decided on shrine issues, founded in 1940) approved these plans (Arakaki 2002). They never materialized, however. This was mainly due to developments in the Pacific War, which culminated in the Battle of Okinawa that led to the death of over 100,000 Okinawans in 1945. As one scholar summarized, "not even the *torii* of Sēfa Jinja was constructed, so the majestic ancient sacred site remained" (Arakaki 2002, 139). Thus, the incorporation of Sēfa Utaki into the

state Shinto system, planned by local and national authorities, was never realized. It remained a worship site without any overarching clerical or ritual authority.

Even though no shrine buildings were constructed, Sēfa Utaki was in fact appropriated by the Japanese imperial authorities. Strategically located on top of a hill at the south-eastern tip of Okinawa, it came to be used for military rather than ritual purposes. In 1941, two large artillery batteries were constructed on the former entrance road that had previously been used for the *agari-umāi* and *oaraori*, near the sacred spring (*urōkā*) that had been used for purification rituals (see Nanjō-shi kyōiku iinkai 2016). The foundations of these military installations still exist today, but visitors are not encouraged to enter this part of the site, because of the bad condition of the stone steps. In addition, this period saw far-reaching deforestation because of unrestrained logging and, later, US bombs (Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003, 31, 56). The deforestation is clearly visible on early post-war photographs, in which Sēfa Utaki looks profoundly different than today; at the time the vegetation mainly consisted of low shrubs, not the high subtropical trees that characterize the present-day forest. The war also left another imprint: one of the most noteworthy features of Sēfa Utaki, in addition to its impressive rock formations and places of worship, is a bomb crater located next to the path in the middle of the forest. A small sign explains that this is a remnant of the Pacific War. Depending on the season, the crater is either dry or filled with water; in the latter case, it is home to dozens of small salamanders, living testimony to the present significance of Sēfa Utaki as a biodiversity hotspot.[8]

Feeling the god

The sacred center of an *utaki* is called *ibi*, and it is here that ritual offerings are made to the deities. Most *utaki* have one *ibi*, but Sēfa Utaki has six. It is significantly larger than most other *utaki* and somewhat atypical because of its historical connection with the Ryukyu state; while most other *utaki* have (or had) a predominantly local significance as places of worship where village priestesses came to pray for community well-being, Sēfa Utaki does not belong to any single community but rather to the Okinawan people as a whole. As we have seen, after the fall of the Ryukyu Kingdom, it was used by groups of pilgrims and spirit mediums from different parts of the island, but it did not have any overarching religious institution possessing authority in ritual matters. The six worship sites are the *urōkā* spring; the *ujōguchi*, *ufugūi*, *yuinchi*, and *sangūi* worship places (each consisting of some stone blocks upon which offerings can be placed but no divine objects of worship other than the rock itself); and the *shikiyodayuru* and *amaduyuru* sacred jugs (see figure 1).

The first *ibi*, the *urōkā*, played a central part in the *oaraori* ceremony and *agari-umāi* pilgrimage, as the water of this spring was used for ritual purification. Today, as mentioned, visitors are not supposed to go here, not because of any taboos related to the spring's sacred character but because of the dire condition of the steps leading there. Instead, visitors approach from the other side. They first purchase a ticket at the visitor center near the main road (300 yen), then walk ten

Figure 1: Map of Sēfa Utaki in the tourist brochure. Reprinted with permission from the Nanjō City municipal authorities.

minutes on a small road lined with cafes and souvenir shops, before they reach the entrance to the site. They show their ticket at the office, Midori no Yakata Sēfa ("green mansion Sēfa"), where they are shown a short video that tells them how to behave: no littering, no high heels, stay off the stones that are used for ritual offerings, and respect those who engage in acts of worship, as this is a "sacred place" (*seichi*). Leaving the small office building, they see a large memorial stone with the UNESCO World Heritage logo prominently displayed—a clear indication of the symbolic power of the World Heritage brand in contemporary East Asia and the first obligatory "picture spot" of the *utaki*.

Next, visitors proceed on a path that leads them to the second *ibi*, known as *ujōguchi*. Prior to the modern period, worshippers were not allowed to go beyond the *ujōguchi*, which was the entrance to the *utaki* proper. It was here that people taking part in the *agari-umāi* pilgrimage would make their ritual offerings. From the *ujōguchi*, the sea is clearly visible—as is the sacred island of Kudakajima, famous for its unique ritual traditions and its historical connections with the *noro* system (see Higa 2000). Today, most visitors do not stay long at the *ujōguchi* but continue walking the slippery steps further into the *utaki*. The first place of worship they encounter here is the *ufugūi*, a clearing in the forest in front of a high rock wall, with some steps and stone blocks used for ritual offerings (see figure 2). The historical connection between Sēfa Utaki and the Ryukyu monarchy becomes clear from the fact that *ufugūi* was a term used to refer to the main hall of Shuri castle; the *ibi* at Sēfa Utaki were believed to correspond to important rooms in the castle (see Iyori 2005, 429–31). The same applies to the next *ibi*, reached after a short walk and surrounded by impressive rock formations covered in banyan tree roots. It is called *yuinchi*, which means kitchen, and it was believed to correspond to the kitchen in Shuri castle (see figure 3).[9]

Figure 2: The *ufugūi* worship site. Photo: Aike P. Rots.

Figure 3: The *yuinchi* worship site. Photo: Aike P. Rots.

Returning on the same path, then turning left before reaching the *ufugūi*, visitors come to another clearing next to a high rock with two stalactites. The water dripping down from these stalactites is collected in two jugs, the *shikiyodayuru* and *amaduyuru*; water from these jugs was used for the purification of newly inaugurated *kikoe-ōgimi*. A sign in Japanese warns visitors not to touch them (apparently, this alone was not sufficient, as new provisional signs in Korean and Chinese have recently been added; see figure 4). Walking past the two jugs, one arrives at the most iconic site of Sēfa Utaki, shown in numerous guidebooks and brochures: two large rocks leaning against each other, leaving open a triangular, tunnel-like space, known as *sangūi* (see figure 5). On the other side of the *sangūi* is a small square area surrounded by rock walls, except on the east side: through an open-

ing in the trees ("heart-shaped," according to some visitors), Kudakajima Island is clearly visible. This may not have been a place of worship during the Ryukyu Kingdom period; rather, it was here that preparations for rituals were made (tour guide, personal communication, December 2016). Significantly, it was also here that numerous historical objects were found (coins, jewels, and ceramics) during the excavations preceding the World Heritage nomination. Today, it is this place that appears to be the main purpose of many visitors. It serves a triple function as a worship site for Okinawan visitors, a spiritual "powerspot" for some Japanese visitors, and a popular "picture spot" for most—few tourists can resist taking a photo of Kudakajima surrounded by the trees of the *utaki* (see figure 6). This multiplicity of uses and meanings is one of the defining features of Sēfa Utaki. However, it does cause tensions and sometimes conflicts, especially when visitor numbers become so high that different actors have to compete for access to and control over the same limited space.

This became clear to me when I witnessed a conflict between two Okinawan women, engaged in a private ritual, and some tourists, at this particular spot. The women were probably *yuta*: Okinawan spirit mediums, hired by individuals to discover and solve the spiritual causes (e.g., dissatisfied ancestral spirits) of problems they experience in their daily lives. Most *yuta* are women, but there are also male *yuta*. In recent years, some have adapted the Japanese habit of referring to themselves as "spiritual counsellors" (*supirichuaru kaunserā*) who are providers of "spiritual care" (Hamasaki 2011; cf. Gaitanidis 2011). *Yuta* should not be confused with *noro*; while the latter engage in ritual ceremonies on behalf of a community and are not paid for their services, *yuta* are individual practitioners who operate in a spiritual market, and their status in Okinawan society is much more ambivalent.[10] Although I did not have the opportunity to talk to these women, they did appear to be *yuta*: one of them conducted the ritual and experienced some sort of communion with the deity, while the other acted as her mentor, sitting next to her

Figure 4: The *shikiyodayuru* and *amadayuru* sacred jugs. A sign tells visitors not to enter the sacred area or throw coins into the jugs. Provisional signs in Chinese and Korean have recently been added, pointing to the recent increase in visitors from other East Asian countries. Photo: Aike P. Rots.

Figure 5: The *sangūi* worship site. In the background, a group of tourists admire the view of Kudakajima Island. Photo: Aike P. Rots.

Figure 6: View of Kudakajima Island from behind the *sangūi*.
Photo: Aike P. Rots.

and supporting her. As Hamasaki Morihasa has explained, when a person makes the choice to become a *yuta* (often middle-aged women who have overcome disease or a personal crisis), she usually finds a senior *yuta* who becomes her mentor. Together, they visit several sacred sites in Okinawa, where they conduct prayers in order to establish good relations with the gods, until the *yuta*-to-be is ready to start her own business (Hamasaki, personal communication, December 2016). A visit to Sēfa Utaki would fit well within such a training program.

The two women had placed their ritual offerings on the steps behind the *sangūi* facing Kudakajima Island and started their prayer ritual, when a handful of tourists entered the space and moved behind them. I am not sure whether or not they took pictures of the ritual, because I came somewhat later, alerted by the sound of an angry voice; in any case, judging from the women's reaction, they had clearly violated their ritual space. By the time I arrived at the spot, one of the two women (the senior *yuta*, probably) was walking around agitatedly, telling people to leave the area between the high rock wall (*chōnohana*) and the Kudakajima prayer steps. The people left, looking surprised. Her companion was still sitting on the steps, huddled up, apparently unwell. Such things have happened often since the World Heritage registration, the first woman explained to the remaining bystanders (who were now standing on the side, in the rock tunnel, where they were apparently allowed to be; I had joined them there). There were so many tourists who "could not feel it," she said; however, those who do have the capacity to feel would know that there was "a large god" inside or in front of the rock wall ("*Koko ni ōkii kamisama ga imasu yo! Kanjirareru hito wa kanjimasu yo!*"). Somehow, the tourists had blocked the flow of energy between the *chōnohana* rock wall and Kudakajima Island, causing the deity to get angry and the woman carrying out the prayer ritual to become unwell. After she had sent away the trespassing tourists and explained the situation to the remaining bystanders, the woman helped her friend get up, whereupon they quickly packed their ritual offerings and left.

This case clearly illustrates the conflicting interests of different types of visitors. The two women felt violated in their ritual, which appeared to have a strong emotional impact. For them, it would be best if the area behind the *sangūi*, between the *chōnohana* rock wall and the prayer steps facing Kudakajima Island, were fenced off completely, only accessible for those wishing to engage in Okinawan-style worship practices. Indeed, some of my informants (tour guides and local residents) suggested that it would be best if visitors were no longer allowed to enter this space. However, the view of Kudakajima from this place has become such an integral part of the tourist experience—a core element of the "tourist gaze," to use John Urry's famous terminology (2002)—that declaring it off-limits would meet with much resistance. Moreover, at a sacred site without any overarching priestly authority, who has the authority to make such decisions? The municipal authorities could decide to fence off this part of the site, but they have to negotiate the demands of the tourist industry, which would not be pleased if visitors were denied the opportunity to take in the most iconic view of the entire site.

Meanwhile, the tourists who were scolded and sent away by the woman may have felt bewildered and perhaps even offended, not having realized that they were trespassing on somebody else's sacred space. After all, there is no sign saying it is prohibited to stand there; the only thing that is not allowed is sitting on the steps that are used for placing ritual offerings. Yet the two women laid claim to the entire space, at least for the duration of their ritual—to the surprise of the tourists, who simply wanted to take their selfies in front of the famous "sacred island" Kudakajima, apparently unaware of the fact that by doing so they were blocking a god's passage. They clearly did not "feel" the god's presence, to use the *yuta*'s vocabulary—but then, they may not have come looking for a spiritual experience. Significantly, to many present-day residents of Okinawa, the ability to appreciate the sacred character of an *utaki*—despite the lack of any buildings, statues, or ornaments—serves as a marker of difference: many people with whom I have spoken recounted stories of ignorant mainland Japanese (or foreign) tourists who visited Sēfa Utaki, then exclaimed disappointedly that they did not understand why this place was so special, since there was "nothing there" (*nani mo nai*). The implication is that one needs a certain spiritual and cultural sensitivity to be able to "feel" the sacredness of the place, which tourists from outside Okinawa often lack.

Whose sacred site?

There is a certain irony to the fact that these two Okinawan ladies—presumably *yuta*—laid claim to this sacred site, suggesting that it was only they who could feel the powerful deity of the place, in contrast to all those tourists that had come "after the World Heritage registration." In fact, during the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom, no individual spirit mediums were allowed to enter the site—only *noro* associated with the ruling dynasty. Later, in the first half of the twentieth century, *yuta* were actively persecuted and imprisoned by the Japanese authorities and had to conduct their activities underground. Thus, not until the post-war period did *yuta* gain the widespread popularity they continue to have today and the free-

dom to perform personal rituals wherever they wish. *Yuta* have creatively adapted themselves to changing circumstances, first by helping people come to terms with the loss of loved ones during the Battle of Okinawa, later by helping them cope with other psychological and economic challenges. Although they may lay claim to "Okinawan tradition," they are constantly in the process of reinventing themselves, as the recent focus on "spiritual counselling" illustrates (Hamasaki 2011). As a matter of fact, it has been suggested that the very place where these women conducted their ritual, today seen by many (Okinawans as well as Japanese visitors) as the most sacred place in Sēfa Utaki, did not become a place of worship until after the war. Prior to that, Kudakajima was not visible from here; it was during the Battle of Okinawa that part of the rock was destroyed, creating the opening that today captures the imagination of worshippers and package tourists alike (Shimura 2015, 87).

In guidebooks, magazines, brochures, and documentaries (including those that can be seen free of charge at the nearby visitor center), Sēfa Utaki is consistently referred to as a "sacred place" (*seichi*). Visitors are informed about its historical significance as the place where the *oaraori* ceremony was conducted for the inauguration of the *kikoe-ōgimi* during the Ryukyu Kingdom period, as well as the royal *agari-umāi* pilgrimage. However, although some general information is given about the *noro* system and the importance of the *kikoe-ōgimi*, these texts and films make little or no reference to historical change, and it remains unclear how practices such as the *oaraori* and *agari-umāi*—as well as, for that matter, the role of priestesses within the Ryukyu monarchy—changed over time. Moreover, in most of the popular introductions I have come across, virtually no information is given about the modern history of the site, including the presence of artillery and wartime destruction. Rather, Sēfa Utaki is presented as a remnant of an essentialized and dehistoricized Ryukyu Kingdom, characterized by age-old worship practices, shamanism, and a unique appreciation of nature's spiritual power. In a documentary film shown at the visitor center, these practices are described as "Ryukyu Shinto," and the suggestion is made that these practices were present in ancient Japan as well. Thus, the exotic otherness of Ryukyu Kingdom worship traditions is firmly placed within the overall framework of the Japanese nation-state.

It is worth noting that Sēfa Utaki is not presented as a site of mere historical interest, however, but as a grove that still carries meaning as one of Okinawa's most sacred places. Thus, in the obligatory video shown at the entrance, as well as in the brochure they all receive, visitors are requested to respect the sacred nature of the site—by wearing appropriate clothes, not sitting on the steps used for rituals, not disturbing or taking pictures of people who engage in worship practices, and not making loud noises. Of course, the very fact that it is necessary to instruct people on how to behave testifies to the fact that, to some visitors at least, this is not at all self-evident. Although all visitors are requested to watch the instruction video, violations of the rules continue to take place regularly. This is partly because the signs are in Japanese and English, while the video is in Japanese with English subtitles. Yet the number of visitors from Korea, China, and Taiwan has increased significantly in recent years; many of them understand neither Japanese nor English. Until recently, there were only brochures in Japanese or English;

today, however, there are also brochures available in Chinese (traditional and simplified) and Korean.

Despite the fact that Sēfa Utaki is consistently referred to as a "sacred site" (*seichi*), there is no overarching narrative as to what it is that makes this place "sacred" and what exactly constitutes proper ritual behavior. "Sacred" thus appears as an empty signifier that remains largely undefined, despite the fact that it is used widely in promotion materials to attract mainland Japanese tourists (Kadota 2017). This is related to the aforementioned fact that there is no single organization—clerical or otherwise—that has the authority to prescribe such a narrative. Ritually speaking, Sēfa Utaki is a "free-for-all" site, where visitors can perform whatever rituals they consider appropriate, as long as they do not disturb others or leave any objects behind.[11] While this is also true to a certain extent for many places of worship in mainland Japan (Nelson 1996), the lack of any priestly institution at Sēfa Utaki implies that nobody has the moral or legal authority to define boundaries based on their knowledge of tradition—including, for instance, fencing off the *sangūi* or reintroducing the ban on men.

This lack of a single overarching authority is exemplified by the "official" tour guides. I was told that there are eighty-eight registered tour guides, approximately fifty of whom are active regularly; they are listed as volunteers, but they do receive some modest financial compensation for their work (fieldwork notes, December 2016). They mostly work on weekends and national holidays, when there are regular tours—in Japanese only—that visitors can join for a small fee (on other days, visitors can order a personal tour, which is more expensive). Most are elderly or middle-aged residents of Nanjō City, and there is a strong hierarchy within the group, based on seniority—those who have been around the longest get to choose when they want to give tours, whereas those who have just joined first have to do menial tasks in the forest.[12] They are all affiliated with a volunteer organization named Amamikiyo Roman no Kai (Amamikiyo Roman guide group), named after the Ryukyu primordial goddess, which is coordinated by the Nanjō City authorities. The fact that the organization has the loanword "Roman" in its name—which refers to adventure, romance, and storytelling—is not without significance. The name of the organization is illustrative of the appropriation of Ryukyuan worship traditions by the Okinawan tourist industry, which capitalizes upon images of exotic otherness, ancient rituals, and primordial nature spirituality (cf. Kadota 2017). Although Amamikiyo Roman no Kai is a non-profit organization with an educational purpose (at least nominally), it is embedded within the larger tourist infrastructure of Okinawa, and its tour guides have contributed to the creation of a new "Ryukyu spirituality" narrative.

Nevertheless, there appears to be significant variety when it comes to the contents of their tours. Some guides consider it their responsibility to educate tourists, declaring that Sēfa Utaki "is not a powerspot" (see below), and angrily telling off visitors who do not hold the hands of their children when walking the steps, as I myself experienced. Others are more reluctant to make statements regarding the sacred nature of the place, instead pointing out that everybody is entitled to their own interpretations and prayers, as long as they obey basic etiquette rules (e.g.,

no littering). Some tour guides have folders with home-made slides, which they use to illustrate their talk; others do not. Paradoxically, several of them deplore the problems caused by mass tourism, at least during informal conversations, yet their guided tours are an integral part of the tourist infrastructure. Moreover, the fact that they get a fee for their work—however modest—means that many of them also benefit from tourism financially and perhaps even depend upon it.

Although some may lay claim to a certain moral authority and expert knowledge, the Amamikiyo volunteers are not actually in charge of the site. This became clear to me when the conflict between the two women and the tourists occurred. There were two tour guides in the vicinity, one of whom was showing me around. They both appeared confused and perhaps embarrassed by the situation; they briefly updated each other on what had happened, but neither made an attempt to interfere or mediate. The fact that the two guides were male, whereas the *yuta* were female, may have also played a part. Historically, men were not allowed to visit Sēfa Utaki, and there are still many Okinawans who consider their presence undesirable. In fact, some local residents and politicians have even suggested reintroducing the ban on men as a possible strategy to reduce the number of visitors. Reportedly, people previously believed that such a ban would be incompatible with World Heritage status, but this has turned out to be incorrect: Mount Ōmine in Nara prefecture and Okinoshima Island in Fukuoka prefecture were listed as World Heritage sites in 2004 and 2017 respectively, despite the fact that women are not allowed entrance. As Tze Loo has suggested, rather than reducing the number of tourists, one of the important reasons for proposing a reintroduction of this ban has been a conflict of authority between male and female *yuta* (personal communication, March 2017). Whatever the underlying motivations, most of the people to whom I have spoken were skeptical about the feasibility of this proposal. Nevertheless, the relationship between gender and spiritual authority in contemporary Okinawa is an important topic, which requires more research.[13]

Heritage tourism and spirituality

Prefectural and municipal authorities throughout Japan have set up World Heritage committees that are lobbying for the nomination of local sites (Saitsu 2006). Heritagization is widely perceived as an effective strategy for reversing problems of rural unemployment, depopulation, and economic decline, as it is supposed to lead to the advent of large numbers of tourists who spend significant amounts of money in the area. Indeed, registration as a World Heritage site often leads to an increase in tourist numbers, especially in Japan, where it is perceived as a mark of excellence and where travel agencies and local authorities actively use it to advertise their destinations—although there are also examples of places where this strategy has failed. In any case, when Sēfa Utaki was listed as a World Heritage site (together with the eight other Ryukyu Kingdom sites in Okinawa) in 2000, the local authorities in Chinen rejoiced in what they perceived as a great success (Ōshiro 2001). Village residents also celebrated the decision, as one of my informants nostalgically recounted.

But the atmosphere has changed. The mass influx of tourists has not brought the expected local economic growth, as the vast majority of visitors come as day trippers from Naha, either as part of an organized tour or by rental car. Visitors may purchase some souvenirs and eat lunch in the visitor center or one of the nearby eateries. Other than that, however, they do not usually spend much time or money at the site—to the dismay of the Nanjō City municipal authorities, which would like more tourists to stay overnight and visit other places in the area, for obvious economic reasons. More importantly, most of the people to whom I have spoken—local tour guides and ticket office staff included—agreed that the rapid increase in tourist numbers has caused some serious problems. The stone path, for instance, has suffered severe damage as a result of the large numbers of visitors treading on it; the steps are worn down and supported by sandbags. During rainy weather, the path is very slippery, posing a risk to visitors. The Nanjō municipal authorities have been aware of this problem for years, and there are plans to construct a new path with wooden stairs. Similar actions have been undertaken at the Tamagusuku Castle Ruins, a nearby historical site that sees far fewer visitors as it has not acquired World Heritage status, which now has a wooden walkway. However, local officials state that they cannot simply change the physical appearance of Sēfa Utaki, even if they have good reasons for doing so. Precisely because it is a World Heritage site, such changes first need to be officially approved by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunkachō*) under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakushō*), which is a time-consuming process.

The fact that so many visitors enter the forest also appears to have a negative influence on forest ecology: eyewitness accounts suggest that certain endemic insects and plants that were a common sight ten years ago are now increasingly rare. Local government officials question these claims, pointing out that there are no scientific data to prove them (interview data, June 2017). It is correct that no biological or ecological surveys have been conducted at the site in recent years, but one might argue that the absence of recent data is all the more reason to take eyewitness accounts seriously, because they are the only evidence we have—anecdotal though it may be.[14] In any case, the hypothesis that large visitor numbers have a negative impact upon forest ecology does not seem too far-fetched. In response to this problem, local citizens' organizations have come up with a plan to turn the former parking space next to Midori no Yakata Sēfa into a butterfly hotspot, planting trees that attract butterflies and other insects and spiders (figure 7). As this space is just outside of the boundaries of the World Heritage Site proper, it is not limited to the same strict maintenance regulations as the grove itself; consequently, local authorities appear more willing to accept changes in physical appearance.

Although UNESCO has a rather utopian mission—promoting peace and harmony between different nations by protecting sites and practices that have "universal value"—the reality is more complicated, not least in East Asia. Multiple actors are involved with World Heritage application processes, and their reasons for doing so are diverse (Smith 2006). Once a site is listed, more actors get involved, ranging from tour operators to shopkeepers to political activists, all of whom try to appropriate and take advantage of the UNESCO brand and the attention it gen-

Figure 7: Sēfa Utaki is famous for its biodiversity, and is home to numerous species of spiders and insects. In the background is the entrance building, Midori no Yakata Sēfa. Photo: Aike P. Rots.

erates. In some cases, World Heritage listings have done more harm than good, contributing to unbridled mass tourism that has led to the destruction of the very places and cultures UNESCO was supposed to preserve. This applies especially to small historical towns and rural areas, which may change overnight as a result of the sudden advent of mass tourism.[15] For a site such as Sēfa Utaki, 400,000 visitors per year (i.e., several thousand per day during high season) constitute a significant burden, and local authorities and residents are busy discussing possible measures to reduce this number. I have already mentioned the suggestion to reintroduce the ban on men, which would presumably lead to a reduction of about fifty percent in visitor numbers. Perhaps more realistic is the suggestion to fix a maximum number of visitors per day—once that number has been reached, no more entrance tickets can be sold.

For the time being, however, the influx of tourists continues. As one disappointed local resident stated: "It would have been better if Sēfa Utaki had not become a World Heritage site. I wish UNESCO would give them a red card; take the World Heritage status away from them" (fieldwork notes, January 2017). I responded by saying that this would be highly unusual; after all, UNESCO has only removed a site from its list twice (the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman and the Dresden Elbe Valley in Germany, which were removed in 2007 and 2009, respectively). "I know," she replied. "So they can do it again." Her statement is based on the widespread assumptions that, first, UNESCO has the power to influence local and national heritage management, which does not correspond to actual reality (Logan 2012); and second, that delisting would lead to lower visitor numbers and therefore fewer problems, which is highly questionable as well. Yet it illustrates the disappointment experienced by local residents, including some of those who have worked at the site.

Many of the problems experienced as a result of mass tourism are perceived as ethical issues; that is, as problems of improper behavior or bad manners (*manā mondai*) (Shimura 2015; Satō 2016). Firstly, there are the common occurrences of visitors who litter or pick flowers. As Michael Di Giovine has described, tourists often seem to think that the rules that apply at home do not apply when they are on a trip, which is a time when they transgress not only physical but also moral boundaries; the desire to leave an imprint (e.g., graffiti) or bring home a souvenir (e.g., a piece of coral) is well-documented across countries and historical periods (2009, 171–75). However, it is not only tourists who leave things behind: one of the tour guides to whom I spoke complained about the behavior of Okinawan *yuta*, some of whom leave their ritual offerings (e.g., paper spirit money) in the forest. To some, bringing the offerings home may undermine the validity and efficacy of the ritual, perhaps even insult the deities. The staff members working at the ticket office, by contrast, perceive these objects as litter, which makes the forest look untidy and has a negative environmental impact. Some monitor the forest regularly, looking for people who might break the rules—not because they conduct their private rituals, which is generally accepted, but because they leave behind the remnants of their offerings, which is not. Similarly, *yuta* and other worshippers are no longer allowed to burn their offerings, as this poses an environmental and safety risk (Kadota 2012, 93); thus, they have had to adapt their ritual practices in accordance with the demands made by the current management. This illustrates that conflicts of authority not only occur between overseas (Japanese or Asian) tourists and Okinawan worshippers but also between these worshippers and those who work for the municipal authorities and are in charge of monitoring the site. As the conflicting attitudes to leaving behind or burning ritual offerings illustrate, there are some profoundly different understandings of what it is that constitutes the "proper" use of the *utaki*, not least among Okinawans themselves.

As Urry famously demonstrated, modern tourism is characterized by the commodification of cultural heritage, a longing for authenticity on the part of tourists, and the transformation of places and practices in accordance with the expectations of paying visitors—referred to by him as "the tourist gaze" (2002). Such expectations and practices are by no means incompatible with motivations of a religious nature. The distinction between tourism and pilgrimage is not clear-cut, and several scholars have recently drawn attention to the overlap between these two categories. For instance, in his study on the relations between global heritage production and tourism, Di Giovine analyzes the tourist experience in the light of Victor Turner's theory of pilgrimage, showing that many of the features observed by the latter—the experience of liminality, the importance of *communitas*, the transgression of rules, and so on—are likewise applicable to tourism, which he characterizes as a highly ritualized phenomenon (2009, 145–85). Meanwhile, "religious" pilgrimage worldwide is often strongly commercialized, involving mass consumption, advertising, and significant economic interests, as Ian Reader (2014) has demonstrated. Such commercialization may be deplored by some of the pilgrims, yet it does not necessarily prevent them from undertaking the pilgrimage

and experiencing it as an expression of faith, as communion with the divine, and as a means to achieve personal transformation.

In present-day Japan, few people would define their travels as "religious"—after all, "religion" (*shūkyō*) is a contaminated category, and even organizations that are legally classified as religious such as Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples actively try to reframe themselves in alternative terms (Rots 2017a). That does not mean, however, that tourism is a purely secular endeavor, devoid of devotional practices or a belief in supernatural actors. The term "sacred place" (*seichi*) is often employed to advertise particular destinations, including Sēfa Utaki, apparently adding to their appeal, even though the term usually remains undefined. In fact, it has been argued that the use of this term is relatively recent, and that it is central to marketing strategies—i.e., used as a means to attract paying visitors (Kadota 2017). Likewise, the term "pilgrimage" (*junrei*) continues to be used widely, not only in reference to well-established historical pilgrimages such as the Shikoku Henro but also to describe the recently popular practice of visiting places that are famous because they appeared in *anime* or TV dramas (Sugawa-Shimada 2015). Many of these destinations are today referred to in travel brochures and women's magazines as "powerspots": they are worth visiting not only because of their natural beauty or historical significance but also because of their spiritual energy, which is believed to be imparted upon those who are capable of feeling it (Carter 2018; Suga 2010). Sēfa Utaki, too, is described as a "powerspot" in magazines and spiritual guidebooks, and numerous visitors enter the site with the expectation of feeling the special energy of the place (Shimura 2015, 88). During my visits, I have seen several people with their hands open, asking others whether or not they could "feel it" (*kanjiru*)—especially around the *sangūi*. Some of them were half-joking, while others appeared more serious; in any case, their reactions to the place indicate that the notion of Sēfa Utaki as a sacred place containing spiritual power is part and parcel of the "tourist gaze," not at odds with it, even if some visitors take such claims with a grain of salt.

Importantly, however, the spiritual power of the site is "felt" differently by different visitors. When the Okinawan lady who got angry with the tourists trespassing on "her" worship site explained that many visitors cannot "feel" the deity, she used the term very differently from powerspot tourists. In the latter case, it refers to some sort of positive spiritual energy, not to a powerful, awe-inspiring, and potentially dangerous deity. According to some of my informants, powerspot tourists misunderstand the nature of the site; despite their claims that they can "feel" the power, they fail to comprehend the fact that Sēfa Utaki is fundamentally connected to the collective well-being of the Okinawan people, not a place where any overseas individual can charge their personal spiritual battery. As one local resident insisted: "Sēfa Utaki is *not* a powerspot. It is a place of worship!" ("*Sēfa Utaki wa pawāsupotto dewa arimasen. Ogamu basho desu yo!*"). In her mind, an Okinawan place of worship (*ogamu basho*, *uganju*) is not to be confused with a powerspot; while the former is associated with local tradition and community life, the latter is perceived as a Japanese invention that is closely intertwined with mass tourism and consumerism.

Concluding remarks

During my field research, I have talked to several people who had the opportunity to visit Sēfa Utaki fifteen to twenty years ago, prior to its popularization as a tourist destination. At the time, there were very few visitors and no signs, let alone visitor centers. The forest appeared wild and other-worldly. One woman recounted how she went looking for the *utaki*, got lost in the forest, and eventually found one of the rock formations that constitute the *ibi*, whereupon she was suddenly overcome with fear for the powerful deity whose presence she felt. Today, as we have seen, the atmosphere has changed completely. The site has not only been subject to commodification and heritagization; it has also been pacified, losing much of its former power. That, at least, is how this woman has experienced the changes taking place at the forest. She does not complain about these changes, however. In fact, she felt so attracted to the site that when the opportunity came to move into a nearby house and set up a shop there, she took it. Thus, today, she depends economically upon tourists who buy souvenirs in her shop. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the transformations and feels ambivalent about them. In fact, she knows several people (including *yuta*) who have stopped coming to the *utaki*, which according to them has been taken over by tourists, leading to a decrease in spiritual power. There is a strong sense among local residents and spiritual practitioners that "their" site has been taken away from them, and that the rapid increase in tourist numbers has made it more difficult to connect with the deities believed to reside in the forest.

It is perhaps no coincidence that I witnessed a conflict between *yuta* and tourists during one of my visits to Sēfa Utaki. When I mentioned the incident during later conversations with tour guides and local residents, they did not appear very surprised. One of them told me that such conflicts have been quite a common occurrence in recent years, especially around the *sangūi*, which is the most contested and congested place in the entire forest. More follow-up research is needed to get a more comprehensive understanding of all the various actors laying claim to the *utaki*, including different types of *yuta* and similar spiritual practitioners (both male and female). What is clear, however, is that the conflict I witnessed was no isolated case. Ultimately, it may be argued, what was at stake here was not only a clash between ritual uses of space and mass tourism but also between Okinawan autonomy and foreign dominance. Local residents have the feeling that they have lost control over "their" sacred *utaki* as a result of the UNESCO World Heritage registration, just as they have lost control over so many other parts of their island as a result of the ongoing processes of militarization, land-grabbing, and economic exploitation (see Asato 2003). The fact that they have to pay an entrance fee to enter Sēfa Utaki, no matter how small, reportedly led to much dissatisfaction among Okinawan spirit mediums, priestesses, and *agari-umāi* pilgrims, and the subsequent large tourist numbers have caused some of them to stay away altogether. Clashes between Okinawan pilgrims (whether *yuta* or not) and foreign tourists (either Japanese or from other parts of Asia), such as the one described above, further strengthen this feeling of a loss of control.

The fact that there is no central authority (official or unofficial) on ritual matters has given rise to a situation in which Sēfa Utaki is widely referred to as a

"sacred site," yet nobody knows what exactly this sacredness entails. This has created a space in which different actors can project their personal interpretations upon the site and claim the right to conduct their rituals, while complaining about the "improper" behavior of tourists. "Feeling" the power of the place and acting accordingly has become a marker of difference between Okinawan pilgrims on the one hand and Japanese or continental Asian tourists on the other. Okinawan ritual uses of space are perceived as "proper tradition," even though they may have been invented in modern times. Mainland Japanese rituals (e.g., offering coins and clapping one's hands in front of an *ibi*, which is a Shinto-style prayer) and notions of sacred space (e.g., the belief in spiritually charged "powerspots"), on the other hand, are perceived as foreign and frowned upon. Despite the fact that Okinawan spiritual practitioners and Japanese powerspot tourists both claim to "feel" spiritual power, there is a profound difference between them; the former lay claim to Okinawan ritual traditions, while the latter are perceived as outsiders who fail to comprehend the nature of these traditions. Thus, the question of whether or not Sēfa Utaki is a "powerspot" is not just about conflicting understandings of what it is that constitutes "sacred space" but boils down to the problem of authority. Who has the power to classify, who gets to tell the official story about the history and meanings of the site, and who is in control of the physical space? Ultimately, then, what is at stake here is not merely the "sacred" character of the forest and the perceived difference between (Okinawan) "place of worship" and (Japanese) "powerspot," but something even more profound: the question of Okinawan self-determination.

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Notes

1. I wish to thank the editors, two anonymous reviewers, and my colleague Mark Teeuwen for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I am also grateful to the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo, which supported my field research in Okinawa financially. Most importantly, many thanks to the Okinawan volunteers, tour guides, local residents, shop owners, and government officials who answered my questions and shared their experiences with me. In order to protect the anonymity of my non-academic informants, I have not included their names.

2. In this article, I use the word "Okinawa" to refer to Okinawa Island, not to the Ryukyu island chain as a whole, despite the fact that the south-western islands of this archipelago are also part of present-day Okinawa Prefecture. Okinawa is the largest island in the Ryukyu archipelago and the historical center of power, home to the Ryukyu monarchy until its abolishment in 1879.

3. The sites are collectively referred to as "Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu" (*Ryūkyū ōkoku no gusuku oyobi kanren isan gun*). Visited by 2.5 million tourists annually (*Ryukyu Shimpo* 2015), Shuri Castle is by far the most famous of these. It is also the most commodified and, arguably, the least authentic, at least materially speaking: the present buildings are post-war reconstructions, as the original castle was completely destroyed in 1945. Three other World Heritage Sites—a landscape garden, mausoleum, and stone gate—are located in the immediate vicinity of Shuri Castle. In addition, the list includes four so-called *gusuku* sites in other parts of Okinawa: hilltop castle ruins, which also contain the remnants of small sacred groves (*utaki*) and sacred springs.

4. Aware of some of the current problems, the Nanjō City authorities have invited different local stakeholders to take part in a committee to discuss the current situation and possible solutions. The committee's conclusions are presented in a report that was published in 2018 (Nanjō-shi kyōiku iinkai 2018). Based on this report, the municipality will make a maintenance plan, which will include measures that should limit the negative impact of mass tourism. Significantly, no spirit mediums or priestesses (*yuta*, *kaminchu*, or *noro*) were invited to take part in this committee—not because of secularist considerations, I was told, but because they lack any formal organization, and because "they all have different opinions" (interview with a local government official, June 2017).

5. For an elaborate overview of the history of Okinawa and the Ryukyu Kingdom, see Kerr 2000.

6. For discussions of the role of *noro* in the Ryukyu Kingdom, see Røkkum 1998 and Wacker 2000. For more detailed descriptions of the *oaraori* inauguration ceremony and other rituals conducted at Sēfa Utaki during the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom, see Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003, 6–24; Iyori 2005, 429–447; and Wakugami 1982. On the *agari-umāi* pilgrimage, see Beillevaire 2007 and Nakasone 2002.

7. The northern Ryukyu Islands (including the Amami Islands) had already been annexed by Satsuma in the early seventeenth century. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), they became part of Kagoshima Prefecture. Relations between Okinawa and Kagoshima remain ambivalent today.

8. Like sacred groves elsewhere (Bhagwat, Dudley, and Harrop 2011), Sēfa Utaki has captured the attention of biologists and nature conservationists. It is characterized by an impressive species diversity: scientists have counted 250 different plant species in the forest, of which 218 are said to be native to Okinawa (Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003, 56). It is also home to a great variety of animal species, ranging from snails and butterflies to reptiles and bats (Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003, 58–127), some of which are rare or endangered. On the potential significance of *utaki* for biodiversity conservation, see Rots 2019.

9. In Okinawan tradition the kitchen is generally considered the most sacred room of a house, as it is here that the protective fire deity of a family—the *hii nu kan*—is worshipped (Nakamatsu 1990, 152–64). Of course, Shuri was no ordinary residence, and the protective deities of the ruling family by extension also served to protect the kingdom as a whole.

10. Another term often used to refer to priestesses and spirit mediums is *kaminchu*, which literally means "god-people." Some sources suggest that *kaminchu* and *noro* are overlapping terms, and that both are opposed to *yuta*. However, several of the people to whom I talked used the word *kaminchu* more generically, referring not only to priestesses but also to spiritual healers and mediums. For a discussion of the different categories of priestesses and other spiritual specialists, see Prochaska-Meyer 2013, 88–99.

11. To underline this point, one of the tour guides recounted his experience of seeing Southeast Asian Muslim visitors engage in prayer near the entrance of Sēfa Utaki. Although he was surprised by this, he did not perceive it as problematic. Later, after our visit to the grove, he told me that he was an active member of Sōka Gakkai. He was not opposed to conducting Okinawan rituals, as these were part of "tradition," even if he did not actually believe in local deities; according to him, the *gohonzon* (main object of worship in Sōka Gakkai) encompasses and transcends all other religious traditions in the world.

12. Nanjō City was established in 2006 as a merger of four smaller municipalities, including Chinen Village, where Sēfa Utaki is located. Since Sēfa Utaki is not run by a religious or other private institution, it is under direct supervision of the Nanjō City municipal authorities.

13. The fact that many Okinawan ritual traditions are female-dominated has hardly remained unnoticed. There have been numerous studies on the significance of gender in these traditions, going back to the work of Yanagita Kunio on *onarigami* (female spiritual power). There are several unresolved controversies in this field, and there is arguably a need for research that sheds new light on the significance of gender in contemporary Okinawan religion. On this topic, see Kawahashi 2017; Røkkum 1998; Sered 1999; and Wacker 2000; 2003.

14. Several studies have been conducted on the ecology and physical condition of Sēfa Utaki (e.g., Okinawa shizen kenkyūkai 1982; Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2002; and see Chinen-son kyōiku iinkai 2003 for a more accessible overview of the forest ecology), but these precede the rapid increase of tourists that has taken place since 2008.

15. Well-documented East Asian examples include Lijiang in China (Opschoor and Tang 2011), Hội An in Vietnam (Avieli 2015), and Luang Prabang in Laos (Logan 2012). In Japan, similar criticism has been expressed with regard to sites such as Shirakawa-gō (Saitsu 2006) and the Iwami Ginzan silver mine (Keough 2011).

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