

Mamoru Akamine, trans. Lina Terrell, ed. Robert N. Huey, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 216 pages. 16 illustrations. Hardcover, \$80; paperback, \$28. ISBN: 9780824855178 (hardcover); 9780824879327 (paperback).

“Cornerstone” may be a superlative: a word perhaps alluding to the paradoxical case of a tiny kingdom of islands in the East China Sea at the forefront of geopolitics. And the key element itself—one of dynastic rule at Shuri on Okinawa Island—was far from rock solid. Since the early seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, a fluctuating amount of autonomy could be carved out only with an elaborate configuration of respect vis-à-vis two regional entities: imperial China and feudal Japan.

Mamoru Akamine’s book highlights the way a Ryukyuan king would receive a patent of investiture from the emperor of China. Vassal status thus conferred entitled the court to conduct trade between entrepôts along the Asian sea lanes. Acceptance of credentials at the Ministry of Ritual in Beijing underscores this cultural concomitant: vocal address in official Mandarin language and ceremonial address in exemplary sync with assigned vassal rank. Trade was thus a privilege sustained by tribute-as-obedience.

Silver was a premium medium of transaction. It was obtainable from repositories owned by Satsuma, the feudal fief in Kyushu.

Akamine deploys a periodical frame for evincing the maritime and mercantile underpinnings of an East China Sea realm of China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The cornerstone as a pivot of maritime trade did not evolve from contact between peoples themselves occupying the littoral regions of Asia but from high-level dispositions reflecting imperial power in China and feudal power in Japan. “The East Asia Trade Sphere” is the term used in the first chapter to strike the key. The drift of the exposition goes as such: the beginnings in detached strongholds on Okinawa Island, the peak when the Ming shuts off its traders from the sea, and the decline when Meiji Japan sets up a nation-state through terms for centralization and boundary-making.

Thirteenth-century liege lords on Okinawa built physical strongholds (*gusuku*), which gradually fell under the sway of centric power at Shuri in the Chūzan domain. Ryukyuan kingship became the centerpiece of family lines with the surname Shō. Ryukyu gained recognition by China as a state of barbarians on the outer maritime rim. Tribute trade privilege paved the way not only for the construction of ocean-going cargo junks but also for enabling their protection through the agency of onboard facilities for worship. Word-magic played a role in this. The Fujianese cargo junks constructed in Ryukyu were metaphorically configured as “bird ships.” A shipyard was a nesting place (*suraba*). These are historical issues recounted by Akamine, some of which might well make interesting motifs for additional interpretation. One example, of possible interest to an anthropological readership, would be the close association between (maritime) technology and magic.

Ryukyu legations were recipients of imperial largess and provided for with boarding and meals, but this was a highly circumscribed ex-territorial presence. There would be inspections, and freedom of movement was limited. Listings of contraband included historical and Christian religious texts. Even as late as 1844, dispatch of missions by Ryukyuan ships to Fuzhou on the mainland coast (with its Ryukyu House) was not just a feat of navigation but also one of mastering the intricacies of etiquette expected ashore. Something like a role-play of the expected interactions took place before heading out to sea toward the mainland. Ultimately, the decline of Qing China and Tokugawa Japan would come to undermine the validity of the model that had granted the Ryukyus some degree of autonomy through much of a four-hundred-year period: tribute trade and the underlying forms. Chūzan kingship at Shuri gradually imploded to become some sort of shadow kingship.

A closer look at this historical instance of power-as-etiquette (such as the dispatch of messages of sympathy) might even yield certain benefits for diplomacy in our day. As a case in point (Røkkum 2015), I recast—with an anthropological frame of analysis—some early nineteenth-century interactions between Ryukyu officialdom and British navy navigators. Akamine’s portrayal of the late-nineteenth-century waning powers of the Qing and the waxing powers of Meiji Japan is ample with illuminating close-ups. It might not, for example, be widely realized today that the Japanese side (Meiji) considered the alternative of absorbing within its nation-state only the northern part of the Ryukyu archipelago, where the main island of Okinawa is situated. The two southern groups, Miyako and the Yaeyamas, would, according to this scheme, go to China. The solution would have perpetuated, within the context of the Qing state, the ancien régime based on the tribute.

The forte of this book lies in its collation of source material—of texts that may not otherwise be accessible to the modern reader. Data synthesized from a welter of written sources makes it a very readable account. Lina Terrell (translator) and Robert Huey (editor) have made the book available to an English-language readership. The possibility that the specialist reader might have preferred some more inclusion of character-based Chinese and Japanese terms has been anticipated in the “Translator’s Note and Acknowledgments,” explained as a choice made in favor of readability.

The Ryukyu Kingdom lays out a picture of how Ryukyu kings were able to acknowledge the hegemonic aspirations of *two* great powers in a geopolitical in-between by paying obeisance to both. This placement, both in geographical and cultural terms—in-between China and Japan—enabled the Ryukyans to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy. Tribute trade was a crucial aspect of this. I highly recommend Akamine’s book not only to those interested in the history of the Ryukyus but to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of power configurations in East Asia. Cultural or social anthropologists might discern in this book a non-Western variant of rationality: a soft approach to transaction consistent with precedence placed on *the forms of* mutual attention.

REFERENCES

- Røkkum, Arne. 2015. “In the Image of the Other: Nineteenth-Century British Voyagers and Okinawans at the Point of Meeting.” *History and Anthropology* 26 (5): 553–75.

Arne Røkkum
University of Oslo