

The Folklore of the Sacred Forest in Okinawa, Japan

Meari HIRAI*

This paper is a report of the presentation did in Nanjing University, China, September 21th of 2012. Through the presentation, I would like to consider about the 3 points. First of all, “what is a forest?”, next, “what is a sacred forests”, and the most important point to note here is that “why are the forests thought to be sacred?”.

In the Southwest islands, of Japan, including *Amami*, *Okinawa*, *Miyako*, *Yaeyama* islands, there are close to a thousand ‘sacred forests’ where no one is allowed to enter, except the priestesses. These sacred forests are called ‘*Utaki*’. The *Utaki* are places which have dense and various trees. It is believed by local people that there are a number of deities living there. So the *Utak* is the house of deities: if someone enters it, they can not return safely. Usually, one village has more than one *Utak*, and communal rituals are performed to protect the sacred forests and deities, by local women priestesses. They pray through the rituals for happiness of the residents, or they remove negative things from the village, such as disease.

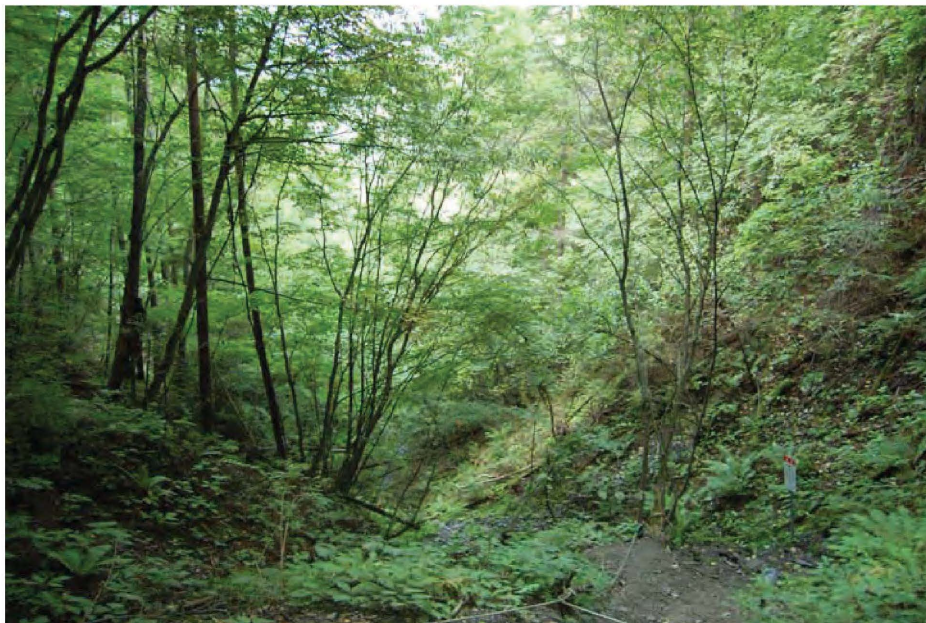


Plate 1: What is a forest?

Over the past few decades, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on *Utaki* of Southwest islands, about faith, deities, location and rituals. On the other hand, there has been no study that tried to answer the third question: why are the forests thought to be sacred? Therefore, I would like to consider as the sacred forest in the case of *Miyako* islands of *Okinawa*, Japan.

* JSPS research fellow.



Plate 2: The sacred forest in *Okinawa*

Firstly, I would like to start think about the forests. It will be different in Japan from China, but everyone has a similar image of forest. In October 20th, on 2011, I asked the questions that “what is a forest?” and “what image does ‘forest’ bring to your mind?” to students in my lectures. Most students replied, “ I have never thought about forests, too much”. Some students said, “it’s a comfortable, relaxing place”. On the other hand, some students said, “it’s dark, mysterious, and a little bit scary”, or “there are many trees.” It means, forests are consisted of many trees. Usually, it is just many trees.

Next, look up the word ‘forest’ in a Japanese folklore dictionary, it is described in two parts. First, it is “a place where trees grow” . Then more is “there are only a few instances when people influence or change the structure of virgin forests and effect its existence in Japan”. According to dictionary, all this means are shrine forest or sacred forest, because many trees are often over several hundred years old, continue to exist and these form the basis of the shrine forests, and sacred forests [Azio eds. 2000:705-706]. I asked my students, again, “what is the closest meaning of forests to you? ”, 100 students, 40% of them answered “shrine forests or sacred forests”.

Secondly, focus on the case of *Nishihara* village in *Miyako* islands, a part of *Okinawa*, Japan. *Okinawa* is located south of main island of Japan, and consists of more than 160 islands and has its own individual particular culture, such as languages, foods, rituals and deities.

Nishihara is situated in about three kilometers to the north of *Hirara*. The population of *Nishihara* consists of 494 men and 476 women, a total of 970 people (as of December 2011). They are mostly cane sugar farmers and who involved in the coastal fishing industry. In 1874, *Nishihara* was founded by migrates who came from other parts of *Miyako* islands, *Ikema* and *Sarahama* [Hirai 2009: 664].

In *Nishihara*, there are more than 10 sacred forests, it means there are 10 *Utaki*, and

communal rituals are performed to protect the sacred forests and deities, by local women priestesses. *The Utaki* is around residence.

There is a group of communal rituals known as the '*Nanamui*', which performs communal rituals in the village. When residents, especially women, reach a certain age, they have to join the *Nanamui* to become priestesses. As a general rule, women first become priestesses



Map1: The map of *Miyako* islands [Hirai 2009:665]

when they reach 46 years of age, and retire at 55 years old. During those 10 years, they perform the communal rituals more than 48 times a year, essentially, once or twice a week.

In modern hi-tech society, it is difficult to be a priestess. If they become a priestess, they must be able to perform the communal rituals, once or twice every week and their responsibility to deity matters always has to be the first priority without change. However, their life style is

changed. They have jobs, have to take care of their children and family. Recently, most people think “ why do we have to follow this old-fashioned habit?”. Therefore, it is hard to keep the *Nanamui*.

This presentation is about the sacred forests and the question is “Why are the forests thought to be sacred?” Firstly, there are trees which are many hundreds of years old, some other forest go back many centuries and it is believed that those old trees have supernatural powers. Secondly, during that time, many priestesses have looked after the sacred forests to sing the holy songs, to bring offering and to pray for the health and happiness of the residents, every time, they say the same prayers, every day, every week, every month, for over hundred years. Because of this, I think those forests have become sacred. Before, in Nishihara village, there were many hundreds priestesses, but now, there are only few priestesses, but they still continue to protect the sacred forests, to protect deities, by praying the same prayer, again and again.

References

- Meari Hirai. (2012) *Miyako no kamigami to seinarumori* (The Sacred Forests and Deities of Miyako islands). Thokyo: Shintensya.
- Meari Hirai. (2009) “Facing the Crisis of Nanamui: The case of Nishihara, Miyako Island.” *Proceedings of the 1st Next-Generation Global Workshop*: 663-674. Kyoto University Global COE Program for Reconstruction of the Intimate and Public Spheres in 21st Century Asia.
- Azio Fukuta eds. (2000) *A Dictionary of Japanese Folklore the second volume*. Tokyo: Yoshikawakobunkan.