

Okinawan Myths in Circum-pacific Perspectives

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The Okinawa Islands consist of three districts: Okinawa Main Island, Miyako Islands, and Yaeyama Islands. I shall briefly examine their creation myths.

1. Okinawa Main Island:
 - a. Creation myth of Ie Island (related to South East Asian myths)
 - b. Creation myth of Nago District (related to Northern Pacific myths)
2. Miyako Islands:
 - a. Myth of Harimizu Utaki Sacred Site (Serpent Husband)
 - b. Myth of Tarama Island (Sun Husband)
 - c. Myth of O-nushi Utaki Sacred Site (Sun Husband + Fire God)
3. Yaeyama Islands:
 - a. Foundation myth of Yaeyama (Various elements including ones of South Pacific)
 - b. Foundation myth of Irabu Island (Heavenly God and Dragon Palace God, common to Japan, Korea, and China)

In order to consider the problem of the cultural continuity of Okinawa and Melanesia, I take the foundation myth of Yaeyama as the first example. According to this myth, Heavenly God ordered *Aman-chu* (Heavenly Being, Primordial Giant) to create Yaeyama Island. Then from the earth, pagurian (hermit crab), the first creature, appeared. Pagurian is called *Aman*, i.e. Heavenly. It is interesting both the heavenly being and the chthonian being have same name. This word *aman* has cognates in South Pacific.

Furthermore, there is a legendary pond in Ishigaki Island about which it is told that the brother and sister couple that had emerged from the earth had made a round of the pond and then had united. This pond vanished due to the recent land development, although I have old photos. The motif of the union of brother-and-sister couple after the circumambulation of a pillar is wide spread.

As to the foundation myth of the Okinawa Islands, I can only talk about the general distribution of motifs, since it is a large problem that cannot be dealt in a short time. There are motifs of the Separation of Heaven and Earth; World Egg; Creation by the Sun and Moon; Creation of the Land by Heavenly Deity etc.

Basically, Okinawa abounds in myths and folktales about the ocean. Although it is still not clear how much of them could be related to the myths of circum-pacific region, let me cite a few examples:

Late Professor Seiji Ito, formerly professor of Chinese folklore at Keio University in Tokyo, conducted an ethnographic survey at Rennell Island (one of Solomon Islands) and in his paper remarked that the island could be characterized by its cyclic cosmology. Okinawa received the idea of Heavenly Deity from China and in daily life the ethical concept of god is fairly common. Yet, at the level of traditional cosmology, naturalistic worship of oceanic deities and the heavenly bodies (the sun, moon, and stars) are strong. People still believe that there is the Dragon Palace (*Nirai-kanai*) over the horizon. I think such naturalistic and cyclic cosmology of Okinawa is historically related to the ones of circum-pacific regions. I suppose it is this traditional cosmology that makes the living of the people of Okinawa stable and peaceful.