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Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa

Susan Sered

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Okinawa is the only contemporary society in which women lead the official, mainstream, publicly funded religion. Priestesses are the acknowledged religious leaders within the home, clan, and village--and, until annexation by Japan approximately one hundred years ago, within the Ryukyuan Kingdom. This fieldwork-based study provides a gender-sensitive look at a remarkable religious tradition. Susan Sered spent a year living in Henza, an Okinawan fishing village, joining priestesses as they conducted rituals in the sacred groves located deep in the jungle-covered mountains surrounding the village. Her observations focus upon the meaning of being a priestess and the interplay between women's religious preeminence and other aspects of the society.

Sered shows that the villages social ethos is characterized by easy-going interpersonal relations, an absence of firm rules and hierarchies, and a belief that the village and its inhabitants are naturally healthy. Particularly interesting is her discovery that gender is a minimal category here: villagers do not adapt any sort of ideology that proclaims that men and women are inherently different from one another. Villagers do explain that because farmland is scarce in Okinawa, men have been compelled to go to the dangerous ocean and to foreign countries to seek their livelihoods. Women, in contrast, have remained *present* in their healthy and pleasant village, working on their farms and engaging in constant rounds of intra- and interfamilial socializing. Priestesses, who do not exert power in the sense that religious leaders in many other societies do, can be seen as the epitome of *presence*. By praying and eating at myriad rituals, priestesses make immediate and tangible the benevolent presence of *kami-sama* (divinity).

Through 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.

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