



*Unjami ritual in Dana village, Iheya island ©OKINAWA41*

## **Okinawa's Hidden Treasures**

The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

Rosa Caroli, Italy

## Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

### The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

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*Iheya Island, Okinawa's northernmost territory ©OCVB*

**Motivation** Okinawa, 160 islands scattered across emerald green waters in a subtropical region, preserves the legacy of its past as a kingdom, which for centuries ruled most of the Ryukyu Islands and actively interacted with the surrounding countries, absorbing different influences and forging a peculiar culture. Indeed, until the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the Tokyo government abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom, incorporated it as a prefecture of Japan, and renamed it Okinawa, these islands were not part of Japan.

My interest in the history of Okinawa is of long standing. As a historian of modern and contemporary Japan, I have always been intrigued by how people living in this peripheral region experienced integration into Japan, interacted with modernity and metropolitan culture, and succeeded in preserving their cultural heritage.

Exploring Okinawa's culture allows you not only to experience the life, tastes and beauty of this region, but also to step into a microcosm where the past survives and resurfaces in myriad of different creative expressions, cultural practices, and daily activities, where a superb environment acted and still acts as a source of the basic elements of life and a font of creative and spiritual inspiration, and where thousands of anonymous sacred places and natural spots are hidden beyond historical sites, museums, and landmarks.

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*Shureimon is the first gate to the Shuri Castle, originally built during the reign of King Sho Sei (1527-1555) ©JIN*

**Objective** Okinawa is mostly famous as a subtropical paradise, home to crystal blue waters, white-sand beaches and coral reefs that attract millions of visitors each year and make tourism the pillar of the local economy. Nevertheless, many distinctive cultural traditions and practices, and peculiar arts and crafts still survive today in Okinawa, revealing the richness, eclecticism, and cosmopolitan character of its culture. The goal of this short essay is to suggest just three of the various itineraries that lead to the discovery of Okinawa's hidden treasures:

*Historic Sites* A walk along and alongside the stone-paved path Ishidatami michi located in a superb environment on the southern downhill of the Shuri Castle. This ancient royal residence of the Ryukyu Kingdom is dotted with places of worship, grave sites, large old acacia trees, water wells, and fine examples of traditional architecture.

*Arts and Crafts* Exploration of different textile materials and weaving techniques and an account of visiting a workshop where banana fibres are used for paper making, which requires traditional techniques to produce a unique type of paper that was widely used during the Ryukyu Kingdom.

*Festivals, Rites, Events* A trip to the unspoiled island of Iheya, about 80 minutes by ferry from Nakijin Village, to attend the annual Unjami Festival and other traditional rituals and worships. Here, according to the ancient Ryukyuan belief, females play the primary role as interlocutors with the supernatural, having the power to communicate with gods and to become the spiritual guardians of their brothers.

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These itineraries reveal many aspects of Okinawans' life, visions of the surrounding world, sense of place, and perception of nature and supernatural, providing an experience that goes beyond mere tourism.

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**Context** Situated along the sea roads through which trading, cultural and technological exchanges with both oceanic and continental countries developed, Okinawa is, for its geographical and cultural specificity, a special place in Japan. Besides a great variety and often rare species of plants and animals, the islands offer diverse and variegated tongues, cultural expressions, and sacred rituals. In fact, from the outside, they appear as a unique cultural mix, reflecting the cosmopolitan past of Okinawa and making it more than just a local culture of Japan.

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Shinkousen zu depicting tribute ships bound for China, Anonymous, 19th Century; Courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum

Until the late 16th century, when its role as a key player in maritime trade with East and Southeast Asia was challenged by the Portuguese maritime competition, the Ryukyu Kingdom prospered thanks to far-flung trading activities with Korea, Vietnam, Java, Malacca, Pattani, Palembang, Siam, Sumatra, and many others. Besides, from 1372 Ryukyu maintained political and diplomatic links with China and, from 1611, with Japan. These exchanges with various foreign lands helped create an eclectic culture, whose legacy is still visible in historic sites, mostly exemplified in the reconstructed Shuri Castle, and whose expressions can be seen in arts and crafts, many of which are only little known even in the rest of Japan.

Okinawa is located at the intersection of two distinctly different climates, the Southeast Asian tropics and the temperate zone of the Japanese mainland. Even though it covers less than one percent of Japan's soil, it is considered a biological melting pot, with a huge amount and variety of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic species not found elsewhere in the world.

Over the centuries, economic activities, popular traditions and practices and religious beliefs and rituals have developed within this superb natural environment. Okinawan culture has been forged through interaction and adaptation with its natural environment that still plays a large role in both everyday life and spiritual practice beyond tourist destinations and exotic-themed landscapes as well as inside and around the urbanized, commercialized, and militarized areas of mainland Okinawa and its many islands.

The legacy of the Ryukyu Kingdom and its golden age of maritime trade is mainly attested by royal buildings, remains of ancient fortresses and stone walls, artistic and craft products, as well as court dances and music. The natural environment is often the backdrop for Okinawans' inner life and spirituality, with sacred spots and groves – *utaki*, places of worship – *uganju*, and spirit stones – *tamaishi*.

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The Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum, constructed in 1501 under an order of King Sho Shin, covers a vast area of 2,442sqm ©OCVB



Ishidatami michi in Kanagusuku ward of Shuri Kinjo ©OCVB

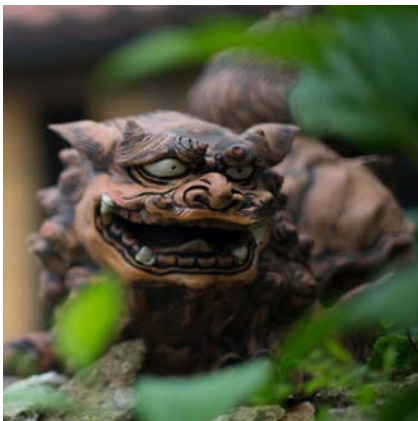
#### Historic Sites

The Ishidatami michi cobblestone road leads down from the bright red Shuri Castle, whose main building was destroyed by fire on October 31, 2019. The shock and sadness in Okinawa and beyond soon gave way to a strong determination to rebuild this great symbol of the Ryukyu. Shuri Castle is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which includes the nearby impressive Royal Mausoleum of Tamaudun. Fragments of this single preserved section of the ancient Madama michi, the *Pearls Road*, that once connected Shuri Castle with the port of Naha, 10 km away, have been found on the site of Shuri Castle and in the city of Naha. It was built for the military to defend against enemies from overseas, as pirates posed a great threat during the reign of King Sho Shin (1477-1526). The road was first paved in the typical Ryukyuan cobblestone style with local limestone in 1522. About four metres wide with a wall along the side of the road made of the same material, it currently runs almost three hundred metres downhill in an area once inhabited by the high-ranking elite.

I have walked this path, which despite its fame is always quiet, several times. It appears to be a remote and lonely place of scenic and natural beauty, combining both the material and immaterial heritage of Okinawa. Having been spared from the devastation of the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 and carrying traces of the past and testimonies of spiritual life, this area is of special importance to me. The road and the area surrounding the stone wall are almost intact and have preserved the characteristics of traditional architecture. The area along and around the trail offers several traces of past practices and activities.

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Shisa guard ©OCVB



The 200-year-old Great Akagi near Uchi-kanagusuku Sacred Grove ©OCVB

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In the upper side of the path, three characters are inscribed in a stone tablet – *ishiganto*, which traditionally was placed at a three-way street intersection to ward off evil spirits. A side alley on the left of this stone leads to the Great Akagi, one of the many tall bishop wood trees that once filled Shuri hill and a rare example of akagi that survived the war. The green space under and around the trees, dotted by sacred groves, or *Utaki*, sees many people coming to worship the gods and make a wish. The Uchi-kanagusuku Sacred Grove, whose origin goes back at least to the 12th century, is a small spot of about nine square meters surrounded by a stone wall, where a gate leads to three ritual stones amid lush vegetation in a suggestive atmosphere.

Another path starts near an old well called Kanagusuku Ufu Hija, that has been used in everyday life by nearby households and for making paper since 1686. It reaches the entrance of the Nakano – or *Nakanuka* in Okinawan – River and an old communal well built in stone masonry; a further example of the well building and water storage techniques developed since the 15th century.

Farther along, the path descends among time-honored trees, sacred spots, multicolored flowers, and traditional houses with low-hanging, orange-red tiled roofs, protected by pairs of shisa, creatures from Okinawan mythology that resemble a cross between a lion and a dog. Travelers can enjoy the beautiful view of Naha and rest at Kanagusuku Muraya, a traditional wooden house midway, or at the Music café Otoneko. Perched on the side of a hill and enclosed by a luxuriant garden, this charming local house is operated by an Okinawan couple and their cats with a genuine passion for music.

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*Ryukyuan lacquerware is distinguished by use of vivid colors and unique surface decoration known as tsuikin*  
©Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center



*Ceramics are developed introducing styles and techniques of nearby countries*  
©Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center



*Examples of Miyako jofu* ©OCVB

#### Arts and Crafts

Okinawa's cultural and history is also reflected in traditional arts and crafts that developed as part of its local life and economy. The technical and aesthetic qualities evolved by synthesizing local skills and styles with those of surrounding countries, often under the patronage of the Royal Court. This continuing process of adaptation together with the inventiveness of local crafts people produced unique Ryukyuan creations; each island often maintained its own characteristics in respect of materials and methods.

The most famous traditional techniques of Okinawa are those used in lacquers, ceramics, and textiles, fourteen of which are among the 219 items designated by the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry as traditional crafts. Okinawa ranks third in the 47 Japanese prefectures for designated traditional arts and crafts products. These handiworks are not only of great aesthetic value, they also communicate the context of their production: from economic, commercial, and socio-cultural factors to the availability of raw materials.

The particular use of wood and plant materials and the treatment of textiles made Okinawa a treasure house of weaving and dyeing techniques.

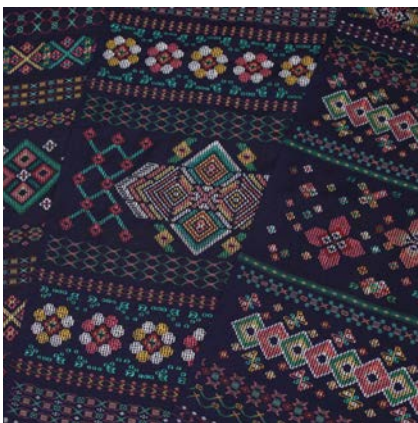


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Women wearing Bingata-dyed-costume, Ryukyu Festival ©OCVB



Example of Yuntanza hanaui ©OCVB



Delicately hand-dyeing using the Bingata technique ©OCVB

Among the most valued of Ryukyu textiles is the brightly colored Bingata, made of silk, cotton or abaca, and hand-dyed with pigments and vegetable dyes. This floral cloth of the east, whose origins go back to the 15th century, satisfied the taste of the elite of the kingdom and was highly regarded in the coastal Chinese markets; it is still produced for decorative cloths, kimono, and obi today.

Hanaori – *hanaui* in Okinawan – is a type of weaving with very charming floral designs that reflect the tropical atmosphere of the islands. It has been manufactured since the 15th century at least, and used for centuries as the official and exclusive cloth of the royal court. Shuri hanaui and Yuntanza hanaui can be found respectively in the Naha and Yomitanzan area; unique variations of hanaori can be found in many of the other islands, woven in the hope of protecting the family and often gifted to a loved one.

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*Handspun yarns are aligned to desired width and length in the making of Basho-fu. All the complexed preparatory processes even before weaving is crucial for quality product.*

*©Association for the Preservation of Kijoka Bashofu*



*Examples of Basho-fu, variations and techniques used for textile, are incomparable throughout Japan ©OCVB*

Ramie is another textile fiber used since ancient times to produce a hand-woven ikat textile. Woven with dye-resistant yarns of hand-spun ramie and dyed with indigo, this fabric is known as *jofu* – literally high-quality cloth since it was used as a tributary good or gift to the king. The craft to extract the fibers of ramie and the best manufacturing process of *jofu* can still be found on the islands of Miyako and Ishigaki.

One of the oldest and most important of fibers used for textiles until the arrival of cotton and silk in the 16th century was banana fiber – *ito-basho*. Suited to the climate of the islands and used as a textile for daily clothing since ancient times, the banana-fiber cloth, Basho-fu, was enlisted among the tributes to China from the end of the 15th century and used for women's court garments in foreign countries. Different production processes of Basho-fu still characterize the islands of Okinawa; the craft practiced in Kijoka (Ogimi village) has been recognized as one of Japan's Important Intangible Cultural Properties.

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Making of Basho-shi, Shoshi-an  
©Okinawa Churashima Foundation



Ito-basho is found across Okinawa  
©Association for the Preservation of  
Kijoka Bashofu



Agena Kiyoshi in his Shoshi-an work-  
shop  
©Okinawa Churashima Foundation

While precious arts and crafts were mainly used by local elites or as trade and tribute goods, many traditional artifacts remained linked to common people's everyday life, and continued to be made from what nature had to offer. The shortage of paper-mulberry for example, which was used to produce thick, pure-white paper for official and ceremonial purposes, led to the use of banana fiber to produce Basho-shi – *bashuukabi* or *basuuchi* in Okinawan. Soon after its first production in Naha in 1717, this craft was transferred to the southern islands of Miyako and Yaeyama, and then later used widely throughout the kingdom, mainly for non-official purposes. The banana-fiber paper production markedly declined in the second half of the 19th century, but was revived in the 1970s. In 1988, Agena Kiyoshi founded the workshop *Shoshi-an* near Shuri Castle. He is not only dedicated to a time-honoured craft that is unique in Okinawa, but also to preserving and passing on the beauty of this tradition through lectures and workshops that are especially aimed at children.

Even today, most of the Okinawan islands stand out for a variety of traditional activities, such as Ryukyu indigo production, cabinetry, bamboo works, and musical instruments, including the sanshin. This snake skinned banjo is considered the precursor of the Japanese shamisen and it can be heard everywhere across the Ryukyu archipelago in performances of folk songs.

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Priestess at shrine performing the Unjami ritual ©OKINAWA41



In the Unjami ritual, priests position themselves at the boat-shaped cloth, offering prayers for the Sea God ©OKINAWA41

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#### Festivals, Rites, Events

Many cultural traditions are practiced throughout the year across these islands, where nature inspires the daily and spiritual life: music performances, sea god and ocean festivals, dragon boat races, and court and folk dances – commemorating the deaths of ancestors, giving thanks for the year's crop, or pleasing gods and spirits. They are often performed at hallowed sites of worship located in hills and forests, and officiated by a hereditary priestess – *kaminchu*, reflecting the preeminent position that women traditionally held in the religious sphere. The *Eisa* dance, which was originally performed to honor ancestors' spirits, is now a vital part of Okinawan life.

The spiritual rule of the sister over the brother was a widespread concept in most of the Okinawa Islands, emphasizing the female superiority in rituals. On Iheya, the dominant island in the religious hierarchy, this authoritative role of priestesses was respected until the 19th century, longer than in other areas. Indeed, the legacy of the Chief Priestess – *noro*, lives on in the annual *Unjami* festival, ritual worship of the sea goddess held in Dana village. *Noro* was second only to *Kikoe-Ogimi*, typically a sister or other female relative of the king. On the 17th day of the 7th month of the old lunar calendar, women dressed in white costumes welcome the god of the sea, perform traditional dances and old songs, and pray for good catches. This ancient festival is an ethnological treasure, a notable example of how nature nourishes the indigenous animism and provides a backdrop for religious rituals.

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The rich and eclectic tradition of Okinawa can be seen in many sites and museums. The Okinawa Prefectural Museum and the Naha City Historical Museum are good starting points to explore the remaining treasure of the Sho royal dynasty that recall the golden days of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Moreover, many local individuals and communities help through a variety of activities to keep Okinawan culture alive for coming generations.

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Okinawa, while a Japanese prefecture and often referred to as the Japanese Hawaii, conserves its cultural heritage as a significant asset in cultivating its sense of identity. Okinawa provides a particular perspective from which to view the history and culture of Japan in a wider context, allowing visitors to grasp the multicultural nature of the country.

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Rosa Caroli is a professor of Japanese History in the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her main field of research is the evolution of Japan's modern state with particular regard to identitarian discourses on both the nation and its peripheries. She has written extensively about Okinawan and, more recently, Edo-Tokyo history. In 2009 she received the Higa Shuncho Prize of the Society for the Research on Okinawa Culture.

An author of various books and articles, she is visiting researcher at Waseda University and Hosei University.

[www.unive.it](http://www.unive.it)

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**Places**    **Basho-Fu Hall**

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Regional institution established in 1986 to revitalize the local craft industry and to promote the Basho-fu fabric. The first floor houses a permanent installation of Basho-fu samples, video footage of the materials being woven, and items for sale. The second floor is reserved for workshops and the training of future stewards of Basho-fu textiles.

Open 10:00-17:00, closed on Sundays and Summer/Winter holidays  
905-1303, Okinawa, Ogimi son, Kijoka 454

[web-site](#)

**Kanagusuku Ufu Hija**

*Hija* is an Okinawan term to describe a supply system where water is brought from a distant source through drains. Kanagusuku Ufu Hija has been used as a communal well – *muraga*, before modern water supply was introduced. The stone-flagged surface of the open space in front of the *muraga* clearly shows its wear by the many *hija* users stepping on it over the passing of centuries.

903-0815, Okinawa, Naha shi, Shuri, Kinjo cho 2-8

[web-site](#)

**Music Cafe Otoneko**

Situated along Ishidatami michi, the stone-paved road in Kinjo cho, this is a good place to stop by for good coffee and music in a friendly atmosphere; the place is run by a couple with deep dedication to music.

Open on Sundays and irregularly on weekdays.

903-0815, Okinawa, Naha shi, Shurikinjo cho 3-22

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

**Naha City Museum of History**

Established 2006 to celebrate the 85th anniversary of municipalization. Its collection of fine arts and crafts and historical documents such as National Treasures of the royal Sho that have been preserved in the Shuri Castle for centuries invite visitors to explore Okinawan history and culture.

900-0015, Okinawa, Naha shi, Kumoji 1-1-1, Pallette Kumoji 4F

[web-site](#)

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**Places**    **Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center**

Conveniently located on Kokusai dori, Naha City Traditional Arts and Crafts Center houses a gallery and workshops where visitors can learn about various Okinawan crafts such as glassblowing, weaving and pottery.

900-0013, Okinawa, Nahashi, Makishi 3-2-10 2F

[web-site](#)

**Okinawa Craft Promotion Center**

Prefectural facility for research, exhibitions, and lectures; long-term courses offer training in various crafts.

901-1116, Okinawa, Shimajiri gun, Haebaru cho, Teruya 213

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

**Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum**

Established right after the Battle of Okinawa in 1946 in Naha's Shuri district, the current museum reopened in the Omoromachi district in a modern building whose design was inspired by the architecture of a traditional Okinawan castle – *gusuku*. This prefectural museum boasts the regions largest collection of Ryukyu and Okinawa history, culture, science, and art and features a shop for many Okinawan souvenirs that can only be found here.

900-0006, Okinawa, Naha shi, Omoromachi 3-1-1

[web-site](#)

**Shoshi-An**

Ryukyuan paper craft workshop established by Agena Kiyoshi, specializing in the manufacturing of Basho-shi, traditional paper made from banana fiber; also offering courses for children

903-0821, Okinawa, Naha shi, Shurigibo cho 4-89

[web-site](#)



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**Places**    **Shuri Castle**

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Built in the late 14th century on a hill in the old royal capital for King Sho Hashi (1372-1439), who united the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429.

The castle retained its function as the administrative centre and residence of the Sho dynasties until the spring of 1879, when the Japanese police forces took control.

The castle ruins, together with other related objects, were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000.

The rebuilt Shuri Castle was destroyed by fire on October 31, 2019, but visitors can visit the complex, which is partially open to the public.

903-0815, Okinawa, Naha shi, Shuri, kinjo cho 1-2

[web-site](#)

**Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum**

One of the three Ryukyuan royal mausoleums in the vicinity of Shuri Castle, Naha. It was founded by King Sho Shin for his father in 1501 and entombs kings and their close relatives from the Second Sho Dynasty (1470-1879).

903-0815, Okinawa, Naha shi, Shurikinjo cho 1-3

[web-site](#)

**The Great Akagi**

Six tall bishop wood trees, over 200 years old and 20m in height, within the grounds of Uchikanagusuku, south of Shuri Castle. As most of its peers fell victim to the flames of World War II, these remaining exemplars are considered divine.

903-0815, Okinawa, Naha shi, Kinjo cho 3

[web-site](#)

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**People**    **Agena, Kiyoshi**

Agena Kiyoshi opened the Shoshi-an workshop for handmade Ryukyuan paper in the Shuri district of Naha after the death of his master Katsu Kimihiko, a Japanese mainlander who revived the production of banana-fiber paper in the late 1970s. Since 1988 he manufactures this unique Okinawan paper and also welcomes children to experience, explore, and enjoy this traditional craft.

**Higa, Izumi**

Award-winning performer, Professor Higa teaches traditional Ryukyu dance at OPUA's Faculty of Music. She is committed to spread knowledge of this dance that has evolved from a Ryukyuan court dance to its present form after the kingdom became part of Japan in 1879. Since the end of the Second World War this dance has become an art-form which can bring comfort and encouragement and which expresses a yearning for peace.

**Maehira, Fusaaki**

A native of Okinawa, Professor Maehira is a refined scholar and a remarkable connoisseur of the cultural heritage of his land. He is author of many works on the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom and its role in the Asian trade network.

**Publications**    **Ancient Ryukyu: An Archaeological Study of Island Communities**

Pearson, Richard; 2013; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press

The book explores 30,000 years of human dwelling in the Ryukyu Islands, focusing on the unique geopolitical position of the islands, their environment, and the historical activities of its many human communities

**Craft Treasures of Okinawa**

The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; 1978; Tokyo: Kodansha International

Examples of Okinawan crafts that were on display at an Okinawan Art Exhibition in the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto in 1974.

Beautiful full page pictures of the crafts, are followed by a discussion of Okinawan history, ceramics, musical instruments, lacquerware, and textiles.

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**Publications**    **Embodied Divinity and the Gift: The Case of Okinawan Kaminchu**  
Kawahashi, Noriko/ Morny, 2017; Springer International Publishing, pp 87-102

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**Heritage Politics: Shuri Castle and Okinawa's Incorporation into Modern Japan, 1879-2000**

Loo, Tze May; 2014; Lanham: Lexington Books

Accounts on how Okinawa became a subordinate state of Japan's mainland, and the role Okinawa's cultural heritage plays till today in creating, maintaining, and negotiating that position

**Keys to Okinawan Culture**

Okinawa Prefecture; 1992; Naha: Okinawa Prefectural Government  
80-page paperback that provides a comprehensive introduction to Okinawan history culture, social life, and customs

**Okinawa: The History of an Island People**

Kerr, George; 2000; Boston, MA: Tuttle Publishing

Originally published in 1956, this book is a readable and useful source for the study of the fascinating history of Okinawa

**Okinawan Religion: Belief, Ritual, and Social Structure**

Lebra, William P; 1986; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press

Wide-ranging study of Okinawan religion, investigating concepts of the supernatural and female predominance in religious life as well as religious practices, religious specialists, and religious organization at the state, community, kin group, and household levels

**The Origins of Banana-fibre Cloth in the Ryukyus, Japan**

Hendrickx, Katrien; 2007; Belgium: Leuven University Press

A scholarly study of the complex tradition of banana-fibre weaving in Okinawa, the history of its fate until its revival in the 1970s, and the evolution of its role as important constituents of Okinawan identity

**The Unjami Ritual at Iheya Island in the Northern Ryukyus. A Preliminary Study**

Ghidini, Chiara; 2012; Università La Sapienza di Roma, Italy: *Morcelliana in Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*, vol. 78, pp. 458-466

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#### Glossary

##### **Basho-Fu**

Traditional Okinawan fabric made from the fiber of Ito-Basho, locally grown wild banana.

Basho-fu products are durable and also comfortable in hot and humid weather, popular among all classes of people during the era of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429-1879).

Today only a few workshops are left that can produce this textile.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Basho-Shi
- ▶ Bingata
- ▶ Hanaori
- ▶ Ito-Basho
- ▶ Kijoka

##### **Basho-Shi**

A type of paper unique to Okinawa, made from the fiber of Ito-basho, a locally grown banana plant. The technique to produce this paper was brought from Satsuma, now Kagoshima Prefecture on the Kyushu island, to Okinawa during the 17th century.

Gibo in Takaraguchi is the only one studio left today that still produces Basho-shi.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Basho-Fu
- ▶ Ito-Basho

##### **Bingata**

Traditional dyeing technique and textile developed during the 14th century Ryukyu period in Okinawa. The textile is resist dyed with bright red, blue, yellow, and green colored motifs through multiple steps using stencils and other methods.

Costume made with Bingata were only allowed to be worn by the royal family and aristocrats.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Basho-Fu
- ▶ Hanaori

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#### **Hanaori**

Type of cotton or silk woven textile dyed with plant-based pigments in distinctive geographic patterns, also known as *Hanaui* in Okinawan. The technique was brought from China and East Asian countries to Okinawa in the 15th Century and refined in the Yomitan village located on the western coast of the central part of the main island.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

- ▶ Basho-Fu
- ▶ Bingata
- ▶ Okinawa
- ▶ Ryukyu Islands

#### **Iheya**

14km long and 3km wide island, a 80min ferry ride from Untenko Port in Nakijin village, Okinawa's northernmost territory. With few tourist facilities, this island of emerald green seas, large sand dunes, and endless white beaches also preserves many indigenous traditions.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Nakijin
- ▶ Okinawa

#### **Ishidatami Michi**

Stone paved road in the Kinjo cho district of Naha that stretches about 250m from the southern end of the Shuri castle park, constructed under the reign of King Sho Shin of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the 16th century. Along the way, also considered as one of the 100 best roads in Japan, are traditional houses with local limestone walls and red-tiled roofing from the same period.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Ryukyu Islands

#### **Ishigaki**

The major island of the Yaeyama islands, around 400km southwest of the Okinawa main island, Japan's southernmost city with a major airport and ferry terminal

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Okinawa

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#### Glossary

##### **Ishiganto**

Small stone slabs that can be found on road-intersections around Okinawa inscribed with three Chinese characters to ward off evil spirits

[web-site](#)

- ▶Uganju
- ▶Utaki

##### **Ito-Basho**

Wild banana plant – *Musa balbisiana* var. *liukuensis*, endemic to Okinawa, used to produce Basho-fu textile and Basho-shi paper

[web-site](#)

- ▶Basho-Fu
- ▶Basho-Shi

##### **Jofu**

Premium hand-woven ramie fabric from a natural fiber whose quality is similar to linen or hemp; produced in various regions of Japan under different names, such as Echigo jofu in Niigata, Noto jofu in Ishikawa, Omi jofu in Shiga, Nara jofu in Nara, and Miyako jofu and Yaeyama jofu in Okinawa.

- ▶Okinawa
- ▶Ryukyu Islands

##### **Kaminchu**

In the ancient belief of Ryukyuan people spirituality is the domain of women. Kaminchu are Okinawa's divine women with exceptional power, serving as medium between gods and human.

- ▶Kikoe-Ogimi
- ▶Noro
- ▶Okinawa
- ▶Utaki

##### **Kijoka**

District in Ogimi village on the west coast of the norther part of Okinawa's main island, renowned for Basho-fu, a textile made from locally grown banana fiber using traditional techniques. It is also famous for its waterfall and purple iris fields, blossoming between March and April.

[web-site](#)

- ▶Basho-Fu
- ▶Okinawa

# Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

## The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

### Glossary **Kikoe-Ogimi**

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Title held by the highest ranking noro priestess of the Ryukyu Kingdom, spiritual advisor to the king overseeing and managing an expanded group of priestesses and shamanesses.

The position was reserved to a royal woman, generally a sister or daughter of the king in power.

Although her status was almost equal to that of the monarch, the highest priestess was illiterate as were all Ryukyuan women whose knowledge continued to be handed down orally at least until the Japanese educational system was introduced to Okinawa after 1879.

#### web-site

- ▶Kaminchu
- ▶Noro

### **King Sho Shin (1465-1526)**

The third successor of the second Sho Dynasty, Ryukyu Kingdom. Sho Shin took throne in 1477 and his reign is known as the *Great Days of Chuzan*, a time of unity, development, and prosperity in Ryukyu.

- ▶Ryukyu Islands
- ▶Sho

### **Madama Michi**

Literally the *Pearls Road*, an important military route constructed during the reign of King Sho Shin in 1522 between Naha port and the Royal Palace. Over a length of about 8km it passes Ishidatami michi, Shikina Slope, Madan bridge, and Ishihiya bridge

- ▶Ishidatami Michi
- ▶King Sho Shin (1465-1526)
- ▶Naha

### **Miyako**

Major island of the Miyako island group in Okinawa Prefecture, around 300km southwest of the Okinawa main island

- ▶Okinawa

# Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

## The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

### Glossary

#### **Naha**

Capital and largest city of Okinawa prefecture.

For centuries the commercial center of the Ryukyu Kingdom, its port developed as an important trading hub for East and Southeast Asia.

Almost completely destroyed during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, it is today the center of political and economic life of the prefecture.

Yui Rail, the Okinawa Urban Monorail, was opened in 2003 connecting Naha Airport to the center of the city and is still the only public rail system in the prefecture.

► Okinawa

► Ryukyu Islands

#### **Nakijin**

Village on the west coast of Okinawa's north; its Untenko port provides ferry services to Iheya island.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

► Iheya

► Okinawa

#### **Noro**

*Nuru* in Okinawan are village priestesses of the Ryukyuan religion.

Known of since the early 12th century, these godly people – *kaminchu*, continue performing rituals and ceremonies for the village they are assigned to, even today.

Their powerful influence in the Ryukyuan community declined after the incorporation of Okinawa into Japan, the promotion of Shintoism as a state religion throughout Japan, and the enactment of the Civil Code in 1896 which sanctioned the principle of male primogeniture.

[web-site](#)

► Kaminchu

► Kikoe-Ogimi

► Utaki

#### **Okinawa**

First mentioned in a Japanese source of the eighth century as Akonawa, Okinawa – *Uchinaa* in Okinawan, is the southernmost prefecture of Japan and also the name of its main island. Annexed in 1872 by the Japanese Government and incorporated as a prefecture in 1879, the name of the former Ryukyu Kingdom was changed to Okinawa.

[web-site](#)

► Ryukyu Islands



# Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

## The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

### Glossary **Ryukyu Islands**

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Chain of islands that stretch southwest from Kyushu to Taiwan; the southern part of these islands make up what is now Okinawa prefecture of Japan. The name *Ryukyu* was restored under the US occupation of the islands (1945-72) to support the detachment of Okinawa from Japan. The islands are generally associated with the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429-1879) as well as with the cultural heritage of Okinawa.

- ▶ King Sho Shin (1465-1526)
- ▶ Okinawa
- ▶ Sho

### **Shisa**

Legendary creature derived from Chinese guardian lions, believed to ward off evils. These gargoyle beasts, resembling a cross between lion and dog, are often placed in pairs – on the roof of homes or at the gate of sacred places.

### **Sho**

The name of the two dynasties who ruled the Ryukyu Kingdom: the first from 1406 to 1469, and the second from 1470 to 1879.

The last monarch of the Ryukyu Kingdom Sho Tai (1843-1901) was forced to abdicate and move to Tokyo in 1879, where he resided until his death. He was buried at the Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum in Shuri, a district of Naha, Okinawa prefecture's capital.

#### [web-site](#)

- ▶ King Sho Shin (1465-1526)
- ▶ Naha
- ▶ Okinawa

### **Uganju**

Generic term of open grassy spaces used for prayers, for divine assistance, and wellbeing in Okinawan communities, often connected to Utaki

#### [web-site](#)

- ▶ Utaki

## Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

### The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

#### Glossary

#### **Unjami**

Harvest festival, held every year on the first day after the Obon Festival of the old lunar calendar in Okinawa's northern towns, dedicated to both sea and mountain gods. This traditional Ryukyuan ritual, also called Ungami, is a registered National Important Intangible Property; its most popular performance can be visited in Shioya Bay and other areas of the small Ogimi village on the western coast of northern Okinawa.

[web-site](#)

▶Kikoe-Ogimi

#### **Utaki**

Sacred places for the veneration of gods and ancestors in Ryukyuan religion, often a grove, cave or mountain located on the outskirts of villages

[web-site](#)

▶Kaminchu

▶Kikoe-Ogimi

▶Noro

▶Uganju

# Okinawa's Hidden Treasures

The Cultural and Material Legacy of the Ryukyu

## Imprint

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