

On the Significance of Displaced and Waterless Sacred Wells in Okinawa : A Case Study of Pilgrimage among a Patrilineal Descent Group

TSUHA Kazuaki

The author examines a folk religion centered on sacred wells that no longer have water. In Okinawa, Japan, certain folk events involve pilgrimages to specific wells or springs. Research in this area has generally taken two forms. The first is historical-geographical, focusing on the origins and development of villages. Unlike *utaki* (sacred places within villages), wells and springs are immovable, and thus their locations and associated ritual groups reveal the histories of villages. The second approach examines the beliefs and rituals centered on *suderu*—a term referring to the literal shedding of the skin by insects or reptiles, particularly snakes in this context, and its figurative association with rejuvenation or rebirth in humans—via the act of stroking the water. However, the case study presented by the author addresses these concerns only marginally, as the wells in question have been displaced and are devoid of water. The situation can be traced back to WW2 and the US military rule (1945-1972), specifically regarding acquisitions. Accordingly, the author begins by examining the military bases and their impact on local holy places. In addition, the displaced and waterless “wells” (now stone monuments) may be regarded as remnants. However, as Malinowski noted, what seems to have survived over time often do so because they acquire new meanings and functions. The question here is how people recognize and practice their own customs and traditions. The case study focuses on an annual event called the *senaga ogami* (also referred to as *senaga ugami*, *senaga mijinadi*, or *mijinadi ugami* in the local dialect) by the *monchuu* (patrilineal descent group) in Oroku region, Naha city. Field research was conducted four times between 2017 and 2019. The author draws three key observations from the data. First, land requisitions and displacements have changed the conditions of the sacred wells thereby revealing their enduring significance for the people. Second, “relatedness” to the ancestors through the wells is key to understanding the people’s practices. The pilgrimage in this folk religion is fundamentally an expression of gratitude: the present generation recognizes its existence is contingent upon their ancestors’ access to these water sources. Additionally, they recognize new connections reinforced by the announcement of births at the end of the pilgrimage. Third, development is crucial in explaining the present situation of these displaced sacred places. In the case study, the requisitions were the triggers; however, the development was the direct cause of

the present situation. The displaced and waterless wells are significant concerns for both researchers and the local community.

Key words: Okinawa, water, sacred places, military bases, displacement