Ships and Tree Spirit Belief in the Ryukyu Islands Arc

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In traditional wooden ships, a divine spirit generally called "funadama" is worshipped to pray for safe voyage and good catches. The funadama belief in wooden ships (eguribune, sabani, itazukebune, etc.) in the Ryukyu region is often influenced by the Onari-gami belief, which worships sisters as guardian deities. While the above is already known, this article focuses on the belief in trees for building ships and studies its relationship with the belief in female gods as guardian deities of ships.

Traditional shipbuilding by shipbuilders starts with the logging of trees in mountains and finishes with a launching ceremony. During this time, religious services for tree spirits and related mountain gods are performed as important courtesies. This is an example of Amami-Oshima. If we expand our scope to the Yaeyama region, there are also oral traditions (songs and ballads) that recognize trees used for building ships as female, suggesting a strong connection among trees, tree spirits, and female gods.

In the announcement of logging by shipbuilders to tree spirits and mountain gods, not only axes but also ink bottles, ink drawers and carpenter's squares, etc. play important roles. The same applies for house builders. In building ceremonies, religious services for mountain gods and tree spirits are considered important. Shipbuilders and house builders use their tools for rituals related to their professions and sometimes for curses, demonstrating magic like shamans.

Finally, this article compares female gods related to voyaging and ships in the Ryukyu region and the belief in tree spirits while shipbuilding, with the customs of the continent and Taiwan, long since related to this region. This article mainly cites the examples investigated by Matsuo, the author, such as the Mazu belief in Taiwan's dragon boat races, shipbuilding ceremonies by the Miao people in Guizhou and the minority in Taiwan, etc. This is only an attempt to settle the perspective with future comparative folklore in mind.

Key words: Ryukyu, Ship (boat), Female god, Tree spirit, Ships (boats) and religious beliefs in China and Taiwan