A Study of the “Consumption” of Sacred Places and Rituals: 
A Contemporary Ethnographic Study of Religious Tourism with a Focus on Ōtama Utaki in Okinawa 

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This paper presents a folklore study of consumption, focusing on Ōtama Utaki located in southern Okinawa Prefecture. This is an ethnographic analysis of the development of the sacred site as a sightseeing spot and the commercialization of holiness. Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2000, this Utaki has attracted an increasing number of tourists. As this has caused damage to the site, protective measures are being taken, such as imposing a limit on the number of visitors and strengthening maintenance management. This increase in the number of people concerned, however, has led to the diversification of interpretations and involvements. For example, while the field administration wants to make the Utaki the central symbol of the local religion originated from the Ryūkyū Kingdom, the Utaki itself attracts diverse people, ranging from conventional visitors, such as Munchū, local community residents, and folk devotees, to overseas and domestic tourists, study tour participants, and those the field administration call “spiritual people,” and each of them consume the holiness in their own ways, creating a multi-faceted situation. In particular, the emergence of a new category of people that symbolizes the so-called post-secular society (“spiritual people” who try to get a holy experience in an untraditional context affected by mass media’s depiction of sacred places) has created a complicated situation where visitors cannot be simply classified as either sightseers or religious explorers. For example, when Ōtama Utaki started to charge visitors an admission fee of 200 yen, which will be reduced by half for visitors for prayer if they request it, the field administration encountered two difficult problems: (i) how to identify those classified into the new category; and (ii) what the fee of 200 yen is actually charged for.

An ethnographic study of consumption in a classical framework has mainly focused on the trade of daily necessities and their use in daily lives in a traditional society, yet it has hardly covered the perspective of what consumption means in a high-level consumer society where consumers’ desire is stirred up by information and other industries. As illustrated by the example of Ōtama Utaki, now that all the existing ethnographic subjects, including religions and rituals, are commercialized so that general people can experience them for themselves, contemporary folklorists are faced with a new important question of how to deal with these economic phenomena deviated from the traditional society.

Key words: Consumption of places, admission fee, multi-faceted holiness, spirituality, belief in utaki