

# WOMEN OF THE SACRED GROVES: DIVINE PRIESTESSES OF OKINAWA BY SUSAN SERED

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*Divine Priestesses of Okinawa*



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## **Review**

"The value of this sensitive study rests in its close attention to gender-related issues....This is a valuable addition to the literature on this relatively understudied area of the world."--Religious Studies Review

## **About the Author**

Susan Sered is at Bar-Ilan University.

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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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## Most helpful customer reviews

2 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Noro of Okinawa

By Keith R Shimabukuro

This is a good book about Okinawan women and their spirituality. The noro & yuta were well respected especially in the Ryukyuan court. Rituals and customs to assist the people in their everyday lives.

15 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

An Educated Outsider's view of One Village's Sacred Rituals

By Rebecca J. Vinson

I spent my childhood in Okinawa and Tokyo and Nagoya. I recently returned to Okinawa to live for several years as an adult in the towns of Yomitan and Okinawa City, both on the main Island. I attended and worked in Okinawan schools, churches, culture centers, and private homes. I speak the language and understand the culture as much as any outsider can. I've never lived on the Islands featured in this book, though I often rode my bike over the bridge out to them and could see them from the veranda of one of my homes in Okinawa City. Every Island, even every village on the main Island, has their own unique historic culture although they in "modern" times now share much Mainland Japanese and Shuri culture (of the Sho Kings). I've given benefit concerts for the old folks home on Okinawa's most sacred Island, Kudaka, where the First Man and the First Woman first lived. Most Okinawans have never even visited Kudaka (Japanese lives are even more full than American lives) and some of my Okinawan friends expressed to me that they were ashamed that I, a foreigner, had made time and they hadn't. In my work as a translator and performer of Okinawan songs, I learned that even the Hogen (local dialect) of different villages on the Main Island can be different enough for folks not to understand each other. If you go to the "outer Islands", communities have been even more isolated until the recent past, (1970s). Given that, I find that the book was an informative look into one village's customs. I am surprised by the anger in the anonymous two reviewers who trashed the author's research methods without giving any proof of their own area of experience. Have they ever even been for a visit? Did they live there a year as the researcher did? I could only speculate at what causes this anger. The book's author is a respected researcher working in a relatively undiscovered area of diverse and rich culture. This book is quoted in the NY Times Best Seller "The Okinawa Program". I suggest you read the book and then enjoy asking your own Okinawan neighbors (they are every where, just look for the Okinawan culture club in your local) to tell you about their experiences. Okinawa is well worth learning about. The whole world could benefit from emulating their values and practices.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Worth a read

By Okigrl

As an Okinawan woman, I appreciated that Ms. Sered went to great lengths to be sensitive and respectful, and to admit one cannot know everything about a topic that is so ethereal, opaque and filled with subtle nuance. And in this case, leaving space for not knowing is more important than trying to pinpoint all the facts ( a truly impossible and futile exercise).

The individuals ( it looks as if there are two reviewers but they write like the same person) who wrote so disparagingly of this work are certainly not representative of all Uchinanchu; furthermore, their vitriol and reprimands are not in accordance with being yasashii.

Regardless of the accuracy of Sered's work ( and who is to say the work and research mentioned by her detractors is complete or irrefutably accurate...for these matters were born in a long ago time, and so much was done to vanquish them), the fact that she wrote about it in a deferential way is commendable. And she got many basic points right...especially about yasashii...that for us, Yasashii is not something you have to analyze or even need to discuss...it is simply what you are and what you feel, and it informs all that you do.

This is worth a read, and much can be learned about it.

See all 6 customer reviews...

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