

Article

Strangers in the Sacred Grove: The Changing Meanings of Okinawan *Utaki*

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Abstract: This article discusses the changing significance of sacred groves (*utaki*) in contemporary Okinawa. Until recently, *utaki* were the domain of female ritual practitioners (*kaminchu* or *noro*), and men were not allowed to set foot in them. In many places, such taboos have faded away, if not disappeared altogether, and *utaki* have acquired new meanings in the context of mass tourism, heritage conservation, and environmental degradation. Although there are several studies of the ritual system of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879), little research has been conducted on the postwar and contemporary significance of *utaki*. This article begins by describing the current situation, using examples from the southeastern part of the island. It then identifies three main issues for the study of sacred groves in Okinawa today: the claim, made by leading Japanese scholars, that these are sites of primordial “nature worship”, supposedly similar to ancient Shinto; the recent popularization of *utaki* as sites of spiritual power, so-called “powerspots”, among tourists; and, finally, the emerging realization of their potential significance for biodiversity conservation.

Keywords: biodiversity; heritage conservation; *kaminchu*; nature worship; powerspots; Ryukyu Kingdom; “Ryukyu Shinto”; sacred natural sites; tourism

1. Introduction¹

Okinawan society is characterized by great religious diversity and activity, perhaps more than any other Japanese prefecture. Despite its small size—the island measures only 1207 km², nearly a fifth of which is owned by the US military—Okinawa is home to a large number of places of worship.² These include religious institutions such as Christian churches, Buddhist temples, the temples and churches of new religions, and a handful of Shinto shrines. In addition, there is a variety of places of worship that are not legally registered as “religious”, but that are visited by Okinawans for ritual purposes. Family tombs are particularly important for many people. In contrast to mainland Japan, Okinawan graves are not usually located on the precincts of Buddhist temples, but placed in the fields or on urban cemeteries; family members gather here on special occasions, such as Lunar New Year or *o-bon*, to make ritual offerings. Likewise, war memorial sites are an integral part of the Okinawan sacred landscape, where people take part in ritual practices and pay their respects to the dead. Finally, there is a large number of so-called “indigenous” sacred sites scattered throughout the island. These are

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² Although *utaki* can also be found in other parts of the Ryukyu archipelago, this article focuses primarily on Okinawa Hontō, the largest of the Ryukyu Islands. I use the words “Okinawa” and “Okinawan” in reference to the island, not the prefecture with the same name (which also includes the western Ryukyu Islands).

usually referred to by the Okinawan word *uganju* (“places of prayer”, *ogamu basho* [拝所]), an umbrella term used for roadside altars, sacred springs (*kā*), communal houses (*tun*), and sacred groves (*utaki*).³

Of these, *utaki* have captured the most attention of scholars, in mainland Japan as well as beyond. They may contain one or several stone altars; in some cases, they also have a rudimentary miniature shrine where incense and food offerings can be placed. Other than that, they do not usually have any buildings. There are some cases of *utaki* that do have a small worship hall, or a Japanese-style *torii* gate in front of them, but these are twentieth-century additions. Most *utaki* have one or several sacred trees—often old banyan trees (*gajumaru*; *Ficus microcarpa*) with characteristic aerial roots and multiple trunks. In some cases, they also have impressive rock formations. The sacred center of an *utaki* is called *ibi*, and it is here that ritual offerings are made to the deities. Most *utaki* have one *ibi*, but some prominent ones have several. Until recently, *utaki* were the domain of female ritual practitioners; as a rule, men were not allowed to set foot in them. Today, in most places, such taboos have faded away, if not disappeared altogether. This does not mean that *utaki* have lost all of their former social and religious significance. It does indicate, however, that the significance of these sites is subject to change and negotiation. This article asks the question what this contemporary significance consists of, and discusses some of the ways in which these groves are currently perceived by worshippers, scholars and scientists, local authorities, and tourists; i.e., the main actors who use and give meaning to them. Of course, this is by no means a homogeneous group, and the image that emerges from the analysis is diverse, but there are some common trends.

Utaki are ubiquitous in Okinawa, and they are mentioned in many works on Okinawan religion, culture and history. Nevertheless, comparatively little in-depth research has been conducted on the sites themselves, neither by historians of religion, nor biologists or forest scientists. Although there are several studies of the ritual system of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879) that discuss the role of sacred sites (e.g., Iyori 2005; Røkkum 1998; Shiitada 2010), little research has been conducted on the postwar and contemporary significance of *utaki*. Meanwhile, recent anthropological studies of “Okinawan religion” tend to focus on the practitioners and their rituals (e.g., Prochaska-Meyer 2013; Sered 1999; Wacker 2003), not on the physical localities where these rituals are conducted. While there are a number of academic histories of particular places of worship (shrines and/or temples) in mainland Japan, to my knowledge no such studies have been conducted of particular sacred sites in Okinawa. This reflects a clear geographical bias within Japanese (religious) studies, which predominantly focuses on sites and traditions considered part of the historical “center”—e.g., the Kansai region and its surroundings, and to a lesser extent the Kantō and Kyushu. “Peripheral” rural areas have long been left to ethnologists, who used ethnographic methods to study “folk” practices that were believed to be the remnants of ancient ritual traditions.

Fortunately, in recent years, some excellent studies have been conducted on Okinawan topics, and useful anthologies have been published in English on Okinawan culture, literature, and politics (e.g., Bhowmick and Rabson 2016; Hein and Selden 2003; McCormack and Norimatsu 2012). Nevertheless, studies of Okinawan religion are still few and far between, and there are several unresolved issues in the field, not least when it comes to the contemporary period. The decline of communal ritual practices, the changing roles of *yuta* (spirit mediums) and other spiritual entrepreneurs, the effects of secularization and the spread of Pentecostal Christianity and other new religions on traditional practices, changing gender roles, and the consequences of mass tourism on festivals and other ritual traditions are all topics that are in need of further investigation. The present article offers some tentative suggestions for such research.

³ There is some regional variation in terminology and spelling. For instance, communal houses are usually called *tun* in southern Okinawa, but *kami-asagi* in the northern part of the island (Morishita and Fukushima 2006). I would like to thank the reviewer for drawing attention to this fact. In this article, I use the terminology and transcriptions common in the southeast of Okinawa.

Sacred places are often subject to contestation, as they are closely related to personal identities and collective memory. They provide political legitimacy and constitute capital in real estate as well as symbolically (Chidester and Linenthal 1995). *Utaki* are no exception. As this article argues, these groves are not merely the physical remnants of a pre-modern past; nor are they the relics of a religious system that is about to vanish (cf. Ivy 1995). On the contrary, these are living sites, ecologically as well as, in many cases, ritually and socially (Figures 1 and 2). However, their significance is subject to ongoing negotiation and transformation, and differs from place to place. The uses of space in Okinawa are highly contested: the island is small and densely populated, and a significant part of it has been appropriated by the US military. In the remaining areas, numerous actors compete for access to land for agricultural purposes, tourism development, and nature conservation.



Figure 1. Worshippers making ritual offerings at Bengadake, a sacred grove on a hill near Shuri Castle, Naha.



Figure 2. Hamagawa Utaki, a coastal grove in the south of Okinawa Island.

Following a general discussion of the situation of *utaki* today, this article identifies three main academic issues for the study of these groves. These three issues are, first, the problem of their modern interpretation and classification, in relation to historical narratives concerning the relationship

between Ryukyuan and Japanese cultures; second, recent changes in ritual practice, corresponding to the reinvention of sacred groves as spiritual “powerspots”, visited by mainland Japanese tourists; and third, the question of the ecological significance of *utaki*, which corresponds to the emerging global (re)appreciation of sacred groves as valuable natural sites.

At first sight, these three issues—competing historical narratives, ritual transformations, and biodiversity conservation—may appear disparate and unrelated. However, I argue that they are in fact closely related, because they all boil down to questions of ownership, access, and use. The question is who *owns* the *utaki*—not only legally, but also culturally and conceptually—and who *uses* it. This is central for understanding why these sites can be contested, and why they are still relevant. As we shall see, in all three cases, *utaki* have been appropriated by non-Okinawan “strangers”, who have laid claim to them in various ways: mainland Japanese scholars, who have incorporated them into the nation-state, by claiming that these are remnants of primordial Japanese “nature worship”; spiritual entrepreneurs, travel companies and (again, mostly mainland Japanese) powerspot tourists, who appreciate *utaki* for their alleged spiritual energy, rather than seeing them as sites of Okinawan ritual worship; and, somewhat differently, “invaders” such as mongooses and other non-native species who dwell in these groves and threaten vulnerable endemic species. In all cases, questions of control and access are central.

I wish to emphasize that this article has an explorative rather than conclusive character. It is beyond the scope of this text to give a complete and comprehensive overview of the state of all *utaki* on the island, and this is not my purpose here. Instead, this article sets out to identify and introduce three of the core issues for the study of sacred space in Okinawa today, and it is my hope that these will be taken up by others in their studies of particular sites. My analysis is based on observations made during several periods of field research in the southeastern part of Okinawa Hontō (Nanjō City, predominantly) between 2015 and 2018, as well as on relevant primary and secondary literature. It should be pointed out that there are some significant regional differences between different parts of Okinawa, and some of my observations may not apply to all parts of the island equally. In some areas, *utaki* are better preserved than in others, and levels of ritual engagement vary considerably as well. Nanjō City is home to most of the sites of the Ryukyu Kingdom *agari umāi* pilgrimage, and the municipal authorities here have actively used this sacred geography for promotional purposes, which is clearly not the case for all other municipalities on the island. Nevertheless, several of the observations made in this article do pertain to sites in the north and center of Okinawa as well: the reinvention of Okinawan sacred sites as “powerspots”, for instance, and the question of the potential ecological significance of these sites apply to the entire island (as well as, possibly, to other islands in the Ryukyu archipelago).

2. Utaki Today

Since the end of World War II, the number of *utaki* has decreased significantly, as several Okinawan scholars have confirmed to me. This has been especially the case in urban or suburban areas, where community involvement in festivals and other ritual traditions is generally low. Throughout the island, *utaki* have been demolished, and given way to houses, highways, tourist resorts, and US military bases. As far as I know, however, there are no official statistics on the total number of *utaki* still existing today. There have been some projects by environmental scientists and archaeologists to map the sacred sites in certain designated areas (e.g., [Hamasaki 2015](#)); likewise, some municipalities have conducted their own surveys, listing the sacred sites (*uganju*) in their respective areas. For instance, in 2006, local historians in Chinen Village (currently part of Nanjō City) published a guidebook of sorts, in which all *utaki*, *kā*, *tun*, and other local places of worship within the municipal boundaries were described ([Chinenson Bunka Kyōkai Gakujutsubu 2006](#)). They counted nearly two hundred in total, including those on Kudakajima Island. Even though the number of sacred sites in this particular area may have been unusually high, we can probably conclude from this that there still are thousands of *uganju* scattered around Okinawa Island, including several hundred *utaki*. Other *uganju* guidebooks (e.g., [Higa 2005](#)) confirm this impression: sacred sites are ubiquitous, but they tend to be small local sites

consisting of an altar, a water source, a few sacred trees, and perhaps a simple building. Some of them are so small that they are easily overlooked.

With the exception of famous historical sites and recently popular “powerspots”, today, many *utaki* look wild and overgrown, and some of them are full of litter. Sacred groves that have fallen into disuse are not easily distinguishable from other forest areas, and are easily sacrificed for construction projects. In fact, as they do not usually have any buildings, it is sometimes hard to tell where an *utaki* is located. Ironically, seen from a conservationist perspective, some of the best-preserved *utaki* are located on US military bases, where they are left mostly untouched. The village communities to which these *utaki* belonged have long been displaced, however (Asato 2003), and people who wish to worship at these sites have to apply for permission from the US military authorities. Moreover, as scientists are not allowed to conduct research on these sites, it is unclear to what extent plants and animals in these groves have suffered from the serious toxic pollution that has taken place at some of these bases (Mitchell 2017).

Until recently, *utaki* were used for special rituals, but they were not normally seen as places where ordinary people would go to say a personal prayer or make a wish. As such, they are quite different from most Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in mainland Japan, where such practices are common. Most *utaki* have a predominantly local function: they are worship sites (*uganju*) where village priestesses (*kaminchu* or *noro*) come to engage in ritual practices on specially designated days, usually on behalf of a community. They may also be used on an ad-hoc basis by spirit mediums (*yuta*) who are hired by individuals to communicate with spirits or deities in order to overcome personal problems. Most ordinary Okinawans, however, refrain from visiting local *utaki*. Unlike a *tun* (or *kami-asagi*), which is a worship hall for the entire village, an *utaki* is not usually perceived as a place for communal gatherings.

Thus, in some communities, *utaki* are still actively used by local *kaminchu* for ritual ceremonies. In other places, they are largely forgotten, visited only by the occasional pilgrim or *yuta* coming to make ritual offerings. In both cases, ordinary villagers do not normally enter the grove; they may perceive it as sacred and perhaps even dangerous, but not as a place where people come together for collective rituals. Unlike Shinto shrine groves (*chinju no mori*), then, *utaki* do not function as symbolic community centers where people gather for festivals. This may be one of the reasons why I have not come across any local forest conservation groups that seek to protect their sacred groves—in contrast to mainland Japan, where various initiatives to preserve shrine forests have emerged in recent years (Rots 2017c).

Although the total number of *utaki* and *uganju* may have declined—which, at least, is what the anecdotal evidence suggests—and many have fallen into disuse, there are some noteworthy examples of the opposite: sacred groves that have gained popularity as tourist destinations, and are visited by increasing numbers of people. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Sēfa Utaki in the southeastern part of the island, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2000, and which is currently visited by over 400,000 people annually (Kadota 2017; Rots forthcoming). Sēfa Utaki is one of the seven famous *utaki* that are associated with Ryukyu royal mythology (in particular the primordial goddess Amamikyo) and mentioned in the *Omoro Sōshi*, the Ryukyu collection of poems compiled in the sixteenth century. Other *utaki* on this list have also gained increasing popularity. Thus, while some *utaki* are dilapidated and filled with litter or have fallen victim to construction projects, others have acquired new meanings in the context of mass tourism, heritage conservation, and identity politics, as this article demonstrates.

This is not to say that Sēfa Utaki is a typical case. In many respects, it is not. Historically, its function was different from most village *utaki*: during the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879), it was used for state rituals such as the *oaraori*, the inauguration of the high priestess (*kikoe-ōgimi*), and the royal pilgrimage *agari umāi*. Thus, in contrast to most other *utaki*, it did not function as a local place of worship, but as a state ritual site. Today, Sēfa Utaki is unusual because it is by far the most visited of all *utaki*, larger than most of the others, and possibly the most contested, as it is

subject to numerous competing claims by worshippers, secular authorities, tour guides, and visitors (Kadota 2017; Rots forthcoming). Nevertheless, some of the problems that can currently be observed at Sēfa Utaki also apply to other *utaki*, to varying degrees: difficulties involved with their preservation (as cultural heritage, but also as natural sites); the question of how to present these sites to mainland Japanese and Asian visitors; and the issue of setting and protecting boundaries (e.g., how do you prevent tourists from violating ritual space). These are also relevant questions for smaller *utaki* in the vicinity, such as Baten Utaki or Hamagawa Utaki, which likewise constitute heritage (cultural and natural) that is subject to national preservation laws; which are likewise managed by secular authorities, not by religious institutions, even though they are places of worship; and which are likewise accessible to and visited by tourists, albeit it much fewer than Sēfa Utaki.

Another famous historical grove in this area is Kubō Utaki on Kudakajima Island, a short boat trip from the main island. Kudakajima had a special place in the sacred geography of the Ryukyu Kingdom as it was associated with royal mythology, and home to a large number of *norō* priestesses, who were responsible for important state-related rituals such as the *izaihō* ceremony (Higa 2000, pp. 144–68; Wacker 2003, pp. 349–50). The island has long captured the imagination of ethnologists and artists, and is currently promoted by the Nanjō City authorities as a tourist destination. Like Sēfa Utaki, it is one of the royal worship sites mentioned in the *Omoro Sōshi*, and it is often mentioned in spiritual “powerspot” guidebooks and websites. Yet in contrast to Sēfa Utaki, Kubō Utaki is an example of a sacred site that is still fenced off, where signs are erected that request visitors not to enter the grove. So here, local residents appear to have successfully resisted the development of tourism in their *utaki*, at least for the time being. However, the ban is not enforced by secular authorities, and there are regular complaints about tourists who ignore the signs and enter the grove.

As these examples illustrate, there is considerable diversity when it comes to the contemporary shapes of *utaki*. Some have been subject to significant transformations, in terms of their uses if not in physical appearance; some have disappeared altogether, while others have become popular destinations for spiritual and heritage tourism. By contrast, some other *utaki* are still in use as worship sites where local *kaminchu* carry out ritual ceremonies. In general, however, few of these places remain completely unaffected by contemporary trends such as mass tourism and environmental degradation. In the remainder of this article, I will introduce the three issues that I believe are central for understanding *utaki*’s contemporary significance: the question of their historical classification, the popularization of “powerspot tourism”, and the emerging realization that these sites may play an important ecological function.

3. Ryukyu Religion: Primordial Shinto?

Utaki worship was an integral part of the ritual-political system of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Ryukyu state was characterized by a rather unique, gendered division of power, whereby the king, who was in charge of worldly affairs, was assisted by a high priestess (*kikoe-ōgimi*)—his sister or another female relative—who was in charge of ritual affairs and relations with the world of deities and ancestors. This system of dual authority was replicated on regional and local levels, where worldly leaders were assisted (and, at times, challenged) by female ritual specialists called *norō*, who performed some of their most important rituals in *utaki* (Iyori 2005; Nakamatsu [1968] 1990; Prochaska-Meyer 2013; Røkkum 1998; Shiitada 2010). The *norō* system was discontinued when the Ryukyu Kingdom ended, in 1879, when Okinawa and the western Ryukyu Islands were annexed by imperial Japan. However, there are still some people who self-identify as *norō* today, for instance on Kudakajima. They do not have any formal function, however, neither within the state nor within officially recognized religious institutions.

Another term that is widely used for village priestesses (and, in some cases, other spirit mediums) is *kaminchu*, which literally means “god-person”. In some parts of Okinawa, there are still *kaminchu* who perform rituals on certain occasions, but their number has decreased significantly since the end of the war. Simultaneously, however, there are also some individual spirit mediums who prefer

calling themselves *kaminchu*, rather than *yuta*, which has negative connotations to some. In theory, at least, *kaminchu* is a general term for priestesses who perform rituals *pro bono* for the well-being of the community, whereas *yuta* are spirit mediums hired by private individuals, and they charge money for their services—which explains why they are subject to critique and accusations of treachery, not least by religious competitors. *Yuta* also refer to themselves as *reinōsha* (a general Japanese term used for spirit mediums) and, increasingly, “spiritual counselors” (*supirichuaru kounserā*)—a term that has also gained traction in mainland Japan (Gaitanidis 2012). In practice, then, there is quite a bit of conceptual overlap and confusion. As there is no overarching priestly organization, and these are not protected titles, nowadays it is hard to tell “authentic” not-for-profit *norō* and *kaminchu* apart from spiritual entrepreneurs who have claimed these labels more recently.⁴

The fact that most *norō* and *kaminchu* were women, and that most *utaki* were off-bounds to men, has intrigued scholars since the early twentieth century. The influential pre-war Japanese ethnologists Iha Fuyū (1876–1947), Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953) all wrote about the spiritual power attributed to women in Okinawan religion—a power referred to as *shiji* or *onarigami* (Prochaska-Meyer 2013, pp. 81–87; Røkkum 1998; Wacker 2003). More recently, scholars of gender have paid attention to the topic as well. There are some striking differences in interpretation, however. Some Japanese feminist scholars have portrayed Okinawan religion in a negative light, reflecting lingering colonial stereotypes about Okinawan culture as backward and patriarchal (Horiba 1990; Kawahashi 2000b).⁵ By contrast, some scholars working on religion and gender have idealized the situation in Okinawa. The most noteworthy example is Susan Sered’s study of present-day *kaminchu* (1999), which has received significant attention in the field, but which makes some questionable claims regarding the purported absence of gender symbolism and hierarchies in Okinawa—claims that have been challenged by other scholars of Okinawan religion (e.g., Kawahashi 2000a; Wacker 2003). For the time being, there are a number of issues that remain unresolved, and there is a need for more research on the ongoing significance of gender in Okinawan religion, as well as on recent transformations. This includes not only issues such as female “spiritual power” and associated ritual practices, but also the gendered nature of the landscape, and associated taboos such as the ban on men (*dansei kinchi*) that lingered until recently, but that has gradually faded away in most places.⁶

Another unresolved debate concerns the origins of *utaki* worship, as historical sources on the topic are scarce. It is clear that *utaki* predate the formation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, as do *norō*—but their historical development is subject to much speculation. In his classical history of Okinawa, George Kerr suggests that *norō* go back to prehistoric times, when they were responsible for preserving the fire in the hearth, and worshipping the “root-deity” (*negami*) of the village. According to him, these worship practices—which, at the time of writing, could still be witnessed in some parts of the island—were a “living fossil of a prehistoric age” (Kerr [1958] 2000, pp. 32–33). Kerr was not an expert on Okinawan religion per se, but his use of terminology is significant, as it reflects a social-evolutionist model that was very common for prewar Japanese ethnology.

As pointed out by critical historians and anthropologists, one of the ways in which the subjugation of colonial subjects by imperial powers was justified was by denying them a pre-colonial history of their own (Fabian [1983] 2014; Wolf [1982] 1997). That is, according to nineteenth-century social-evolutionist

⁴ On these different ritual specialists, their various functions, and the terminology involved, see also (Hamasaki 2011; Prochaska-Meyer 2013).

⁵ See also Kirino Natsuo’s popular recent novel *The Goddess Chronicle* (Kirino [2008] 2014), which is set in Kudakajima Island—fictionalized, yet easily recognisable to anybody who is familiar with the geography of the island—and portrays local culture as underdeveloped and cruel.

⁶ Although *dansei kinchi* bans are no longer widely enforced, they are still valued by some. Some elderly and middle-aged Okinawan men have confessed to me that they feel uncomfortable when visiting *utaki*, and usually refrain from doing so. Correspondingly, some Okinawan women—including *kaminchu* and *yuta*—complain about the dissolving of these bans, for instance at Sēfa Utaki, which is currently visited by large numbers of tourists (men and women). There are a few places where gender restrictions are still in place; the most notable example is Kubō Utaki. On gender restrictions at Japanese sacred sites, see (DeWitt 2016; Rots 2017b).

anthropology, “primitive” societies had not gone through the same stages of development as more “advanced” ones; they were seen as static and backwards, and their practices and beliefs were believed to have remained unchanged since prehistoric times. This model has had profound influence on Japanese ethnology (*minzokugaku*), especially the work of Yanagita and Orikuchi, who came to Okinawa—as well as other peripheral regions, such as rural Tōhoku—to study “ancient”, originally Japanese “folk” traditions that were believed to have “vanished” from the modern center (Ivy 1995). Thus, as Tessa Morris-Suzuki has summarized, “Okinawan culture could be represented as an anthropological treasure house whose contents revealed ‘the shape of things as they were in the beginning’ and as they had once been throughout the entire Japanese archipelago” (Morris-Suzuki 1998, p. 31). Such representations contributed to the appropriation of cultural diversity within the modern Japanese national narrative and, ultimately, as justification for the assimilation of these islands into the imperial state.

This is not merely a prewar phenomenon. Social-evolutionist models linger on, and narratives of Okinawan “ancient nature worship” still serve to subjugate the island’s traditions under the banner of “Japanese tradition”. The popular philosopher Umehara Takeshi (1925–2019), for instance, has declared that the prehistoric Japanese spirit of “animism” needs to be revitalized in order for environmental problems worldwide to be solved. If we want to find out what Jōmon-period animism looked like, he suggests, all we have to do is look at the worship traditions of Japan’s indigenous peoples, who still live “in harmony with nature”: the Ainu (the indigenous people of northern Japan) and the Okinawans (Umehara 1989, Umehara [1991] 1995). Such claims are problematic because they deny historical change and diversity, and downplay the profound differences between Okinawan worship traditions and mainland Japanese Shinto.⁷ They also deny the fact that much of Ainu and Okinawan culture has been transformed, if not completely destroyed, by Japanese imperial actions. In fact, in many respects, Okinawa continues to be treated as a colony by Tokyo, which structurally ignores Okinawan citizens’ wishes and suffering (e.g., McCormack and Norimatsu 2012; McCormack 2018). Social-evolutionist narratives that present Okinawa’s culture as “primordial Japanese” are part and parcel of an ideological apparatus that denies Okinawa its fundamental alterity—and, by extension, its autonomy.⁸

Utaki are central to claims about Okinawan worship traditions as a remnant of ancient “animism” and nature worship. Prior to the colonial period, *utaki* did not usually have any buildings; rather, the grove itself was seen as the site where the deity resided. It is precisely this lack of human-made constructs that has captured the imagination of many, and has been interpreted as an indication of the “primitive” or “primordial” character of Ryukyuan worship traditions, supposedly characterized by a close relationship between people and nature. Several Japanese ethnologists, *nihonjinron* authors and Shinto scholars have lauded the *utaki* tradition, seeing it as the remnant of an imaginary “original Shinto” that has disappeared from mainland Japan yet has been preserved in the underdeveloped periphery. Thus, Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu believed that traces of “ancient Shinto” (*koshintō*) had remained in *utaki* worship (Okaya 2016, p. 89). Following in their footsteps, contemporary Shinto scholars have equated *utaki* with Japanese shrine forests (*chinju no mori*), and argued that Okinawan *utaki* worship is similar to prehistoric Japanese shrine worship, which was likewise centered around trees and sacred groves (e.g., Ueda 2004, pp. 12–15). These sacred forests have gained significant attention

⁷ In fact, it has been argued that Okinawan worship traditions bear more similarity to those on the Korean peninsula, and even that Ryukyu culture has Korean, rather than Japanese, origins (Okaya 2016). Likewise, in a recent historical study, Gregory Smits argues that Ryukyu culture and politics developed as part of a maritime network stretching from coastal Korea and western Kyushu to Taiwan and coastal China (Smits 2018). Thus, the assertion that Okinawan *utaki* worship constitutes some sort of proto-Japanese “primordial Shinto” is historically problematic.

⁸ Significantly, Umehara is not the only one who has spread the “Japanese animism will save the world” narrative: influential scholars such as Yasuda Yoshinori, Yamaori Tetsuo, and Iwata Keiji have made similar arguments. Considering the ideological implications of this discourse, it is all the more surprising that a cohort of “new animists”—anthropologists and STS scholars who associate with Actor-Network Theory and the “ontological turn”—has rediscovered Japanese “Shinto animism”, lauding it for its purported environmental credentials (e.g., Jensen and Blok 2013; Yoneyama 2018). Sadly, these scholars appear oblivious to the ideological subtexts underlying postwar Japanese discursive constructions of “animism”, and to the lingering colonial power dynamics in which they operate. On this topic, see also (Thomas 2019).

in recent years, and are used by the Association for Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō) to substantiate claims about Shinto as the foundational, essentially public ritual tradition on which Japanese society is built—claims which, among other things, are used to justify constitutional change, and are therefore of a profoundly political nature (Tanaka 2011; Rots 2017a).

The similarity between *utaki* and *chinju no mori* is that both are groves, or small forests, in which rituals are performed for local deities. As such, they are not different from sacred groves in other parts of the world. Other than that, they have little in common: the deities, rituals, and ritual practitioners are very different indeed. Even visually, they can hardly be considered similar, not only because the tree and plant species found in the groves are different—which is primarily due to climatological factors—but also because altars and worship sites do not at all resemble each other. In sum, the claim that *utaki* constitute the original shape of Japanese *chinju no mori* seems far-fetched.

This is not merely an academic debate, however. In contemporary Okinawa, local worship traditions are often referred to as “Ryukyu Shinto”, even by some of its practitioners. For instance, at the information center near the entrance to Sēfa Utaki, visitors can watch documentary videos about the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the royal *agari umāi* pilgrimage, as well as about “Ryukyu Shinto” in general. Not surprisingly, the Okinawan worship tradition is presented here as ancient “nature worship”, centered on the creator goddess, Amamikyo—who, like her Japanese counterpart Amaterasu, is associated with the sun. The implication is clear: *utaki* worship constitutes the original shape of Japanese Shinto, characterized by an animistic appreciation of nature as sacred. Despite such narratives, in reality Ryukyuan cosmologies and ritual practices are significantly different from mainland Japanese ones, and the identification of these traditions with “Shinto” is historically incorrect.

There are in fact eight Shinto shrines in Okinawa that date from the Ryukyu Kingdom period, but these were all connected to Buddhist temples, are mostly located in the vicinity of Shuri (in present-day Naha), and “did not become a part of ordinary Ryukyuan people’s everyday lives” (Loo 2014, p. 100). In the modern (i.e., colonial) period, more Shinto shrines (*jingū*) were constructed, especially in the southern part of Okinawa, as part of the state’s policy to spread imperial Shinto in the colonies. These, too, had little or no connection with *utaki*-centered worship practices. It was not until the 1930s that more ambitious plans were developed by the authorities to incorporate local traditions within the State Shinto system and, in the early 1940s, many *utaki* were indeed converted into shrines, in a process referred to as *utaki saihei* (“reorganization of *utaki*”) (Loo 2014, pp. 105–9; Prochaska-Meyer 2013, pp. 58–59). This led to a number of cosmetic changes, such as the erection of *torii* gates in front of *utaki* and, in some cases, the construction of shrine buildings. At most *utaki*, however, the incorporation into the State Shinto system came too late to have a lasting impact on local worship practices, which can also “be reasonably attributed to the resilience of the island’s *utaki*-centered religion” (Loo 2014, p. 108). Although some *utaki* still have *torii* today, this does not mean they are Shinto shrines. In today’s Okinawa, in most cases, Shinto shrines and *utaki* are clearly separated and have distinct functions and characteristics. The latter far outnumber the former, which are only found in some of the cities.

In sum, although the times of state-sponsored imperial Shinto are long gone, the classification of *utaki* and associated worship practices remains contentious. It is not only a matter of definition, but also of ownership: who has the power to decide what ritual practices are accepted, and who is allowed access to a sacred site? As mentioned previously, at most *utaki*, gender restrictions are no longer enforced. Unlike Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples, *utaki* are not legally registered as religious organizations, and at most places there is no formally recognized clergy. Ritual practitioners do not usually own their *utaki*, legally speaking, and do not have the power to deny access to others. In general, then, anybody can visit an *utaki*, and visitors are free to engage in whatever worship practices they like—including overseas visitors, as we shall see in the next section.

4. Powerspot Pilgrimage, Tourism, and the Question of Ownership

One of the most noteworthy developments in the field of Japanese religion since the early 2000s has been the popularization of sacred sites by mass media, travel companies, and local authorities as “powerspots” (*pawāsupotto*). This term goes back to the New Age movement in the 1980s, but it was not used commonly until the early 2000s, when so-called “women’s magazines” (*joseishi*) started promoting them as places with special spiritual power. After *Asahi Shimbun* (one of Japan’s leading newspapers) picked up on the topic and declared a “powerspot boom” in 2005, the term spread more widely (Suga 2010). Since then, it has been used in numerous popular guidebooks and magazines on “spiritual travel” and “pilgrimage to sacred places” (*seichi junrei*), as well as by travel agencies and PR organizations. As Caleb Carter has summarized, “coverage of power spots in the mass media and marketing reached a fervor in the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, peaking in 2010. While media attention has declined since then, interest in power spots among the broader public continues down to the present” (Carter 2018, p. 148; Horie 2017).⁹ This mediatized “powerspot boom” led to a transformation of popular worship practices at Buddhist temples and especially Shinto shrines, and to the emergence of new practices that were not endorsed by the clergy. For instance, all of a sudden visitors to Ise Jingū could be seen hugging the high cedar trees and holding their hands above sacred stones in the precincts of the main shrines, while visitors to Meiji Jingū ignored the shrine’s worship hall altogether, waiting in line for hours to feel the spiritual energy of an Edo-period well located in the shrine garden (Carter 2018; Rots 2017c, p. 224).

In Okinawa, too, tourist offices and publishing houses have been eager to promote certain sites as “powerspots”. There are a number of popular guidebooks that list Okinawa’s best powerspots, provide information on the sort of benefits (*riyaku*) that can be obtained there—e.g., good health and love relationships (*en-musubi*)—and practical details on how to get there, and what sort of spiritual products to purchase. For instance, one of them, the *Okinawa pawāsupotto arukikata* (“Okinawa powerspot guidebook”), is written by a local “spiritual counsellor”—which, as mentioned, is a term widely used these days by spirit mediums and other spiritual entrepreneurs, who prefer it to the more traditional word *yuta* with its negative connotations. The guidebook lists a number of famous and less-famous places, such as the Yanbaru Forest in the north (“a sacred forest with powerful healing energy”), the Nakijin Gusuku castle ruins (“a World Heritage Site that connects heaven and earth, where a deep ancient energy remains”), the Bise Fukugi Tree Road (“a place of tranquillity and inspiration”), and the Busena Misaki marine park, where “the energy of the goddess stimulates the chakra” (China 2011). Likewise, several mainland Japanese spiritual counsellors have published “powerspot guidebooks”, in which they enthusiastically proclaim that Okinawan sacred sites have a unique and mysterious healing power. These include the famous spiritual trendsetter Ehara Hiroyuki, who has listed Sēfa Utaki and Kudakajima as important “spiritual sanctuaries” (Ehara 2006; Gaitanidis 2012), and the couple Mano Kyō and Noma Osamu, who have made an Okinawan powerspot guidebook in manga format (Mano to Noma 2011).

Similarly, there is a considerable number of websites on which certain places are advertised as powerspots.¹⁰ One popular destination for powerspot tourism is Kudakajima Island: the “Island of the Gods”, home to Kubō Utaki, which has gained fame because it is one of the few places where *noro* continue to conduct ritual ceremonies on a regular basis (Higa 2000). Others include Hamahiga Island, where the tomb of the ancestral goddess Amamikyo is located; the Valley of Gangala, an old limestone

⁹ As Horie explains, the term *pawāsupotto* is a *wasei-eigo* neologism, a Japanese concept that was created by combining English words (Horie 2017, p. 192). In Japanese, *pawāsupotto* is a single word, and it is for this reason that I choose to write it without a space in the middle: “powerspot”. Other authors, by contrast, have chosen to write it as an English compound term, i.e., with a space: “power spot”. This spelling appears to have become more common in recent years (e.g., Carter 2018; Horie 2017), but I stick to my choice to write it as a single word, in order to convey the foreign nature of the concept. In other words, I have chosen not to anglicize this term, because it refers to a particular Japanese phenomenon.

¹⁰ This includes sites run by local authorities, as well as online travel booking websites. See for instance (Okinawa Labo 2018).

forest that has been turned into a popular tourist destination; Hedo Misaki, the northernmost cape of the island, and nearby Asumori Utaki; Sēfa Utaki, of course; and even Shuri Castle, Okinawa's most-visited tourist destination, which was completely rebuilt after the war (Loo 2014), and which has some small reconstructed *utaki* on its grounds.

Framing sites as “mystical” and “powerful” no doubt attracts a certain type of mainland Japanese tourist. This image fits well with popular imaginations of Okinawan culture as characterized by ancient nature spirituality, a subtropical happy-go-lucky mentality, delicious and healthy cuisine, and exotic performing arts (*ēsā* dancing, *sanshin* music, et cetera). Okinawan cultural expressions have gained increasing popularity in mainland Japan in recent years, to the point that media have declared an “Okinawa boom”. There is a certain irony to this appropriation, of course, not least in the light of recent events: while I am writing these sentences, the Japanese government is beginning its landfill work in Henoko Bay, destroying a unique marine environment so that the US military can construct yet another large military base on Okinawa, despite the fact that the vast majority of the Okinawan people are opposed to this (Ryukyu Shimpō 2017). James Fisher has phrased it well:

This appropriative turn is the latest phase in mainland Japan's problematic relationship with Okinawan culture. The Japanese media has long presented the archipelagic prefecture as a paradisaal retreat for mainlanders wearied by their quotidian modern existence: a “lost world” to be rediscovered by sharing its inhabitants' quaint contentedness, *joie de vivre*, and coexistence with nature. (. . .) [This impression] is particularly troubling in light of the material reality in Okinawa, which has long suffered from Japanese exploitation, repression, and neglect. Indeed, Okinawa seems far more like a colony than a prefecture equal with those of the Japanese home islands. (Fisher 2017)

It is no coincidence that many of the sites touted as “powerspots” are popular tourist destinations. For most local authorities and travel agencies, attracting paying visitors is probably more important than safeguarding ritual traditions. That does not mean, however, that the “powerspot boom” is merely a matter of shrewd marketing. Visitors may well have a genuine interest in sacred sites, and seek to experience their spiritual “power”, while they hold Okinawan ritual traditions in high esteem. This, in turn, may provide ritual practices with new popularity and legitimacy. In recent years, there have been cases of recreated Ryukyu-period ritual ceremonies, such as the *Wakamizu kenjō* relay, whereby sacred water is brought from Hedo in the north to Shuri Castle (Yamashiro 2015). Such ritual reinventions may double as tourist performances, and there may be commercial interests involved; nevertheless, they are indicative of a renewed interest in certain cultural practices.

Furthermore, when *utaki* and related sites (e.g., *gusuku* ruins) become part of established tourist itineraries, they are less likely to be demolished, and more likely to be restored. The *agari umāi* is an interesting example. This was the Ryukyu period royal pilgrimage, which includes Sēfa Utaki and some *gusuku* sites associated with the Ryukyu kings' ancestors, as well as a handful of lesser-known *utaki* and *kā* (sacred springs). After the fall of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the *agari umāi* pilgrimage has been conducted occasionally by kin groups (Beillevaire 2007). In recent years, however, the pilgrimage has also been promoted by the authorities of Nanjō City, the municipality in which the sites are located. The production of free colorful bilingual maps and brochures, which provide background information on the different sites of the *agari umāi*, has gone hand in hand with some necessary maintenance work. Thus, promoting the *agari umāi* among tourists may well have had a positive effect on the sites themselves, even if the direct economic benefits have been limited.

Overall, Okinawan responses to the “powerspot” trend have been mixed. Some Okinawan *yuta* or “spiritual counsellors” are adapting well: they make a business guiding mainland Japanese visitors to Okinawan sacred sites, and conducting prayer rituals on their behalf. This is especially visible on Kudakajima Island, which is full of worship houses, *utaki* and other sacred sites, frequented by small groups of mainland Japanese visitors guided by elderly Okinawan women. They may not enter Kubō Utaki—which, as mentioned, is still fenced off—but they tour the other *uganju* on the island. Some of these guides self-identify as *kaminchu* (priestess), but they are from the main island.

By contrast, the local *kaminchu* of Kudakajima, who identify with a long and proud *norō* lineage, reject such practices, which according to them have nothing to do with proper Ryukyuan worship traditions (interview data, June 2017). However, while they look down upon these spiritual entrepreneurs from the main island and the mainland Japanese tourists that they bring with them, there is little they can do to prevent them from worshipping at their sacred sites. Today, it is hard to make a living in fishery, so the local community on Kudakajima is economically dependent on tourism. Media representations of the mysterious “island of the gods”, with its unspoiled nature and “ancient” rituals, are useful for attracting visitors. Authenticity is a malleable thing.

Thus, while some Okinawans reject “powerspot” tourism and “sacred site pilgrimage” (*seichi junrei*) as recent, mainland Japanese innovations, others are more willing to play along, and use such terminology as a strategy to attract visitors. This is clearly visible at Okinawa’s best-known sacred grove, Sēfa Utaki. Prior to its inscription as a World Heritage Site in 2000, and even during the first couple of years afterwards, the site saw few visitors, other than the occasional *munchū* (kin group) doing the *agari umāi* pilgrimage, and a handful of local worshippers and *yuta* who came there to conduct rituals. But since 2005, tourist numbers have risen steadily (Nanjō-shi Kyōiku linkai 2018, p. 83); the site is now visited by over 400,000 people annually, which has caused a number of problems ranging from soil erosion and biodiversity loss to “improper behaviour” and tensions between tourists and ritual practitioners (Rots forthcoming). In guidebooks, magazines, brochures, and documentaries, Sēfa Utaki is consistently referred to as a “sacred place” (*seichi*), and there is ample reference to popular “powerspot” discourse. For instance, on the Nanjō municipal tourist portal site, a large banner describes Sēfa Utaki as a place where “the power of the sacred site can be felt” (*seichi no pawā o kanjiru Sēfa Utaki*).¹¹ Such terminology is reflected in popular practices: for instance, at the famous *sangūi* rock tunnel, it is common to see mainland Japanese visitors holding out their hands to feel the spiritual energy of the place (Figure 3). “Sacred site” is also a central term in the introductory videos shown to visitors prior to entering the grove. They are informed about its historical significance as the place where the *oaraori* ceremony was conducted for the inauguration of the *kikoe-ōgimi* during the Ryukyu Kingdom period, and they are requested to respect the sacred nature of the site—by wearing appropriate clothes, not sitting on the steps used for rituals, not disturbing or taking pictures of people who engage in worship practices, and not making loud noises.

However, despite the fact that Sēfa Utaki is consistently referred to as a “sacred site” (*seichi*), there is no overarching narrative as to what it is that makes this place “sacred”, and what exactly constitutes proper ritual behavior. “Sacred” here appears as an empty signifier that remains largely undefined, despite the fact that it is used widely in promotion materials (Kadota 2017). This is related to the fact that there is no single organization—clerical or otherwise—that has the authority to prescribe such a narrative. Ritually speaking, Sēfa Utaki is a “free-for-all” site, where visitors can perform whatever rituals they consider appropriate, as long as they do not disturb others or leave any objects behind. The lack of any priestly institution at Sēfa Utaki implies that nobody has the moral or legal authority to define boundaries based on their knowledge of tradition. This situation regularly gives rise to tensions, and even conflicts, for instance between worshippers using sacred places for ritual purposes, and tourists taking pictures or “trespassing” on ritual space. Several local residents have suggested that the rise in heritage and *powerspot* tourism may have even led to a decrease in the number of Okinawan worshippers, but I have no data to back up this claim. The municipal authorities and local tourist organizations are currently debating possible solutions to these problems, such as fencing off parts of the site, restricting visitor numbers, or even reintroducing the ban on men.¹² It remains to be seen what policies they will implement, but it is unlikely that this “sacred site” loses its popularity among non-Okinawan tourists any time soon.

¹¹ On <http://www.kankou-nanjo.okinawa/tokusyu/view/safa> (accessed on 14 December 2018).

¹² This case is discussed in more detail in (Rots forthcoming). See also the report by Nanjō City on the current state of conservation, which lists problems and possible solutions (Nanjō-shi Kyōiku linkai 2018).



Figure 3. Powerspot tourists standing in a circle in front of the *sangūi* rock, feeling the sacred energy of Sēfa Utaki.

5. *Utaki*, Ecology, and the Fight against Invaders

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing interest in sacred sites on the part of natural scientists and nature conservation organizations worldwide. They are valued not only for their historical, cultural or spiritual significance, but also for their natural beauty and species diversity. Powerful international organizations such as UNESCO, IUCN, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation have all made the claim that sacred sites are often better preserved than other, more “secular” natural areas, and that the preservation of sacred sites—in cooperation with the religious stakeholders involved—is of crucial importance for nature conservation globally (Finlay and Palmer 2003; Schaaf and Lee 2006; Verschuuren et al. 2010; World Wildlife Fund n.d.). Scientists have described sacred groves as “biodiversity hotspots”, the conservation of which is essential for protecting endangered flora and fauna, and various research initiatives have been developed for mapping the ecological value of sacred sites (Bhagwat et al. 2011; Bhagwat and Rutte 2006; Metcalfe et al. 2010). Accordingly, temple and shrine groves in different parts of Asia have acquired new significance as “Sacred Natural Sites” (Healy et al. 2018), and captured the attention of scientists and environmental activists. This trend is visible for instance in India (Kent 2013) and in mainland Japan (Rots 2017c).

Although widely promoted as a tourist destination with a beautiful natural environment, in reality, Okinawa has a number of serious environmental problems. These range from coral bleaching to rapid species loss, and from toxic pollution to habitat destruction due to military base construction and tourist development (Dias and Murayama 2018; *The Japan Times* 2018; Mitchell 2017). Presumably, sacred groves are important for biodiversity conservation. In contrast to mainland Japan, however, in Okinawa there has not yet been systematic, island-wide research on the ecology of sacred groves, and nature conservationists have not paid much attention to *utaki*. But there have been some small-scale research projects that focused on mapping the species composition of selected *utaki* and *gusuku* sites, for instance at Sēfa Utaki (Okinawa Shizen Kenkyūkai 1982; Chinenson Kyōiku linkai 2002, 2003). This research showed that Sēfa Utaki is characterized by impressive species diversity: scientists counted 250 different plant species in the forest, of which 218 were said to be native to Okinawa (Chinenson Kyōiku linkai 2003, p. 56). Sēfa Utaki is also home to a great variety of animal species, ranging from snails and butterflies to reptiles and bats (Nanjō-shi Kyōiku linkai 2018, p. 80), some of which are rare

or endangered. As they constitute small areas of remaining natural (primary or secondary) forest, other *utaki* are also likely to be home to considerable species diversity, including endemic plants and animals. In any case, the hypothesis that *utaki* are of importance for biodiversity conservation seems worthy of further investigation (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Sacred biodiversity? Salamanders frolicking in the Urōkā sacred spring next to Sēfa Utaki.

However, throughout Okinawa, invader species pose a serious threat to endemic plants and animals. This is one of the main problems of Yanbaru National Park, home to a number of endangered species, where foresters are fighting a constant battle against invader species (Itō et al. 2000). But it also applies to smaller forests, including *utaki*. For instance, at Sēfa Utaki, mongooses constitute a threat to the local ecosystem. The small Asian mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*) is a predator native to South and Southeast Asia. It is an invasive species that constitutes a significant threat to Okinawan ecosystems, especially endemic birds. Famous for its ability to kill snakes, it was introduced in Okinawa in 1910 as a means to control the highly venomous *habu* snake (*Protobothrops flavoviridis*). In subsequent decades, it gradually spread throughout the island, reaching the northern Yanbaru forest area—home to many endemic species—around 1990. The effect of the introduction of mongooses upon the *habu* population has been limited, not least because mongooses are daytime hunters, while *habu* are mostly nocturnal. However, while “there has been no clear evidence that the mongooses prey on the [*habu*] snakes”, they have “caused significant damage to crop production (. . .) and poultry” (Yamada and Sugimura 2004, p. 120). They have also preyed on endangered endemic animals, including birds such as the Okinawa rail (*Gallirallus okinawae*), various species of amphibians, and, on nearby Amami Island, the Amami rabbit (*Pentalagus furnessi*). The mongoose is probably Okinawa’s best-known invasive species—it has even been listed by IUCN as “one of the World’s 100 Worst Invasive Species” (Yamada and Sugimura 2004, p. 121)—and nature conservationists today are actively trying to eradicate them, with limited success. Throughout Okinawa, invasive species control is considered a core aspect of nature conservation, and Sēfa Utaki is no exception. Mongooses are culled periodically, as are feral cats (Nanjō-shi Kyōiku Inukai 2018, p. 96), and invasive flora is removed by foresters. This only happens after opening hours, however, so as not to spoil the image of a “natural” sacred forest, frozen in time.¹³

¹³ The mongoose is by no means unique: Okinawa’s modern history is full of examples of foreign species that were introduced by colonial powers (Japan and the US) for economic or other reasons, which—along with other factors, such as pollution and construction (military and otherwise)—has led to the far-reaching transformation of local ecosystems. Another well-known

While there is no doubt that mongooses constitute a threat to endemic birds or amphibians, the present-day concern about invasive species in Okinawa, as in mainland Japan, has another, more symbolic dimension as well. One of the core concerns of many local forest conservation projects in mainland Japan is the removal of fast-growing invader species (*gairaishu*) such as *sasa* bamboo; this includes projects for shrine forest maintenance (Rots 2017c, pp. 152, 221–22). While such practices may serve to protect biodiversity, there are also other issues at stake. Sébastien Boret has written about this phenomenon in relation to a local environmental movement in Tōhoku, which seeks to keep the local *satoyama* landscape free from such invader species (Boret 2014, pp. 136–46). According to him, “the invasion of the land by foreign species has become not only a threat to biodiversity but also a threat to the ideology of the movement in restoring and protecting the Japaneseness of their local ‘natural’ environment” (Boret 2014, p. 142). In the case of the *satoyama* conservation movement, notions of “indigenous” and “invader” species are embedded within a larger discourse on authentic “Japanese” (as opposed to “foreign”) nature, which rests on nostalgic idealizations of the landscape that have a nationalistic undertone (Knight 2010). In Okinawa, an island that has been (and, arguably, continues to be) subject to dual Japanese-US colonialization, exploitation, (sexual) violence and land-grabbing, such concerns are all the more immediate. The vulnerability of the ecosystem to invasive “strangers” cannot be seen apart from the appropriation of local landscapes by foreign actors. Moreover, it is hard to miss the symbolism of outside invaders who prey on endemic birds.

It is unclear to what extent mongooses and other invasive species constitute a real threat to other organisms living in the forest of Sēfa Utaki, let alone other sacred groves where no regular forest maintenance takes place. For this, more research data are needed. At Sēfa Utaki, data on species diversity were last collected around the turn of the century; these all predate the rapid increase of tourists that has taken place since 2008. Yet the fact that so many visitors enter the forest does appear to have had a negative influence on forest ecology: eyewitness accounts at least suggest that certain insects and plants that were a common sight ten years ago are now increasingly rare. In addition to large visitor numbers, there may be other reasons for local biodiversity decline as well, such as pesticide use, topsoil loss, and climate change.

Some initiatives have been undertaken to counter this problem: for instance, the Nanjō City authorities have come up with a plan, together with local citizens’ organizations to turn the former parking space next to the entrance into a butterfly hotspot, planting trees that attract butterflies and other insects. They also dug a new pond, in order to create a habitat for the endemic salamander species that can be found in the forest. As this space is just outside of the boundaries of the World Heritage Site proper, it is not limited to the same strict maintenance regulations as the grove itself; consequently, local and national authorities were more willing to accept changes in physical appearance. Thus, in February 2018, a tree-planting festival was organized at this site, involving school children and local politicians.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the authorities are busy discussing possible strategies for limiting the negative environmental impact of the large tourist numbers, such as soil erosion and litter. There are clear discursive associations between environmental decline and other negative effects of the influx of strangers, such as their perceived violations of ritual space. In the minds of many local residents to whom I have spoken in recent years, these issues are closely related.

Of course, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, Sēfa Utaki is a somewhat atypical site, not only because of its historical significance and present-day World Heritage status, but also because tourists here far outnumber visitors to other *utaki* on the island. Nevertheless, there is reason to assume that some of the environmental problems that can be observed here—biodiversity loss, invader species, soil erosion etc.—also affect other groves, in the vicinity and elsewhere on the island. In this section,

example of such a species is the tilapia fish, which was introduced into the streams of Okinawa, leading to a decline in smaller endemic fish species and freshwater biodiversity.

¹⁴ See <http://www.city.nanjo.okinawa.jp/about-nanjo/introduction/nanjo-diary/2018/02/-20180204.html> (accessed on 31 August 2018).

I have focused primarily on the case of Sēfa Utaki, because even less evidence (scientific or anecdotal) is available for those other *utaki*. But if it is true that sacred groves are often characterized by high biodiversity—which, as we have seen, is a claim made by organizations such as IUCN and WWF, and there is no reason to assume that this does not apply to Okinawa—it is all the more important that biologists and ecologists start conducting large-scale research on Okinawan *utaki*. The preservation of *utaki* then becomes a matter not only of cultural and spiritual, but also environmental importance.

6. Conclusions

The study of *utaki* poses researchers with significant methodological challenges. Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are religious institutions with organizational structures; they are run by priests, have ritual calendars, are frequented by members of the parish (*ujiko* or *danka*), and often have their own institutional archives. *Utaki* have none of these. Thus, one can conduct biological surveys or archaeological excavations, but if one wants to learn more about the cultural or historical significance of the site, there are several difficulties: the lack of reliable historical source materials, the lack of a priestly organization and an official institutional narrative, and, in many cases, the lack of consensus among worshippers concerning a site's meanings and proper use. But then, arguably, it is precisely this diversity, and the absence of a single organization that “owns” the site, that make *utaki* fascinating.

As *utaki* lose their former role as the ritual worship site where village priestesses conduct their traditional ceremonies, they can come to signify a number of different things, depending on who you ask: the abode of the village goddess; a remnant of “ancient Shinto” (*ko-shintō*), which can supposedly teach us about Japanese religion's “original shape”; a site of Ryukyuan ancestral rituals, and a place of worship (*uganju*; *ogamu basho*) where ritual offerings are made in order to preserve continuity with this ancestral tradition; a “powerspot”, where visitors can feel the energy of the universe, and perhaps experience healing; a UNESCO World Heritage Site of “universal value”, the collective property of all of humanity; a disappointing tourist destination, as “there is nothing to be seen”; a biodiversity hotspot, threatened by invasive species and pollution, possibly subject to protective measures; a dangerous, sacred site, where men should not set foot; a place to gather firewood; or a combination of several of these.

In several respects, Okinawa is the prefecture with the most serious problems in all of Japan. Environmental degradation threatens human and non-human livelihoods. The US military base issue is a cause of continuous anger and anxiety, and the construction of the new base at Henoko only strengthens such feelings. Tourism is a mixed blessing: it provides economic benefits and jobs, but it also leads to environmental problems, the transformation of cultural practices (e.g., *ēsā* dancing) into commodified tourist spectacle, and, in some cases, the appropriation of Okinawan worship sites by outside visitors. Studying sacred sites may help us understand some of the changes and challenges affecting Okinawan society today, including environmental problems and questions of cultural identity.

Small though it is, Okinawa is home to remarkable cultural, religious, and ecological diversity, and my observations do not necessarily apply to all *utaki* equally. I have not attempted to present a comprehensive overview of the current situation of all these groves; this would require more research in different parts of the island, and it would be beyond the scope of a single article to do so. Rather, the purpose of this article was to identify three main issues for the study of *utaki* in contemporary Okinawa: the question of their origins and historical trajectories, and the related problem of lingering social-evolutionist narratives; the popularization of mainland Japanese “powerspot tourism”, and the mixed responses to this trend on the part of Okinawan actors; and the potential status of *utaki* as “Sacred Natural Sites” with high biodiversity, as well as the challenge of invader species. Ultimately, these all boil down to the question of ownership: who owns the *utaki*, who gets to tell its story, and who decides on its boundaries? These are pressing issues, which are directly connected to ongoing struggles for political and economic control, nature and heritage conservation, and the formulation of social identities. Sacred sites are contested sites, not least in Okinawa. Arguably, then, more in-depth research on *utaki* and other Okinawan sacred sites is important for acquiring a better understanding of their

ecological value, historical changes, and present-day significance. Such research will also shed light on broader changes in Okinawan society, religion, and the natural environment.

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