

What are *Magatama*?

The Ryukyu Islands are home to an ancient indigenous religion in which women have always played the most important ceremonial roles. Certain individuals are recognized as being “godly people,” or *kaminchu*, and influential priestesses called *norō* have hereditary roles passed down within the same families for generations. Necklaces of stone ornaments called *magatama* have been prized symbols of status and power for centuries and are handed down from mother to daughter.

Magatama are natural stones which have been carved and polished into a comma shape. They resemble the claws of wild beasts and are believed to have originated in the shamanistic practices of prehistoric Southern Manchuria and Korea. In the main Japanese islands, they were first used by prehistoric communities as decorations and ceremonial objects from about 1000 BCE through the sixth century, eventually spreading widely throughout the archipelago. They are believed to have come into use in the Okinawan islands much later, around the twelfth century. Along with special white vestments, they are only worn by *norō* on ceremonial occasions, and are considered sacred.

This *magatama* necklace belonged to priestesses of royal status, who held the title Nakijin Aoriyae. They were the highest ranking female *kaminchu*, responsible for rituals throughout the northern part of the main island. The necklace was handed down from generation to generation, and was donated by the clan. The largest *magatama* is made from black obsidian. It is believed to be from Tokachi in Hokkaido, the northernmost major Japanese island, which indicates the extent of trade routes at the time. Other *magatama* and oval beads are made from stones such as serpentine, chalcedony, rhyolite, quartz, wax stone, jasper, and green schist, though little is known about their origins. The largest *magatama* is placed at the center, with others arranged so the most attractive shapes and colors will be visible from the front. This treasure was passed down from Nakijin Aoriyae through succeeding generations and is now a Tangible Cultural Property of Okinawa Prefecture.