

Spiritual Life on Amami Oshima

Although Amami Oshima has been culturally connected with mainland Japan since prehistoric times, it was deeply influenced by the Ryukyuan culture, and the island's religious beliefs and social activities still reflect those traditions.

Ryukyuan beliefs were based on ancestor veneration and had ancient animistic roots, much like Japan's indigenous Shinto religion. The creation myth centered on the goddess Amamikiyo, which likely led to the belief in the spiritual superiority of women. Traditionally, women not only played the primary religious role in the home but also were the spiritual leaders of the local community.

Religion and History

During the heyday of the Ryukyu Kingdom, especially the reign of King Sho Shin (1477–1526), administrative officials governed through *noro*, priestesses who performed the religious rituals of each community. Although the Satsuma domain introduced Zen Buddhism after effectively taking control of Amami Oshima in 1609, Buddhism remained largely the realm of Satsuma officials. It made little headway into the lives of the islanders, and no Buddhist temples from this period remain. The government promotion of Shinto during the Meiji era (1868–1912) was matched by a renewed push from both the Jodo Buddhist sect and Catholic missionaries. Although these more recent religious arrivals have gained ground, there is still a deep respect for Ryukyuan religious culture. There are no longer any *noro* priestesses on the island, but many ancient rituals have survived as part of festivals and other events, and spiritual sites are still treated with great reverence.