

The Spiritual Life: *Noro* Priestesses

After Amami Oshima became part of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the latter part of the fifteenth century, the spiritual lives of the island's communities came to be led by *noro*, village priestesses who were appointed by the royal government. They acted as religious administrators, responsible for praying to the gods for the community's prosperity. A museum in the town of Uken displays a certificate from a Ryukyu king appointing a *noro* to her post in 1594. There are a number of other *noro*-related items on display, including the white robes worn at ceremonies, cabinets in which religious articles were stored, and colorful fans. The *noro* used these fans to call and welcome deities, and their illustrations of the mythical *fenghuang* bird, known in Japanese as *ho-o*, show how deeply Ryukyuan culture was influenced by China.

Talking to the Gods

Noro held a prestigious position, although their lives and living conditions were no different from those of other villagers. They could even marry and have children. On ceremonial days, the *noro* would put on their white robes and communicate with the gods on behalf of their village, aided by their mostly female assistants. The Satsuma domain of southern Kyushu took over the appointment of *noro* after Amami Oshima and other islands came under its control, but the formal system ceased when the kingdom was abolished in 1879. The *noro* were so central to village life that their influence continues to be felt at many of the island's festivals. Older islanders share tales that have been passed down for generations about the awe-inspiring powers of some legendary *noro*.

The Shaman Tradition

Yuta, female spirit mediums or shamans, are often confused with *noro*. *Yuta* were not part of the governing administration, but rather independent agents. Unlike the *noro*, whose prayers were focused on the security and prosperity of their community, the *yuta* acted as psychic mediums by conveying the will of the gods to individuals—a role similar to a spiritual counselor. They would become possessed, and often wore masks

that represented their transformation into a channel for the voice of the spirits. There are still some reminders of this tradition on the island in the form of fortune-tellers, who usually operate out of their homes.