

Yambaru's History and Culture

Yambaru has likely been inhabited since the last few centuries BCE. By the fourteenth century, it was part of the Hokuzan Kingdom, one of three realms that ruled the island of Okinawa. Hokuzan was defeated by the armies of its southern neighbor, the Chuzan Kingdom, in 1416. Chuzan unified the three realms into the Ryukyu Kingdom, which lasted from 1429 until it was dissolved by Japan's Meiji government and became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879.

A People Connected to Their Natural Surroundings

Throughout history, the people of Yambaru have actively maintained the region's forests, relying on them for essential resources. From the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom on, Yambaru supplied charcoal, firewood, and building materials to the rest of Okinawa Island. Traditional Yambaru sailing boats helped trade to flourish, bringing daily necessities back to Yambaru in exchange for forestry products. In certain areas near the

villages, there are stone walls built hundreds of years ago to prevent the encroachment of wild boars.

The Ryukyuan Spiritual World

Ryukyuan traditional spirituality believed that the sea and mountains are one. Sacred sites known as *utaki* may consist of rocks, groves of trees, or entire mountains. They are places where the Ryukyuan gods visit and where ancestral deities are worshipped. Local rituals are held there, and many worshippers still venerate them as sanctuaries that protect the local area. Under the Ryukyu Kingdom's administrative system, women called

noro served as priestesses for each village. They communicated with the gods and presided at traditional festivals in which people expressed their gratitude for nature's blessings, drove away evil spirits, and prayed for good harvests and fishing. The most significant events are still held today in mid-summer, and include prayers to the mountain gods for a good harvest and to the sea gods for a bountiful catch. Several of the festivals have been designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties by the Japanese government.

Yambaru Communities

The layouts and settings of Yambaru communities reflect Ryukyuan customs that facilitate the use of natural resources and maintain traditional lifestyles. Settlements were originally organized around rivers, with designated areas for activities such as farming and charcoal making, and the offshore reefs provided seafood and seaweed. Today, Yambaru's population of under 10,000 residents is divided into three villages.