

Ryukyu sites (Japan)

No 972

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu
<i>Location</i>	Okinawa Prefecture
<i>State Party</i>	Japan
<i>Date</i>	25 June 1999

Justification by State Party

Each of the stone monuments and archaeological sites included in the nominated property illustrates the unique development and transition that Ryukyu underwent through political, economic, and cultural interchanges with mainland Japan, China, and south-east Asia. **Criterion ii**

The *gusuku* sites included in the nominated property are exceptionally precious archaeological remains, valuable as sources of information about the architecture of forts and castles which had developed in tandem with the political changes of Ryukyu since they first appeared as the residences of the chieftains of farming villages on the southernmost islands of Japan. They are tangible symbols of the now lost ancient culture and tradition of Ryukyu. Originally the *gusukus* were deeply incorporated in the daily lives of farming villages. They remain to the present day active stages for cultural activities for Ryukyu and local spiritual centres where people living in the region strengthen spiritual ties with one another through prayer and worship of their common ancestors. **Criterion iii**

Each of the monuments, sites, and cultural landscapes included in the nominated property is an outstanding demonstration that Ryukyu boasted high standards of civil engineering, architecture, and landscape architecture from both the cultural and the aesthetic points of view during the Ryukyu Kingdom. Stone monuments such as Tamaudun and Sonohyan-utaki Ishimon and other structures in stone, in particular, clearly reflect elements of architectural workmanship and design used in China and east Asia skilfully modified and adjusted to suit traditional Ryukyu materials. At the same time, Shikinaen shows, in its composition, landscape, and garden elements such as arched bridges, typical elements of a uniquely Ryukyuan sense of architectural composition and design born out of a fusion between Japanese and Chinese garden design. **Criterion iv**

The monuments and sites included in the nominated property represent the typical elements of religious beliefs and activities unique to Ryukyu. *Gusuku* sites were not simply

political centres but also religious stages for the local people of the farming hamlets. At the same time, *gusuku* sites are archaeological relics of high academic value and living spiritual centres for contemporary Ryukyuan people, reflected in the fact that they are still used today by priestesses known as *Noro* as settings for religious rituals. Sêfa-utaki, which was the religious centre of the entire Ryukyu Kingdom, retains the key features of the Ryukyuan sacred places known as *Utaki*: dense enclosed forest and picturesque rocks. It is intriguing that Sêfa-utaki commands a view of small islands in the eastern sea between the tree trunks of the dense forest, reminding devout visitors of the old Ryukyuan belief that the land of the gods, *Nirai Kanai*, is located far to the east at the end of the sea. In this sense Sêfa-utaki is a cultural landscape closely associated with religious beliefs unique to Ryukyuan nature worship, a living religious tradition still flourishing in the contemporary rituals and festivals of this region. Indeed, the entire nominated property is rooted in the spiritual lives and daily activities of the local people as an active setting for such rituals. **Criterion vi**

Category of property

Two of the three categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention – *monuments* and *sites* – and also *cultural landscapes*, as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, are represented in the nine properties that make up this nomination.

History and Description

History

In the 10th-12th centuries, Ryukyuan farming communities (*gusukus*) began to enclose their villages with simple stone walls for protection. From the 12th century onwards powerful groups, known as *aji*, began to emerge. They enlarged the defences of their own settlements, converting them into fortresses for their own households; these adopted the term *gusuku* to describe these formidable castles. There followed a continual struggle for supremacy between the *aji*, which did not coalesce until the 15th century into three main kingdoms – Hokuzan (North Mountain), Chûzan (Central Mountain), and Nanzan (South Mountain).

The Sanzan (Three Mountain) period was marked by many changes in Ryukyuan society and economy. Improved tools and techniques resulted in enormous growth in agricultural production. There was intensive trade from the Sanzan Period onwards with Song Dynasty China, mainland Japan, the Korean peninsula, and south-east Asia, reaching its peak between the end of the 14th century and the mid 16th century.

This period came to an end in 1429 when Ryukyu was finally united by the Chûzan ruler into a single kingdom. The first king was expelled in a coup-d'état in 1469, but the kingdom survived intact until 1879; the two periods are known as the First and Second Shô Dynasty respectively. The third king of the Second Shô Dynasty, Shô Shin, consolidated the administration of the kingdom, instituting strong centralized control of both the political and the religious system.

The Kingdom was conquered from Japan in 1609 by the Satsuma fief during the Tokugawa Shogunate, but the new overlords retained the Ryukyuan monarchy as its local administration. It also provided valuable links with the rest of the world at a period when Japan was virtually closed to all overseas contacts. With the end of the Shogunate at the Meiji Restoration in 1868, it survived briefly as the “Ryukyu Domain,” but in 1879 the Ryukyu Kingdom was abolished and the islands became the Okinawa Prefecture under the new administrative system.

Ryukyu was the scene of heavy bombardment and bitter land fighting at the end of World War II; many lives were lost and the cultural properties were grievously damaged. It was under US administration until 1972, when control was returned to Japan.

Description

- Tamaudun Royal Mausoleum [monument; Naha City]

The mausoleum was built by Shō Shin around 1501 as a symbol of royal power, and to take advantage of the Ryukyuan people’s practice of worshipping at the tombs of ancestors.

It is carved into the limestone bedrock and covered by a gabled pantile roof. The walls enclosing the burial chamber and the mausoleum area are of coralline limestone. The burial chamber has three compartments, each entered through a stone gate. The central one was for the reception of royal remains before purification by washing; they were then transferred to the western chamber (kings and queens only) and eastern chamber (other members of the royal family).

- Sonohyan-utaki Ishimon (Stone Gate of the Sonohyan Shrine) [monument; Naha City]

This stone gate was erected in 1519 by Shō Shin, fronting a sacred forest (*Sonohyan-utaki*). It was considered to be the guardian shrine of the Ryukyu Kingdom, where prayers were offered for peace and security at annual ritual ceremonies.

It represents the unique style of stone architecture developed in Ryukyu. This is based on decorative designs used on wood but reproduced painstakingly in stone on rafters, gables, pendants, and ridges. Coralline limestone is used for the main structural members and the roof and fine sandstone on ridges and elsewhere. The doors themselves are in wood.

- Nakijin-jō (Nakijin Castle) [site; Nakijin Village]

The castle of the Hokuzan King during the Sanzan Period became the residence of the Ryukyuan Kingdom governor. Work began on its construction in the late 13th century and that it had reached its final form by the beginning of the 15th century. Archaeological excavations have produced immense quantities of Chinese ceramics, indicating intensive trade.

The castle is strategically sited on a lone hill, well defended by natural features (river, cliffs, deep valley). The steeply sloping external walls extend over 1500m, laid out in arcs conforming with the topography. They are constructed of blocks of hard limestone, rising to 6-10m, up to 3m thick at the top, where there are low parapets.

The existing gate (*Heirōmon*) is a reconstruction of 1962; following Japanese conservation practice, its foundations are separated from the below-ground archaeological evidence by a layer of sterile soil. Inside there are six enclosures. The first, at the highest point of the site, which was painstaking

levelled, was the site of the state hall, a shrine, and a stone slab recording the history of Hokuzan. In front is a second enclosure on which two more halls were built, and behind is the *Uchibaru*, the priestesses’ residence. One stage below is the *Shigemajōkaku*, with the barracks of the garrison.

The Lower Shrine (*Soitsugi-no-utaki*) was dedicated to the guardian deity of the castle. It is one of the most important sacred sites in the Ryukyu Islands.

- Zakimi-jō (Zakimi Castle) [site; Yomitan Village]

This castle was built in the early 15th century by powerful chieftain, Gosamaru. After the establishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom it served to watch over the survivors of the Hokuzan kingdom, who had fled to the west coast of Okinawa.

It is on an elevated site strategically selected to give a clear view of the Ryukyu royal castle of Shuri-jō. It consists of two linked enclosures surrounded by serpentine walls of coralline limestone blocks. The extant gate of the second enclosure is one of the oldest arched gates on Okinawa. Within are to be found the foundations of at least one large building. The site includes a sacred site dedicated to guardian deities, and it is still an active place of worship.

- Katsuren-jō (Katsuren Castle) [site; Katsuren Town]

Built in the 12th/13th century, Katsuren was the castle of another powerful chieftain, Amawari. Archaeological excavations have provided abundant evidence of extensive trade in the Sanzan period. Again sited on a dominating hill, it comprises four linked enclosures with walls of coralline limestone. The foundations of several substantial buildings have been discovered by excavation.

There are several ancient places of worship. In particular, the shrine dedicated to Kobazukasa, a round stone column in the middle of the first enclosure, is still of considerable spiritual significance. There is also a ritual stage (*Tunumutu*) in the third enclosure, where ten stone stools are placed in an L-shaped configuration. These are known to have been used by local priestesses (*noro*) for ritual prayers.

- Nakagusuku-jō (Nakagusuku Castle) [site; Kitanakagusuku and Nakagusuku Villages]

This castle, built in the turbulent final years of the 14th century and extended in the mid 15th century, consists of six enclosures, arranged in a line on a steep promontory. The walls are of coursed coralline limestone blocks; the corners are especially well fashioned using much larger, shaped blocks. In places the height of the walls exceeds 10m. Various forms of bonding the stone blocks (horizontal, hexagonal, random) are used on different walls, confirming that the castle was extended more than once. There are several places of worship in the southernmost enclosure.

- Shuri-jō (Shuri Castle) [site; Naha City]

Built in the second half of the 14th century, Shuri-jō was the main castle of the kings of Chūzan and, after unification, of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The hill on which it stands dominates Naha City and its port. It is divided into inner and outer enclosures, conforming with the topography.

The castle’s enclosure walls, built with random bonding of coralline limestone, extend over 1080m, with two watch towers, the remains of which are still visible. They vary in height from 6m to 15m and are on average 3m thick. There

were several gates, including vaulted examples with hipped-roof wooden turrets.

The state hall (*Heiden*) was a three-storeyed palatial structure with a hipped gabled roof, facing south-west, built on an elevated foundation platform with stone balustrades in front and along the sides of the approach stairway. Its decoration displays unique Ryukyuan features, most notably the front eaves of the gables, which have large dragon sculptures, in Chinese style. Only the first and second floors were used, the second being lavishly decorated, as befitted its use as the royal throne and reception room. The hall was surrounded by a state courtyard (*Unâ*), with large halls on either side; the northern of these, in Chinese style, was used for receiving and accommodating Chinese delegations, whilst the other was in Japanese style and served the same purpose for Japanese delegations.

The hall was destroyed by fire repeatedly, most recently and comprehensively during World War II. It had, however, been thoroughly recorded before the war, and exhaustive archaeological excavations took place before the present reconstruction was made.

- Shikinaen [site/cultural landscape; Naha City]

This royal garden villa is recorded as having been constructed in 1799. The plan of the garden shows Japanese influence, whilst Chinese features are to be found in some of the structures within it; the result is, however, uniquely Ryukyuan. The central feature is the pool, around which are disposed walkways, pavilions, artificial hills, and flower gardens. The pond itself is accentuated by the presence of two small islands and Chinese-style arched bridges; on one of the islands there is a hexagonal pavilion in Chinese style. Other pavilions are single-storeyed wooden structures roofed with red tiles, a privilege reserved for the upper classes.

- Sêfa-utaki [site/cultural landscape; Chinen Village]

During his long reign (1477-1526) the third Shô king, Shô Shin, reorganized and centralized Ryukyuan religion, the spiritual head of which was a women priest, *Kikoeôgimi*. Sêfa-utaki, already an important ritual site, became one of the most sacred places in the new religion.

There are several places of worship, three of them linked by stone-flagged paths. There are few material indications of the significance of Sêfa-utaki: it is essentially a densely wooded hill on which the shrines and prayer sites have an ageless spiritual quality that derives from their setting rather than manmade symbols.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Two of the nine properties that make up this nomination (Tamaudun and Sonohyan-utaki Ishimon) are designated under Article 27 of the 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties as Important Cultural Properties. They are also designated as Historic Sites, the designation which applies to the other properties. Any interventions proposed to the protected properties must be submitted for authorization to the national Agency for Cultural Affairs. There are heavy penalties for contravention of this law.

Management

Ownership of the properties making up this nomination is varied. Sêfa-utaki and Zakimi-jô are owned by the relevant local authorities. Nakijin-jô, Katsuren-jô, and Nakagusuku-jô are largely on public land, with small portions in private ownership. Shuri-jô belongs to the Government of Japan and Okinawa Prefecture. Ownership of Tamaudun is shared by the Prefecture and Naha City, whilst Sonohyan-utaki Ishimon and Shikinaen are on lands belonging to Naha City.

Maintenance, repair, and presentation of these properties is the responsibility of the owners or custodial bodies. However, there is financial and technical support available from the national and prefectural administrations.

In addition to the protection of the sites and monuments themselves arising from designation under the 1950 Law, each of the properties features in municipal ordinances, which define buffer zones within which there are strict controls over building heights, design, colour, etc. Most also form part of city park projects, designed to improve their settings and their presentation to visitors.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

All the properties were designated cultural sites and monuments before World War II. During this time they were subject to systematic maintenance programmes, with some authorized repair and restoration projects on, for example, the castle walls.

Damage during the closing stages of World War II was enormous. Shuri-jô suffered worst, since the headquarters of the Japanese forces was dug beneath the monument; severe damage was also sustained by Sonohyan-utaki Ishimon, Tamaudun, and Shikinaen. After the end of the war conservation and restoration work was put in hand, though it had to compete with the major reconstruction required by the whole island in order to provide a basic social and economic infrastructure.

With the reversion of Okinawa in 1973, the Japanese Government initiated a major programme of restoration and conservation projects, mindful of the significance of these properties in the maintenance of Ryukyuan cultural identity. All such projects have been planned with great care and precision, with the objective of ensuring the highest degree of authenticity and integrity. Reconstructions are based on detailed archival and archaeological research and great care is taken to ensure that original and reconstructed features are clearly distinguished.

Authenticity

Because of the strict standards of restoration and reconstruction that have been in force in Japan for more than a century, the level of authenticity of design and materials of the properties nominated is high. Care is taken to distinguish between original and restored or reconstructed structural elements and in the selection of materials for restoration. In a few cases of immediate post-war restoration using inappropriate materials, these either have been replaced or are clearly differentiated.

All such projects are based on meticulous survey and research in advance of starting operations. The complete reconstruction of the state hall at Shuri-jō derives from scale drawings and photographs of the hall before it was destroyed by fire, cross-checked with extensive archaeological excavation. The result is an exact replica of the earlier structure, which is of great symbolic value in Okinawa. At Shikinaen, a similar process is being used in the accurate re-creation of the garden of the royal villa.

Underground archaeological remains are carefully excavated, recorded, and preserved in good condition, where necessary sealed by a layer of sterile soil or sand from structures reconstructed *in situ* and protected against any form of intervention from them. There are examples of this at Nakijin-jō and Shuri-jō.

There is an equally high level of authenticity in terms of workmanship. Traditional techniques are employed extensively in all restoration and conservation projects.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited all the properties included in the nomination in January 2000.

Qualities

The group of monuments and sites that make up this nomination graphically illustrate the special cultural trajectory of a territory that provided a link between the cultures of China, Japan, the Korean peninsula, and south-east Asia. Its multi-cultural background and the unique character that emerged from several centuries of interchange is of great importance in studying the processes of cultural interaction.

The nomination is also significant for the way in which ancient religious practices have survived intact over many centuries, and have been largely unaffected by the growth around them of major world religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity. This has been one of the most important factors in the strength of Ryukyuan cultural identity, despite some 150 years of external political and economic pressures.

Comparative analysis

Because of the unique nature of the culture of the Ryukyuan Kingdom, it is difficult to find any comparanda, especially in east Asia or the Pacific Rim generally.

Brief description

Five hundred years of Ryukyuan history are represented by this group of sites and monuments. The ruined castles, on imposing elevated sites, are evidence for the social structure over much of that period, whilst the sacred sites provide mute testimony to the rare survival of an ancient form of religion into the modern age. The wide economic (and hence cultural) contacts of the islands over that period are illustrated by the unique culture that emerged.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iii, and vi*:

Criterion ii For several centuries the Ryukyu islands served as a centre of economic and cultural interchange between south-east Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, and this is vividly demonstrated by the surviving monuments.

Criterion iii The culture of the Ryukyuan Kingdom evolved and flourished in a special political and economic environment, which gave its culture a unique quality.

Criterion vi The Ryukyu sacred sites constitute an exceptional example of an indigenous form of nature and ancestor worship which has survived intact into the modern age alongside other established world religions.

ICOMOS, September 2000