On the links between Busa (Maso) and *onari-gami*.

An examination of some Chinese influences on Ryûkyûan culture.

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This article has its origin in the discovery, a few years ago, of a legend recorded in Okinawa, in 1846 or 1847, by the French missionary Pierre Leturdu. Although no information is given as to its source, we may presume that the missionary heard it from the Buddhist monks with whom he was in contact at the Seigenji, his abode in Ameku, or from the clerks of Kumemura who happened to visit him at times (Beillevaire 1996). In substance, the story goes like this:

> Busa was a daughter of Heaven. To come into the world, she borrowed the womb of a woman who already had three sons. As she had been conceived by nature's way, she was treated like any other girl and was in charge of the housekeeping. It happened that her three elder brothers went to sea for a long journey. No news from them had reached home since their departure. One day, while she was spinning, the maiden felt asleep. Then her mouth started to open and close with contractions as if she was trying to catch something. This had already happened twice when her mother raised her voice and scolded her for being lazy. The maiden woke up suddenly and started to cry. "Why are you crying ?" the mother asked. "It is because my three brothers are shipwrecked" she answered. "I had already rescued two of them by seizing them with my teeth, and I was just about to seize the third when you woke me. This caused me to let him drop and he drowned". Shortly afterwards the two surviving brothers returned home and reported the loss of their brother with details corresponding to what their sister had told. Thereafter, the maiden rescued many other sea voyagers in distress. One day she died and was buried. But later on, as one came to open her tomb, it was found totally empty. From that day, the people around could not doubt that she was the sea goddess, and they never failed to seek her assistance before embarking on a journey.[1]

Stories of the sort are of course most familiar to specialists of traditional Ryûkyûan culture. They belong to a type of legend commonly termed *onari* (or *unai*)*-gami to funa-tabi*, "the sister-god and sea voyages", and more precisely —though in this case the girl is

[1] Leturdu recorded the legend twice, in his diary and in his report, in about the same words (Leturdu 1846-1848: 361, 393-394). He spelt the maiden's name Buza, in accordance with the rules of French phonetics that nasalizes the consonant s when it is placed between vowels.

spinning— to the subtype of "weaving and ship salvage" (*kijô-kyûshû*).[2] Many variants are found throughout the Ryûkyû Islands. Sometimes it is the maiden's father and brother who are at sea: in that case, either the brother is rescued and the father drowned, or the opposite. Sometimes it is the father who scolds his daughter and thus causes the death of one of his sons. In some variants the maiden is using her hands instead of her mouth to rescue her brothers or her father, while in others she is using both her hands and her mouth (*Nihon mukashi banashi tsûkan*, 1983 : 407 sq.). One of the three well-known legends relating the origin of Futenma Shrine (Futenma-gû), first recorded in *Irôsetsuden* (*ca.* 1745), begins with a similar story —except that there is no mention of weaving— in which the maiden was prevented from rescuing her father (Iha 1971: 382; Akamine 2000).[3]

All those legends exemplify the protective power that the Ryûkyûan culture attributes to a sister towards her brothers, more generally to a woman towards her close male relatives, and, beyond the family, to all women invested with religious functions towards their community.[4] In real life —as it could be observed as recently as during WWII, if not later—, when a man was departing for a long journey, his sister customarily bestowed her protection on him by giving him a lock of hair or a piece of cloth she had woven (Rk. *tîsâji*; Jap. *tenugui*). This magic power, together with the broader spiritual or religious predominance of women in Ryûkyû —linked to their ability to be possessed with *seji* (Rk. *shiji*), the "spiritual force" emanating from the *kami*—, is encapsulated in the concept of *onari-gami*, "sister-god". The beliefs associated with it were at the very heart of the state ideology which developed during the 15th-16th centuries and established the king and his sister (or sometimes another of his close female relative) as the top officiants presiding over the life-renewing rituals. The king's sister, who bore the title of *kikoe-ôgimi*, acted then as an intermediary between him and the

[2] *Kijô-kyûshû* is an abbreviated designation of the *hata-ori onna ga yume no naka de nansen wo sukuu* ("the weaving girl who salvages ships from wreck in dream") type of legend, as mentioned by Kojima Yoshiyuki (1993: 426).

[3] The story continues like this: Thereafter the girl refuses to be seen by anyone who does not belong to her house, including her husband. One day, the latter eventually manages to see her face, causing her to disappear in the Futenma cave where the people start to worship her. That *sugata wo kakusu onna* (the woman who hides herself) kind of narrative, as designated by Kojima Yoshiyuki, is also found separately. It seems to be native to the Ryûkyû Islands and in several cases relates to the belief in a deity protecting voyagers (Kojima 1993: 426, 432-434). It is beyond the scope of this article to question the ambiguity inherent in those legends in which the death of a brother or of a father reveals that the sister's or daughter's protection is partly deficient. So far, this recurring feature seems to have attracted little attention from Okinawan scholars, and still awaits an explanation, either structural or psychological, that would give meaning to it.

[4] Ordinarily the word *onari* (Rk. *wunai*, *unai*) means "sister", but in the context of village rituals it should rather be understood as "woman", as pointed out by Monika Wacker (2001; see also Kojima 1993: 424). The emphasis on the sister's ritual role could have in fact resulted from the patrilinearization, under Chinese Confucian influence, of the political rule and, in its wake, of the principles governing the organization of both the family and the ancestor worship groups.

primeval *kami* that reside in *niruya* or *nirai* —the realm located on the horizon from where the sun rises— and that cyclically bring fecundity into the human world.[5]

In the *Omoro-sôshi*, especially in Book thirteen, entitled *Funa eto*, which contains songs dating from the 14th-15th centuries and dealing with ships and sea voyages, as in many "Ryûkyûan songs" (*Ryûka*) and popular narratives (*mukashi-banashi* or *setsuwa*), that protective force —usually referred to as *shugojin*, "guardian deity"— takes the form of a butterfly, of a bird, often white (Rk. *shirutuyâ*), or of various sea animals such as flying fish, sharks, or turtles (Iha 1971: 375, 378; Hokama 1998: 203; Hokama 2000, vol. 2: 89, 127; Higa 1982: 11-13, 16).[6] It may also appear as a ray of red or blue light illuminating ships in distress. In a broader context, a butterfly fluttering around a shrine or a ceremonial ground is also usually conceived of as an embodiment of the *kami* (Kuratsuka 1979: 77-88).[7]

On the name Busa.

To return to the above-quoted legend, what is rather unexpected is that the *onari-gami* maiden be called Busa. Moreover, in a previous paragraph of the missionary's diary we also learn that this "sea goddess" is none other than Kannon (Leturdu 1846-1848: 361).

Let us examine the name Busa first.[8] Linguistically, *busa* (or *busâ*, *bûsâ*) is the colloquial shortening of *busatsu*, the Ryûkyûan pronunciation of *bosatsu* (Skr. *bodhisattva*), a qualification that notably applies to Kannon (*Okinawa kogo daijiten*, 1995: 594). More specifically, *busatsu*, with its oral forms *busa* and the respectful *busâ-ganashi* (or *bûsâ-ganashi*), is also the popular appellation of Maso, a goddess of Chinese origin protecting the sea voyagers, and otherwise called by her honorific titles Tenpi, Tenpi-jôjô, Tenkô, or Tenjô-seibô. Its earliest occurrence in Ryûkyûan sources is found in an *Omoro* song (chap. 13/764) concerning the departure of a certain ship for China, which says: *Tô no bôsa takabete*, "Pray to the *bosatsu* of China" (Higa 1982: 27-28; Hokama 2000, vol. 2: 19-20). As noted by the Japanese monk Taichû, of the Jôdo-shû, at the beginning of the 17th century, *busatsu* was the common appellation of the goddess Maso in Kumemura, where two shrines —the Kami and Shimo Tenpi-byô (first called Tenpi-gû)— were dedicated to her (Taichû 2001: 200). The erection of these shrines in the early 15th century followed the settling of Fujian merchants and craftsmen in that neighborhood of Naha, an event which itself resulted from the admission of

[5] We cannot enter into details here, but it should be added in passing that, very likely under the joint influence of Tentô concepts and of Shingon Buddhism, the rising sun, embodying the essence of the primeval *kami*, became an object of worship with which the king himself was identified. On that question, see Smits 2000.

[6] It is to be noticed that in some variants of the *onari-gami to funa-tabi* legends it is the brothers who die and transform into birds (Kojima 1993: 427).

[7] In a cemetery, however, it is likely to be taken for the manifestation of a dead and possibly resentful soul.

[8] I am indebted to Akamine Masanobu who first drew my attention to the designation of Maso as *busa*. See his own commentary on the legend of Busa recorded by Leturdu (Akamine 2000).

Chûzan as a tribute state of the Ming empire in 1372 (Tomiyama 2001: 185; Kuniyoshi 1983: 873; Kubo 1981: 245).[9]

The Chinese envoys sent to Ryûkyû for the investiture of its kings (*sappôshi*) had made a habit of visiting the Kami-Tenpi-byô before embarking, in order to obtain from the goddess a safe passage to Fujian (Maeda 1976: 42). So did the Ryûkyûan officials appointed to conduct the tribute missions to China. The prayer, *otakabe*, that the latter addressed to Maso/Tenpi on the occasion was called *bosatsu otakabe* (Rk. *busa utakabi*). One of the ceremonies preceding their departure, the *bosatsu gojôsen*, was then intended, as its name says, "to bring *bosatsu* (meaning Tenpi) aboard" the tribute ship. At sea too, they prayed to the "*bosatsu-ganashi* of the ship", as shown in the diary of Maezato-oyakata, an official dispatched to Fuzhou in 1865 to welcome the Chinese embassy sent for the investiture of King Shô Tai (Tomiyama 2001: 187-188). In that particular case, as the sea was becoming dangerously rougher, the ship's goddess was further asked to intercede with the Tenkô worshipped in a shrine near Fuzhou, so as to obtain her protection in return for the promise of generous offerings. Likewise, Ryûkyûan officials and seamen travelling to Kagoshima placed themselves under the benevolent surveillance of Tenpi.

The other most important Ryûkyûan shrine dedicated to Maso is found in the village of Nakazato on Kumejima, an island located on the shipping route between Fujian and Okinawa. The original shrine was built in 1756 to thank the goddess for the rescue by the islanders of the Chinese embassy led by Quankui. The construction was made by order of King Shô Boku, at the suggestion of the Chinese who bore the expenses. Officially designated as Tenkô-gû, in accordance with Maso's recent promotion to "Impress of Heaven" (Tenkô) by Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722), the shrine would remain better known as Busa-dô (Kubo 1981: 246-247; Yamazato 1983; Tomiyama 2001: 185).

At this point, to recapitulate, we have a characteristically Ryûkyûan *onari-gami to funa-tabi* legend in which the maiden is named Busa, a colloquial appellation of the Chinese goddess Maso. Furthermore, we are told that Busa and Kannon, the most popular *bodhisattva* of Mahâyâna Buddhism, frequently pictured at the Buddha Amida's side, are one and the same. At first sight, the association of *onari-gami* —the so-called "sister-god"— with Maso and Kannon is intriguing, these three protective deities issuing from distinct religious and legendary traditions. This leads us to wonder whether their association here results from a superficial narrative borrowing or from some deeper historical links between these traditions.

Origin and development of Maso worship.

[9] The *Ryûkyû-koku yurai-ki* (1713) reports that the Shimo-Tenpi-gû was built in 1424, prior to the Kami-tenpi-gû (Hokama and Hateruma, 1997: 168-169). However, according to Li Xianzhang, quoted by Kubo, there must have been an earlier shrine that was repaired in 1433 to become the Kami-Tenpi-gû (Kubo, 1981: 245).

Like many popular cults, the beginnings of Maso (Ch. Mazu) worship remain obscure and necessarily enshrouded in layers of legends. It also gave rise, through the centuries, to a number of Chinese commentaries aiming both at clearing up the question of its origin and giving evidence for its actual efficacy on the strength of voyagers' testimonies. In that respect, it is noteworthy that most, if not all, the reports left by the Chinese envoys to Ryûkyû (*sappôshi-roku*) devote a chapter or a number of pages to discussing Maso's life, manifestations, and places of worship (see for instance, Li 1985, Wang 1997, Xu 1982, Chen 1995, Zhang 1998).[10]

Both the legendary narratives and the data concerning the early development of the cult point to the small island of Meizhou on the coast of Putian District, in Fujian Province, as Maso's birthplace. Although there is no total agreement on the matter, it has generally been accepted since the Ming Period (1368-1644) that Maso was the second daughter of a Lin family (hence her name Lin Erjie, Jap. Rin Jiso), born in 960 on the 23rd day of the 3rd month (Pimpaneau 1997: 223; Kojima 1993: 429). For historically-minded commentators the cult of Maso finds its source in the veneration of a female spirit medium who lived in the area around that time (Kubo 1981: 237-238; Taichû 2001: 204, note 16). The standard hagiography of Maso has it that she remained totally silent until one month of age. During her short existence —she supposedly died at the age of twenty-eight—, she did not marry and displayed supernatural talents that bore witness to her divine nature. In particular she is credited with the same miraculous deed as the Ryûkyûan maiden of the *onari-gami* legends: while weaving she falls asleep and, in a dream, rescue her relatives caught in a storm on the sea except one —either a brother or her father—, owing to her mother's untimely interference. It is not only the legends of Maso and *onari-gami* that are very similar, but also their subsequent manifestations, beyond lifetime, as divine protectresses of all sea voyagers. We will return to that point below. After Maso's death —or, according to some versions, after her ascent to Heaven amid a celestial cohort— her family and the neighboring people started to worship her and to look for her protection (Pimpaneau 1997: 223).

Maso rapidly became the most popular tutelary deity among fishermen and seafarers of the region.[11] During the 12th century her cult diffused along the coast, north and south of Fujian. By the mid 13th century —that is at the end of the Southern Song dynasty—, it was already implanted in Guangdong and Zhejiang Provinces, and before long reached Shandong and other provinces further north, while extending to inland populations too (Maspero 1971: 166). With the migration of Fujian merchants overseas, Maso worship also spread to

[10] The first known Chinese report is the *Shi Liuqiu lu* (Jap. *Shi Ryûkyû roku*) by Chen Kan who visited Okinawa in 1534. On its way back to Fujian, the mission suffered a terrible storm. All the men on board besought Maso to save them. Soon a crimson-colored ray of light pierced through the sky and the storm abated. The next day, a butterfly came flying round the ship, then a sparrow alighted on the mast (Chen Kan 1995: 56-57; also quoted by Tomiyama 2001: 186).

[11] Small altars dedicated to her are usually placed on the left side of boats.

Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Ryûkyû, and Nagasaki. In Ryûkyû, however, Maso would never attain the same popularity among local fishermen as in Fujian or in Taiwan.[12] In Japan, in addition to Nagasaki with its Chinese colony, and apart from Kagoshima, in contact with Chinese traders from an early date, Maso worship also reached haphazardly more distant regions such as today's Kôchi, Ibaraki, and Aomori Prefectures (Tomiyama 2001: 183; Kojima 1993: 444).

In parallel with the geographical extension of her cult, the imperial governments on several occasions gave official recognition to Maso's notorious merits, among which the safeguarding of a high-ranking official during a difficult journey to Korea, and her help in capturing pirates and defeating the Dutch in Taiwan. Thus she was granted the following honorific titles: in 1156, under the Southern Song dynasty, *Linghui furen*, "Princess of the benevolent soul", in 1281, by Emperor Qubilai (Shizu), *Huguo mingzhu Tianfei*, "Illuminating Queen of Heaven protectress of the country", later shortened as "Queen of Heaven" (*Tianfei*, *Tenpi*), and, in 1684, by the Qing Emperor Kangxi, *Tianhou* (*Tenkô*), "Empress of Heaven" (Maspero 1971: 165; Tomiyama 2001: 184; Higa 1982: 16).

Maso is generally represented with a halo of light, sitting on the waves or on the clouds, sometimes on a throne, wearing the attire of a high celestial official equal in rank with the emperors. She is often flanked by two assistants: *Senrigan*, "Eyes that see a thousand leagues away", and *Junpûji*, "Ears that follow the wind". Both personages are believed to be former monsters that she defeated on the Peach Blossom Mount thanks to her magical powers.

Maso worship and Buddhism.

Now let us consider the question of Maso's relationship to Kannon (Ch. Guanyin, Skr. Avalokiteshvara). The legends clearly establish a close bond between Maso and Kannon by insisting upon her pious devotion to the latter from childhood (Maspero 1971: 164-165). Sometimes it is said that Kannon —in some narratives Kannon of the South Seas— appeared to Maso's mother in a dream and gave her a pearl or a flower that made her pregnant with Maso after she swallowed it (Pimpaneau 1997: 223; Kojima 1993: 432).[13] She may also rescue sea voyagers on Kannon's order, as mentioned in *Tianfei niangma chuan* (1602-1611, Jap. *Tenpi-jôbo-den*, quoted by Kojima, *ibid.*). Like Maso, Kannon is often represented as emerging from the clouds, surrounded with light, to rescue fishermen. Historically the cult of

[12] Apart from the protective function of the *onari-gami* belief, expressed in state rituals or in family contexts, there are many deities or spirits, some also of Chinese origin, to which the fishermen and sea voyagers entrust their safety, such as Kannon *bosatsu*, various forms of *funa-dama* (boat-spirit), specialized *kami* of village shrines, *kaijin* (*kami* of the sea), *Ryûgû no kami* (*kami* of the Sea-Dragon Palace), etc. (Noguchi 1978; Tomiyama 2001).

[13] Kannon of the South Seas (Ch. Nanhai Guanyin) is the name given to the original representation of Kannon worshipped on Putuo Island, located in the district of Dinghai, formerly called Nanhai (Pimpaneau 1997: 209).

Kannon spread along the coast of the Fujian and Guangdong Provinces at about the same time the cult of Maso started to expand. The foundation, in the 10th century, of a monastery dedicated to Kannon on Putuo Island, in the Zhushan Archipelago (Zhejiang Province), is known to have been a decisive factor in the swift propagation of her cult among the coastal populations (Maspero 1971: 189; Tomiyama 2001: 189).[14] During this time the representations of Kannon underwent a process of feminization that transformed the not so affable Indian god Avalokiteshvara into a compassionate and motherly figure better adapted to popular needs. Such a transformation, possibly drawing on earlier Tantric figurations of Kannon, may well have been promoted by Chinese Buddhists to counter the popularity of the Taoist "Holy Mother Impress of Heaven", Tianhou Shengmu, who was likewise reputed to protect against shipwrecks or diseases and to give children to women (Pimpaneau 1997: 205).

During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), Maso began to be viewed as an incarnation of the Kannon of Putuo Island in some regions. More generally, since that period, if not earlier, she has been widely amalgamated with Kannon *bosatsu* in the popular devotion, so that the appellation *bosatsu —pusa* in Chinese—applies for her as well (Taichû 2001: 203, note 8; Higa 1982: 29).[15] In practice, Maso is often represented alongside Kannon on altars, both deities affording worshippers the same attractiveness as multipurpose protectresses and child-providers (Kubo 1981: 241-243). Although we lack concrete evidence, it is not inappropriate to wonder whether in fact Maso was not from the start an anthropomorphic adaptation of the meditative and merciful Kannon, further extricated from the learned metaphysical considerations still attached to the latter in Buddhist doctrine. Save for her outstanding and lasting fame, Maso appears to be not very different from the many feminine incarnations of Kannon whose stories emerged during the 11th-13th centuries.

In Okinawa, interestingly, one finds several variants of the *onari-gami to funa-tabi* legend in which the weaving maiden dreams that she has a thousand hands (Rk. *shinti*) to save people from drowning. Thereafter she is worshipped either as a *kami* with a thousand hands or quite explicitly as Senju Kannon, "Kannon with a thousand hands", an esoteric representation of Kannon *bosatsu* widespread in China and Japan (*Nihon mukashi banashi tsûkan, 26*: 408-409). Following Satsuma's invasion of Okinawa, the cult of Kannon propagated in the Shuri-Naha area in the early 17th century, mainly in connection with the protection of sea voyagers (*kôkai anzen*, *kôkai shugo*). Among the monasteries or oratories set up then, several were dedicated to Senju Kannon. The oldest, commonly known as Shuri Kannon-dô, was built in 1618 on King Shô Kyû's initiative, as a thanks offering for the safe return of his son, the future King Shô Boku, from Kagoshima (Tomiyama 2001: 190-191).

[14] During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Putuo Island was to become a thriving center for pilgrimage with up to seventy-two temples and some five thousands monks (Pimpaneau 1997: 211).

[15] The form *bosa* found in Nagasaki, like the Ryûkyûan *busa*, could be borrowed from Chinese rather than shortenings of *bosatsu*/*busatsu* as ordinarily stated in dictionaries.

Prior to that period, however, Kannon *bosatsu* was already revered in Okinawa as one of the three figures, together with the Buddhas Amida and Yakushi, of which Futenma-gongen, the deity of Futenma Shrine, is the emanation or *gongen* (Nakamatsu 1983; Uezu 1983; Kojima 1993: 432-433; Hokama, and Hateruma 1997: 205-207, 219-220). Brought to Okinawa in the second half of the 15th century, under circumstances that remain obscure, that deity is the local form, or metastasis, of Kumano-gongen, the deity of Kumano Shrine in Kii Province, an influential center of Shintô-Buddhist syncretism. Probably from the outset, Futenma Shrine has been a renowned place of worship for the protection of sea voyagers, connected by one of its legends of origin, as mentioned above, to both *onari-gami to funa-tabi* and Maso narratives.

Dating from about the same time, the story of Akato (*circa* 1443-1493) deserves to be mentioned in this context for it not only associates the devotion to Kannon *bosatsu* with the protection of sea voyagers, but also links it to weaving. Akato was the daughter of a Sai Jô, a member of the second generation of the Sai lineage. That family belonged to the community of Chinese immigrants who had settled in Kumemura by the end of the 14th century, and was closely involved in the relations of the Ryûkyû kingdom with China. Akato was only seventeen when her husband died. Thereafter she led a pious and chaste life, struggling to accumulate as much money as she could out of her work as a weaver, with the aim of erecting a tutelary shrine for the Sai family. This was eventually carried out in 1472 (Dana 1983). The shrine, Seitai-dô, later renamed Chûjin-dô, was dedicated to Senju-Kannon and especially meant to guard the men of the Sai family against the dangers of the sea (Kojima 1993: 450-451). We will see below that, a century later, another woman from the Sai family of Kumemura seems to echo the figure of Akato.

The cult of Maso is also intertwined with Buddhism in a more concealed way through the rituals devoted to the *kami* of the twenty-third night. That matter, which Kojima Yoshiyuki has also carefully examined, can only be summarized briefly here (Kojima 1993: 441-446, 456-459). These community and family rituals, which are usually related to the observation of the moonrise (*tsuki-machi*), are performed throughout Japan one or several times a year, most often in the first, fifth, seventh and ninth months (not the third), and take various religious meanings, depending on the kind of Buddhist influences or local beliefs involved. They mark the beginning of the fourth quarter of the lunar month, and, in that respect, probably date back to pre-Buddhist times. As noted before, the legendary biographies of Maso set her birthday on the twenty-third night of the third month. In places where she is worshipped, like Kumemura and Kagoshima, or the Tosa and Ibaragi regions of Eastern Japan, that day, or the night of that day, is commemorated with special offerings and ceremonies. A document dating from the end of the Edo period shows that in Kôzô Temple in Kita-Ibaragi City, Maso, or "Tenpi-gami" as she was designated, was venerated under the name *nijûsanya-shôtai* (True form of

the twenty-third night) as an emanation of Daiseishi *bosatsu*, one of the two assistants —the other being Avalokiteshvara/Kannon— of the Buddha Amida.

The celebration of Maso's birthday in the third month is not exclusive, however, of celebrations performed on other twenty-third days, either every month or in the first, seventh and ninth months, as well as on the occasion of the five annual Chinese festivals, as was the case in the Chinese colony of Kumemura. In the Shuri and Naha area, as well as in the southern part of Kita-Kyûshû, when Maso and Kannon are joined together in the same worship —whether Maso was explicitly considered as Kannon's embodiment or not—, it is the twenty-third day or night which is chosen for their celebration, not the eighteenth which is usually specific to the latter. In localities scattered from the Amami-Ôshima island group to Kagoshima, one finds rituals of the twenty-third night, be they performed in the first, fifth or ninth month, meant for the protection of seamen in distress, and sometimes associated with legends of the *onari-gami to funa-tabi* type. Here, although her name is not mentioned, one may suspect that the belief in Maso has pervaded the celebration of the twenty-third night, but this probably did not happen before the 16th century.

The indigenous character of the *onari-gami* belief called into question.

Now, if we list the main miraculous deeds and manifestations attributed to Maso/Tenpi/Tenkô during her lifetime and subsequently, it appears that those of *onari-gami*, as regards sea voyages, seem to have been directly patterned on them.

During her lifetime, Maso rescues her brothers and/or her father in peril at sea. She acts in a dream, and most often she is weaving while she falls asleep. When only her brothers go to sea, their number varies from two to four. It is either the eldest or the youngest brother whom she fails to rescue. In some variants, it is the maiden's father who goes to sea with a son (Maso's brother): he or his son cannot escape drowning. The maiden is using either her mouth or her arms, or her mouth and her arms together, to pick up her relatives from the raging sea. When her brothers sail separately, she picks up the ships themselves (Pimpaneau 1997: 223; Xu 1982: 38; Wang 1997: 133; Kojima 1993: 431; Maspero 1971: 165; Taichû 2001: 202).

Beyond her earthly existence, Maso keeps manifesting herself to endangered sea voyagers in various shapes: most frequently as a butterfly or a dragonfly fluttering around the ship, or as some white bird, sparrow, or swallow that alights on the prow, but also as a big fish, a flying-fish (*tobi-sakana*), or a shark, that seizes a rope from the ship and pulls it (these details are found in the *sappôshi-roku*, see Higa 1982: 17-20). She may also come down along the mast, beautifully dressed with a red or blue gown, appear as a ray of light illuminating the ship or its sail, or approach the wrecked ship on a boat.

Confronted with so striking an identity between the motifs of Maso and *onari-gami* narratives, most scholars are content to bring forward the possibility of a syncretism (*shûgô*), of a combination (*gattai*) between Ryûkyûan and Chinese beliefs, or of a reinforcement

(*kyôka*) of the former by the latter (see, for instance, Hokama 1998: 205, and Kojima 1993: 470).[16] As Maeda Giken puts it, Maso tends to be looked upon as a "Chinese *onari-gami*" (Maeda 1976: 42). It may further be advanced that the manifestations attributed both to Maso and to *onari-gami* largely derive, in fact, from natural phenomena experienced by all seamen, such as the arrival of birds or of butterflies announcing a nearby land, or strange illuminations accompanying a storm. In other words, there is a shared reluctance, though interrogatively formulated sometimes, to consider that the *Omoro* songs in particular, and the popular beliefs and customs of Ryûkyû more generally, could have been so thoroughly permeated with motifs pertaining to the belief in Maso. This may be all the more understandable that the adoption of the cult of Maso proper remained very limited in Ryûkyû. Only Higa Minoru seems willing to cast doubts on the indigenous character of the *onari-gami* belief, and consequently advocates reconsidering its originality and uniqueness (Higa 1982: 31).

The possibility of an extensive diffusion to 11th-15th century preliterate Ryûkyû of narrative elements relating to Maso is indeed most plausible. As amply shown by archeological findings, contacts between the Ryûkyû Islands and China occurred for many centuries prior to the admission of the three Ryûkyûan principalities as tributaries of the imperial court, which took place by the late 14th century. Moreover, Quanzhou, the first official gateway to China — before Fuzhou— for the Ryûkyûan tribute missions, is located in the vicinity of Meizhou Island, the center of devotion to Maso. There, the recently formed Ryûkyû Kingdom was authorized to keep a permanent trading-depot (*Ryûkyû-kan*) from 1439 to 1471.

Nevertheless it remains difficult to think of the "weaving sister" motif as an outright Chinese cultural import, given the comprehensive significance assumed in all layers of the Ryûkyûan society by the intimately related belief in the sister's spiritual predominance.[17] Unlike in China, the protective power attributed to the divine sister of Ryûkyûan legends, which extended beyond her relatives to all those who turned to her, was consonant with the functions performed by women, especially as sisters, in the actual society. At the domestic level, apart from the protection she was expected to exert for her brothers, especially through the gift of woven cloth, the sister —usually the eldest— remained in charge of the rituals for the ancestors in her native household even after she had joined another household by marriage. At the ward or village level, it was often the sister of the head of a particular household who was conducting the rituals and acted as an intermediary between the gods and the community. The same principle applied at the state level with the leading role assigned to the king's sister as both main officiant of the royal rituals and head of the religious

[16] In his presentation of one of the aetiological legends of Futenma Shrine, Iha Fuyû is making no mention of a possible Chinese origin, nor simply of a similarity with Chinese legends (Iha 1972: 382).

[17] However, as indicated by Mabuchi Tôichi, the spiritual predominance of a sister over her brothers, or of a father's sister over her nephews, of a daughter over her father, is not a feature unique to Ryûkyû, but is also found among Oceanian populations, and perhaps in ancient Japan (Mabuchi 1974: 152-153). It could possibly have existed in ancient China too, as admitted by Hokama Shuzen (1998: 188).

administration. Even when no real sister was involved, the notion of a symbolic sister-brother pair was central to Ryûkyûan mythological and religious representations.

In addition to these general observations, it is not irrelevant here to mention the story, verging more on legend, of Sai *fujin* (*circa* 1573-1619), the "wife" of Sai Kinjô, a member of the Sai family of Kumemura like Akato (Kojima 1993: 447-449). Sai *fujin*, known by the personal name of Kôtei, was contributing as a weaver to the tribute owed to the Chinese court. So magnificent was her silk fabric that she was summoned to the imperial capital. She proceeded to China, but unfortunately fell ill and died during the land journey. Her remains were brought back to the district of Changyue in Fujian Province, and taken care of by members of the Sai family living there. Upon hearing the news of her death, the emperor ordered the erection of a mausoleum on her grave. According to another version of her story, not long after she had arrived to Changyue from Ryûkyû, and following a visit to the Sai ancestral mausoleum, she underwent a sudden petrifaction while she was sitting in a rocky alcove on the seashore. In both cases she soon became an object of worship locally, and was credited with powers, reminiscent of Maso's, to help people in peril at sea. Judging from the report of the Chinese envoy Zhang Xueli, dispatched to Okinawa in 1663, which ascribes Maso/Tenpi to the Sai family, and not to the Li family, the identification of Sai *fujin* with Maso appears to have been more than superficial. Some fifty years later, yet, another Chinese envoy, Xu Baoguang, would deem it necessary to correct his predecessor's mistake in his own report (Zhang 1998: 34; Xu 1982: 38).

A commonly held opinion has it that Akato and Sai *fujin* were actually the same individual. The puzzling fact, noticed by Li Xianzhang, that Kôtei is likely to be the Sino-Japanese reading of Akato (or Akatooru) could even come in support of that opinion (Kojima 1993: 451).[18] Chronologically, however, if one is to trust genealogical records compiled no earlier than the end of the 17th century, this appears quite impossible, owing to the eighty-year gap between the former's death and the latter's birth (Dana 1983). In any case, with no sound historical evidence to substantiate their stories, it must be admitted that the existence of both figures remains extremely vague. What nonetheless matters from our viewpoint is that the legendary narratives surrounding them would give some reasons for thinking that a prototypic Maso-like figure could have also emerged in Ryûkyû, combining the native belief in the feminine protective power, the symbolism attached to weaving, and the influence of the devotion to Kannon. More restrictively, the absence of the weaving activity, so fundamental to Ryûkyûan culture as shown in the stories of Akato and Sai *fujin*, from the earliest Chinese account of Maso's legend, leaves room for speculation about a possible Ryûkyûan origin of

[18] Li Xianzhang's careful research on the formation and diffusion of Maso worship, published in 1979 under the title *Maso shinkô no kenkyû*, is used as a reference work for Chinese sources by Kojima Yoshiyuki, Higa Minoru, and Kubo Noritada.

that motif which would have secondarily been incorporated into Maso's narratives.[19] But, of course, it cannot be denied that sericulture and weaving are deeply rooted in China's past as well.

As an attempt to conclude, it may be suggested that the borrowing of the motifs pertaining to the *onari-gami to funa-tabi* narratives from those of Maso's, to which our legend of Busa belongs, is a very likely hypothesis. So complete is the resemblance between these groups of narratives that it seems implausible that they would have developed in parallel on both sides of the China Sea. Nor is it conceivable that the belief in Maso would not have been linked to them from the start. Yet, the preexisting *onari-gami* belief and customs, while not to be considered as unique to Ryûkyû, have no doubt provided a breeding ground for a thorough appropriation of the legendary motifs initially attached to Maso.

[19] According to Li Xianzhang, quoted by Kojima Yoshiyuki, the earliest Chinese source on Maso worship is the fourth volume, entitled *Tianfei niangniang* (Jap. *Tenpi jôjô*), of *Sanjiao yuanliusou daquan* (Jap. *Sankyô genryûsô taizen*), a work compiled around 1602 (Kojima 1993: 430, 453-455, 461; Higa 1982: 34). The weaving motif is also lacking from Taichû's *Ryûkyû shintô-ki*, which dates from the same years.

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