

# The History of Shuri Castle And Related Historical Sites



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## Introduction

Okinawa, a land rich in history. Located nearby to Japan, China and Korea it has throughout history found itself caught between the ambitions of nations. For a period of 200 years, the ancient Okinawan kingdom (Ryukyu) was subjected to a form of “dual subordination” during which the country it enjoyed such a profitable trade relationship, China, turned a blind eye to the obvious and forbidden trade with Japan. This time period ended with the Ryukyuan king being merely a figurehead of the dominant Japanese state. The influences of these events on Okinawa’s own culture cannot be overlooked, particularly in Ryukyuan capital. This unique blending of Chinese and Japanese influences undoubtedly created an atmosphere that influenced, but certainly did not dictate, Ryukyuan culture. In the histories and architecture of Shuri Castle and its surrounding precincts are areas within Okinawa’s history where the combined influence of China, Japan and the Ryukyu’s own unique culture can be seen.

## Shuri Castle

Because of its tremendous culture and historical value in 2000 Shuri Castle was listed as one of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites. As such it was recognized as having outstanding universal value to

humanity. Shuri Castle was marked for protection for future generations to appreciate and enjoy.

But where did its story begin? There are two theories regarding the development of Shuri as the base from which powerful feudal lords, Aji, and eventually kings would grow the capital of what would become the Ryukyu kingdom. There is the "Satto" theory and the "Sho Hashi" theory. One hypothesis holds that Satto, king of Chuzan at the time of three kingdoms<sup>1</sup>, built Shuri Castle as his palace. According to the other theory, Urasoe castle<sup>2</sup> was the base of Chuzan through the reigns of Satto and his son and successor, Bunei. Then Sho Hashi, the founder of the first Sho dynasty, established himself at Shuri Castle. Which account is correct is not yet clear (Shuri Castle, Castle Origins).

Relations with a foreign country, in this case China, are already having an effect on Shuri castle. The Chinese relationship weighs heavily in both theories. The "Satto" theory places a great deal of emphasis on the "thirty-six families" of learned men from China. These families were comprised of craftsmen and clerks who were intended to bring the better arts of shipbuilding and Chinese administration to Okinawa. The thirty-six families had substantial roles in the tribute trade with China and had settled between Naha Port and Tomari Port. The presence of the learned men along with King Satto building the

Gokoku<sup>3</sup> and Banju Temple, coupled with his son having built the Tenshikan<sup>4</sup> in Naha during his reign to host the Chinese Sappo<sup>5</sup> envoys is why many believe by the time of Satto's reign the king had moved from Urasoe Castle to Shuri.

Within Okinawan history it is documented that Sho Hashi unified the three kingdoms, and started the first Sho dynasty. The theory states that he also did this from Shuri Castle and, shortly thereafter, the main trading port with China was moved to Naha Port from Tomari. Immediately after disposing of Satto's son Bunei, Sho Hashi sent the proper notification required by the complex tributary relationship with China and announced his father as King and restructured the administration based on Chinese patterns (Kerr, 84). During his reign King Sho Hashi continued sending students to China to be educated in the Chinese history, poetry and ethics. This educational arrangement further brought into the court and trades the influence of Chinese. Trade relations with China became increasingly important during this time. Not only did Sho Hashi recognize the vital trade relationship the tributary was and strive to maintain and grown it, but he is also given credit for building up the castle in a splendid fashion and putting up more walls and many new buildings.

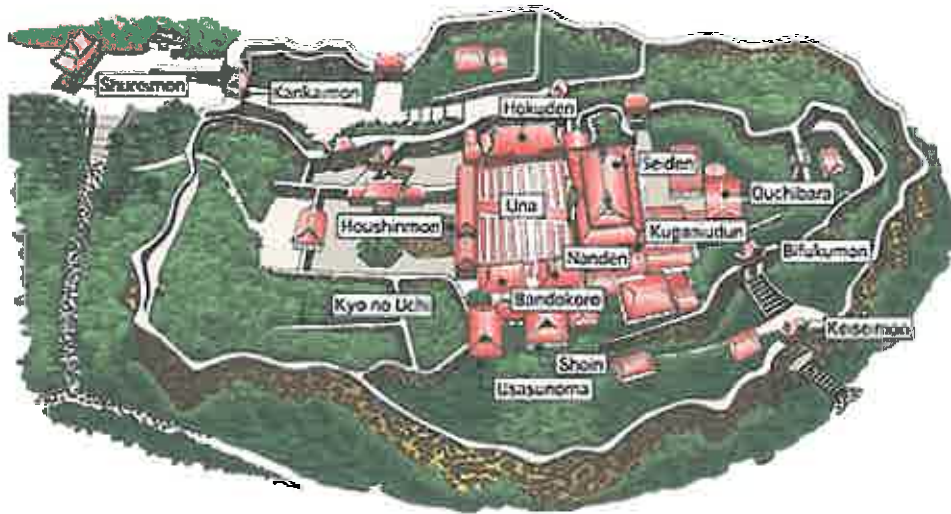
Having emerged somewhere in the fourteenth century, either by Satto or Sho Hashi, Shuri Castle has quite a story. Including its present reconstruction, there have been five Shuri Castles:

- Founding to 1453 Destroyed by fire after succession struggle
- Reconstruction (date unknown) to 1660 Accidental fire
- 1671 to 1709 Accidental fire
- 1712-15 to 1945 Bombs and shells
- 1992 reconstruction to present

Up until the American bombardment in 1945 the damage had been limited to Seiden, the main building, and a few other buildings on the castle grounds. The King and other offices were able to be moved to areas around the castle for a number of years until reconstruction was finished. The devastation in 1945 however was complete; the whole of Shuri castle had been reduced to rubble and ash.

Prior to the castle's destruction in 1945, its grounds evolved and changed, growing with the times. This evolution is clearly evident in the architectural changes along the castle grounds. The most obvious signs of growth are the once outer gates and walls have become the inner gates and wall. The Zuisenmon, Rokokumon, Koufukmon and Bifukumon are four gates from an earlier time and design. All are

## Overview of the Shuri Castle Grounds



(Shuri Castle)

wooden rather than stone. The Bifukumon is set directly in the inner wall. This gate held a special place of significance. As the successor passed through the outer gate he would always come through this



gate to receive his crown, climbing up steep stone steps, walking through a wooden gate topped with a wooden turret, all under the watchful eyes of two stone shisa (lion dog figures). Rokokumon, also called, Kagoise Ujo, is a hip-gable thatched roof and wood tiled. Officials who rode a palanquin<sup>6</sup> would customarily dismount here. Koufukumon, is east of Rokokumon, and topped with a one-story wooden house. This area

served a dual purpose of providing a place from which to overlook the palace grounds and also an office space. The east side was used for resolving disputes among aristocrats and the west was an administration building for shrines and Buddhist temples.



Shuri castle's original castle gate was mostly likely Zuizenmon. Believed to have been built around 1470. Unlike later structures, Zuizenmon's design is simple; ten stone steps lead up to a wooden gate, framed by Shisa. What would be impossible to miss is Ryushi, or dragon tub. Ryushi is a spring that wells up to the right of Zuizenmon. The water flowed from the mouth of a carved



Ryushi (Shurijo)

dragon. The Chinese envoys, Sapposhi, thought very highly of the spring's water and required it to be shipped daily to the lodgings near Naha Port. Near the spring were The Seven Investiture Tablets of Sapposhi. These were destroyed in the Battle of Okinawa but have been restored using rubs.

The Seven Investiture tablets:

- Chuzan Daiichi (number one): This is the finest spring in Ryukyu
- *Unkon Sekizui*: A mountain wizard's water, flowing over stones from high in the hills.

- *Yokoku Reigen*: Miracle-working water from east of the rising sun.
- *Kappatsu Hatchi*: A mighty gushing spring, as lively as jumping fish.
- *Gen'en Ryucho*: The source of the spring is far and its flow is eternal.
- *Hisen Sogyoku*: A spring whose water leaps and scatters like gems.
- *Reimyaku Ryufin*: A marvelous vein of water with enchanting fragrance. (Shuri Castle, The Castle Story)

In addition to the castle's original gates there are Kankaimon and Kyukeimon. These two gates are special in that they are used by



Kyukeimon (Shurijo)

one gender or another, both were built into a wall build around the original castle wall.

This created two walls around the castle, one inner and one outer. Kankaimon is the

castle's main gate. Built around 1477-1526

it was designed by King Sho-Shin who brought in workers from foreign

lands, most likely China, to build it during a

large expansion project on the castle. The

King, along with diplomats and palace

officials used this gate; during this time

period this would have been all men. The

opposite of the Kankaimon was Kyukeimon. Kyukeimon is the gate

intended for women to use while entering and leaving the castle.



Kankaimon (Shurijo)





Seiden (Wikipedia)

As well as the castle's original gates there are the main buildings of the Seiden, Hokuden, Nanden and Bandokoro. Seiden is easily recognized, as it is the symbol most often seized when one is looking for a way to symbolize Okinawa. Seiden has two other names, Kokuden, the hall of the nation and Momourasoe. Its design encapsulates the influences of Japan, China and Ryukyu itself.

It is said to have been built on the model of the Daiwaden in Beijing's Forbidden City. But it also incorporates Zen Buddhist design details of Japanese buildings. The Seiden's natural surroundings and the taste of its designers are ingeniously expressed in its plan of construction, giving it an altogether distinctive Ryukyuan atmosphere. It is a two-level, three-story structure (two levels seen from outside; three stories inside) and its decorative dragon pillars are features not found in either China or Japan; they are distinctively Ryukyuan forms. [\*The Seiden's two-level construction is similar to the Daiwaden and the Kwanghwamun and Kunjongjon in Seoul, Korea. This feature conforms most strictly to the form of Chinese palaces.] (Shuri Castle, The Castle Story)

Public and private life were separated in Seiden, with men using the west side of Seiden to deal with the workings of the outer world or public life, while the east side was devoted to the inner world and private life. Whether on the east side or the west side of Seiden the

decoration was a splendid blend of Ryukyuan, Chinese and Japanese influences. Unseen in Japan or China are the dragon pillars standing on the foot of Seiden's steps facing one another. Carved out of stone during the reign of King Sho Shin, these unique carvings have been replaced each time Seiden was

destroyed. The throne rooms are fashioned so as to be the main focus of Seiden. Unique in that there are two located in the same building, the second floor throne is designed



Throne (Shurijo)

for the king, whereas the first floor seats not only the king, but just below him the crown prince and several grandsons. Bargeboard is the heavy boarding attached to the gable of the roof over the center of the arch. Shuri Castle's bargeboard is bent or warped upward in the center and downward on the right and left to bend out gently in a curve. This style of bargeboard is very Japanese unlike many of other Chinese influences around the castle. The entire castle is covered with intricate woodcarvings and painted with a rich lacquer until the entire palace glows with golden dragons and clouds of five different colors. The beautiful workings of stone, wood and lacquer visually come together to convey that was the main stage for the king. Hokuden, Nanden and Bandokoro are vital buildings located next to Seiden at

the head grand plaza. The Una, forecourt, is framed on all four sides and is a reflection of the influence of a Chinese court on the Ryukyuan court. It is the area in which complex ceremonies, fashioned very much after those of the Forbidden City,<sup>7</sup> were carried out. The nature of the building of Una, in a Chinese fashion, is the result of generations of tributary relations with China, whereas Naden is not. Naden is a direct result of Satsuma invading Okinawa in 1609. Some time after the King was allow to return from Japan after swearing subjugation this building was erected in the Japanese fashion. Satsuma officials were housed in here for some time and the area was also used for receptions and banquets. Adjoining Naden, is the all purpose reception area, Bandokoro. It's a one-story building, stucco walls and wooden roof tiles. The interior is designed in a Japanese fashion like Naden. On the opposite side of Una is Hokuden, and appropriately enough, one of the primary uses was a guest palace for the Sappos. The Chinese dignitaries were often entertained with sake, tea and traditional dance at Shuri's guest palace.



To enter Seiden, Hokuden, Naden or Bandokoro a visitor would have passed through Houshinmon. A three-gate complex, modeled

after the Chinese. It is hip gabled and known to have been intact by 1562. The king and Sappos only used the central area. Naden, the north side of the gate, was an office that handled receipts and disbursements for drugs, tea and tobacco. The south side of the gate, Kimihokori, was only used for ceremonies and special occasions. Together these three made an entrance into the Una forecourt.

Near the central structures, located behind Seiden is the Ouchibara. Literally called private field, this is the private area for the king and his family. The customs here are the same as Seiden in regards to the division of public and private life. The west side was for the outer world, or public life. The east side was for inner world or private life. For both the Ouchibara and Seiden only a select few males were allowed within private areas.

Any man or boy who violated this custom, plus the gatekeeper found responsible for their slipping in, was exiled for one generation. In Ryukyuan culture



Shureimon (Wikipedia)

men ran the outside world and, women controlled the inside world. Of these women the head was the queen followed by ladies-in-waiting. Together they held together the ancient customs and practices vital to the private world.

Located near Shuri castle are several structures important to the history of Shuri. Shureimon, is highly renowned. With the Seiden it is

the most recognizable symbol of Okinawa. It appears with some controversy on the 2,000 Yen note. The motto inscribed above the horizontal picture frame reads "Shurei no Kuni", land of propriety. Originally given as a gift in 1579 from the Chinese Emperor to recognize to which distinction and consistency the Okinawans cultivated the Chinese arts and maintained formal relations with China. Shureimon was designated as a national treasure in 1933, destroyed in the Battle of Okinawa and rebuilt in 1958. Where Shureimon was known as the upper gate, located further down Shuri former main street, Ayajo Ufumichi, was Chuzanmon or lower gate. Chuzanmon was designed in a similar fashion as Shureimon. In 1908, it was pulled down and sold off at an auction.

Tamadun Royal Mausoleum and Royal House and Gardens were both for use by the royal family. Tamadun was used exclusively for the burial of members of the Royal family. It was built in 1501 by the kings of the second Sho Dynasty. It was built directly into the natural surrounding rock with a stone exterior build around. Divided into three chambers the central chamber was the temporary resting place of a coffin prior to final burial. After a number of years, the bones were washed and placed into special vessels. The remains of a king or queen were then enshrined in the western chamber; all other family members were placed in the eastern chamber. The family crest,

peonies, and other intricate designs were carved on the roof. Two large *Shisa* (lion-dog) statues sit above the mausoleum to the left and right as tomb guardians.

Royal House and Gardens is located less than a mile from Shuri castle and was the second residence of the royal family. It was designed for the relaxation of the royal family and the entertainment of investiture envoys. There are beautiful gardens surrounding an artificial lake. Along the go around style garden there is a stone bridge and monument. During times when the main hall, Seiden, was being rebuilt the Royal Villa and Gardens also served as the main seat of the nation.

### Religion and Shuri Castle

Division of public and private life was very important to Okinawans, not only was it important, its divides ran along gender, political and religious lines. Whereas, men governed the public world, women governed the private world. This is an echo of the native ancient religion of Okinawa, headed by women and still practiced in small numbers in this century. Okinawan women were believed to be living deities. They could protect the opening energies of males, Ekeri, using, Seji, a spiritual power to protect. For this reason usually the king's sister or sometimes his wife was always appointed as Kikoe

Okimi, the head priestess protecting him from Ekeri, with the conserving energy of females, Onari. The ability to draw on Seji is superior in women and shows itself particularly in the brother/sister relationship. By Kikoe Okimi, providing the balance with Onari she was protecting the King and increasing prosperity. This was the most important religious position in the kingdom and her power was the level of the king. The office of Kikoe Okimi was run from Shuri Castle until finally being eroded under Satsuma. Along with Kikoe Okimi, in each village was a local priestess, or Noro.

Just south of Shuri Castle proper lies a sacred precinct call Kyo no Uchi. Its existence on the grounds holds well for the proponents of the "sacred precinct theory" of gusukus. According to this theory, not only does a fortress or castle's structure, gusuku, have to be surrounded by a wall, but first there had to be a holy place there, an open area that served a function as a go-between for the people and their gods. The evidence bodes well for them, as Shuri gusukyu was not the first fortress in this location. Located on the southwest area of the inner courtyard, near the site of the Kyo no Uchi shrine an ancient castle stood. This area of the inner courtyard has been very important in the kingdom's religious ceremonies since ancient times.

Kyo no Uchi is derived from a word that means spiritual or supernatural power. This was the holiest place on the castle grounds.

Of the ten Utaki, sacred groves, located at Shuri, five or so were believed to be located at Kyo no Uchi.

The kingdom's most important place of worship was Siumui Utaki. It is a stone gate located at the front of Shicha nu Una, the lower courtyard, Shicha nu Una, was a men's only area with the exception of this holy place. Siumui Utaki in front of Kyo no Ucki, is believed to be one of the 10 Ibe of the castle. An Ibe is the holiest place within an Utaki. The history of Siumui Utaki is extremely ancient and is mentioned often in the ancient Okinawan poem and songbook Omorosoushi.

Kyo no Uchi and Siumui Utaki cannot be mentioned without also referring to Sefa Utaki. Although not located at the premises of Shuri Castle, this is another historical site of traditional Okinawan religion of extreme importance. Sefa Utaki is the most sacred site in the Ryukyus, and interestingly enough, has a role to play in the history of Seiden.

Sefa Utaki is a sacred grove, the most sacred grove. The first grove created by the creator goddess, Amamkikyo, and the male god Shenerikikyo at the command of the sun god. Amamkikyo and Shenerikikyo were commanded to build all the islands that made up the Ryukyus beginning with the sacred groves. It was forbidden for



males to enter the Utaki. Ufugui is one of the first areas encountered at the Utaki. It can be found along a cobblestoned path in the a inner courtyard. Here Kikoe Okimi offered up her first prayers after being appointed the kingdom's high priestess. On the day of the ceremony a booth was set up in the stone courtyard and the priestess entered with a pillow in order to retire with the gods for a while. Ufugui is also the



Sangui (Shurijo)

name of the area within the Sedien Hall on the second floor, where functions of the royal court were performed. Further along past Ufugui, is Yuinchi, a place of prayer at Sefa Utaki. Yuinchi also means kitchen, there is no indication that this area has been used as a kitchen in the past. However, at Shuri castle Yuinchi is the name of the area in which the royal family's food was prepared.

Just past Yuinchi are two stalactites that collected the sacred water from heaven. The High priestess used the water collected from these in a ceremony called Unbinadi and the amount collected in the jar was supposed to indicate the year's harvest. Past a platformed area is an inverted "V" shaped stone passageway made through the rock. This leads to Sangui, a place to offer prayers. From the right-hand side of Sangui, prayers can be sent

to heaven through the stonewall, and from the left side there is a place to send prayers and view Kudaka Island<sup>8</sup>. At the time Shuri Castle was the capital of the Ryukyuan kingdom Sefa Utaki was tremendously important. It inspired the names of several Seiden's living quarters. Sefa Utaki was the most sacred grove in native Okinawan religion and as such it had a role to play not only the religious beliefs of the Ryukyuan, but also in the government with the position of the high priestess.

As a small island nation located between the two powerhouses of China and Japan, the Ryukyuan kingdom, had little choice but to pay tribute. Always the tribute took the political form and often it was through taxes. The Shuri government, however, embraced certain aspects of foreign culture, especially Chinese culture. In time, this created a unique blending of the Ryukyu's own nature focused culture with its priestesses, sacred precincts combined with the Chinese. The blending was reflected in the government, design and structures of Shuri Castle.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the north was the Hokuzan Kingdom, in the south was the Nanzan kingdom and in the center was the Chuzan kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> This castle was constructed in the 13th century to be the residence for the kings of the central Chuzan Kingdom. The castle was destroyed by Sho Hashi in the beginning of the 15th century when he took over the kingdom and the capital was moved to Shuri.

<sup>3</sup> The oldest temple next to the Naminoue Shrine northwest of Naha City was built in 1368 during the times of King Satto for the propagation of Shingonshu worship

<sup>4</sup> Living quarters for envoys and missions from China

<sup>5</sup> The duties of the Sapposhi were to perform the ritual ceremony to deify the former king and continue with the Sappo ceremony to enthrone the new King of the Ryukyus. The party consisted of a Chief and his deputy-envoy, along with several hundred people, and it is said that they usually stayed for about half a year. There were literary men, technical experts and calligraphers in the party,

<sup>6</sup> A conveyance usually for one person that consists of an enclosed litter carried on the shoulders of men by means of poles.

<sup>7</sup> Imperial China's capital during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911)

<sup>8</sup> The "island of the gods" and the land where the five grains originated. When Amamikiyo, the creator of the Ryukyus, descended from heaven, Kudaka was the first island she made.