

THE POSITION OF THE RYUKYU JOMON CULTURE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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ABSTRACT

From c.5000 BC to AD 900, the Ryukyu Jomon culture flourished in the northern Ryukyu Islands. During this period, cultural relationships between this region and mainland Japan were intermittent and limited. The Ryukyu Jomon culture also had some cultural similarities with certain assemblages in Southeast Asia and Oceania. In terms of pottery, the Ryukyu Jomon possessed nine successive indigenous styles whose transitional processes were continuous. Furthermore, in the northern Ryukyus the durations of the different pottery styles were relatively short. The main subsistence economy of this culture was based on foraging for wild plants and animals, an economy well adapted to coral reef islands in the subtropics. However, swidden horticulture might also have been practiced. Cultural differences like those that existed during the historic period between the Ryukyus and mainland Japan (Yamato) might have extended back to the time of the Ryukyu Jomon culture.

The Ryukyu Islands include Tokara, Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. Archaeological, historical, ethnographic and linguistic data indicate that this chain of islands can be divided into two cultural regions. The Ryukyu Jomon culture flourished in northern Ryukyu, which includes Tokara, Amami and Okinawa. From c.4000 years ago, different prehistoric cultures emerged and developed in southern Ryukyu, which includes Miyako and Yaeyama (Asato 1990). Many recent studies have shown that cultural relationships between the northern Ryukyu Jomon and the prehistoric cultures of southern Ryukyu were weak or non-existent.

The Ryukyu Jomon flourished in the northern Ryukyus from c.5000 BC to AD 900. This time period runs parallel to the duration of much of the Jomon culture of mainland Japan, but extends also into the early historical period. However, cultural contacts between northern Ryukyu and the mainland

were not continuous. I have demonstrated (Ito 2000) that the Ryukyu Jomon, in terms of pottery chronology, contained nine successive and continuous pottery styles indigenous to the region (Figure 1). The durations of these different pottery styles were relatively short, and mainland influences on them were generally weak and limited.

The Ryukyu Jomon is characterized by other cultural elements unique to this region. For example, although the residential architecture of the Ryukyu Jomon culture is mainly of the pit dwelling type so common in mainland Japan and northern Eurasia, the Ryukyu Jomon pit dwellings contained coral limestone slabs for wall supports (Figure 2), a usage completely absent in the mainland Jomon. Ryukyu was also at the southern limit for pit-dwellings. In addition, the artefacts of the Ryukyu Jomon are different from those of the mainland Jomon, and include items such as shell spoons, shell fishhooks and shell operculum tools that resemble artefacts from Southeast Asia and Oceania. The Ryukyu Jomon, however, has yielded only a small number of fishhooks, and most fish bones recovered are of parrotfish (*Scaridae*) which can be easily caught in inshore areas of coral reefs without using hooks (Iha 1987). Perhaps this kind of fishing strategy is similar to that reconstructed for the Lapita cultural complex in the western Pacific (Kirch 1997:199).

Interestingly, during the early decades of Lapita studies, scholars debated whether the Lapita peoples had "strand-looper" or "horticulturalist" economies (Groube 1971, Green 1979). We have the same question over the Ryukyu Jomon culture. Most sites are shell middens, although shellfish are not usually very abundant and are dispersed in distribution. They are on quite a small scale compared with the shell middens of the Japanese mainland Jomon. Many such small scale shell middens, dated to c.3500 to 2000 BP, are located in relatively high situations more than 50 m above present sea level on terraces or slopes. Many of them lack fishing or hunting artefacts, but often have abundant inedible landsnails, such as *Cyclophorus turgidus*, that inhabit

relatively open habitats such as second growth forests (Ikehara *et al.* 1977). This could perhaps suggest the presence of cleared land and swidden horticulture for the cultivation of root crops. However, the main subsistence economy in the Ryukyu Jomon was based on foraging (Takamiya 1997).

The antecedent culture to the Ryukyu Jomon was associated with the Pleistocene human remains from Minatogawa (Suzuki and Hanihara 1982), and an aceramic stone tool industry found in several sites in the Amami islands. Many of these stone implements are amorphous flake tools, but among them are found a few *pieces esquillées* and notched scrapers. Estimated dates range from *c.*20,000 years ago to the early Holocene. According to Kato Shimpei (1996), these stone industries are different from those of mainland Japan. He suggests that the stone industry of the northern Ryukyus has some similarities with both the Changpinian culture of Taiwan (Sung 1969) and the stone tool industry of Lang Rongrien cave in southern Thailand (Anderson 1990). In other words, there is a possibility that the first settlers of Ryukyu came across the northern part of the South China Sea.

The oldest pottery styles of the Ryukyu Jomon contain both finger and fingernail-like impressions (Figure 3) as well as plain pottery, and date to *c.*7000 to 6000 BP (Kishimoto 1984). Previous studies have pointed out that this pottery resembles similarly decorated pottery dating to *c.*10,000 BP in mainland Japan (e.g., Takamiya 1990). However, there is a considerable time gap of *c.*3000 years between them, and by the time this form was being manufactured in Ryukyu it was already long out of fashion in southern Kyushu.

Looking towards the fringes of the South China Sea, the oldest pottery sites in Guangxi, southern China, date from *c.*10,000 to 7000 BP (IACASS Archaeological Team of Guangxi *et al.* 1998). This Chinese pottery has cord marking produced by a cord-bound paddle and anvil technique, and some sherds have finger impressions as well (IACASS Archaeological Team of Guangxi *et al.* 1997: Figure 8; Guangxi Archaeological Team *et al.* 1982: Figure 6-2). The oldest pottery-using culture of northern Vietnam is the Da But culture, with an estimated date of *c.*6000 BP (Nguyen and Nguyen 1990; Bui 1996). Da But pottery also has rough cord marks produced by paddle and anvil (Figure 3).

The pottery making techniques in these southern regions are different from those of the Ryukyu Jomon, but the vessel forms, characterised by rounded bases, and the forms of surface decoration, are very similar. Taiwan, Fujian and Guangdong are also located between Ryukyu and Guangxi, although no pottery styles similar to the early styles of the Ryukyu Jomon are yet reported. The oldest pottery in Taiwan, Fujian and Guangdong is dated so far to about 6000 BP. More research on it is perhaps needed if we are to

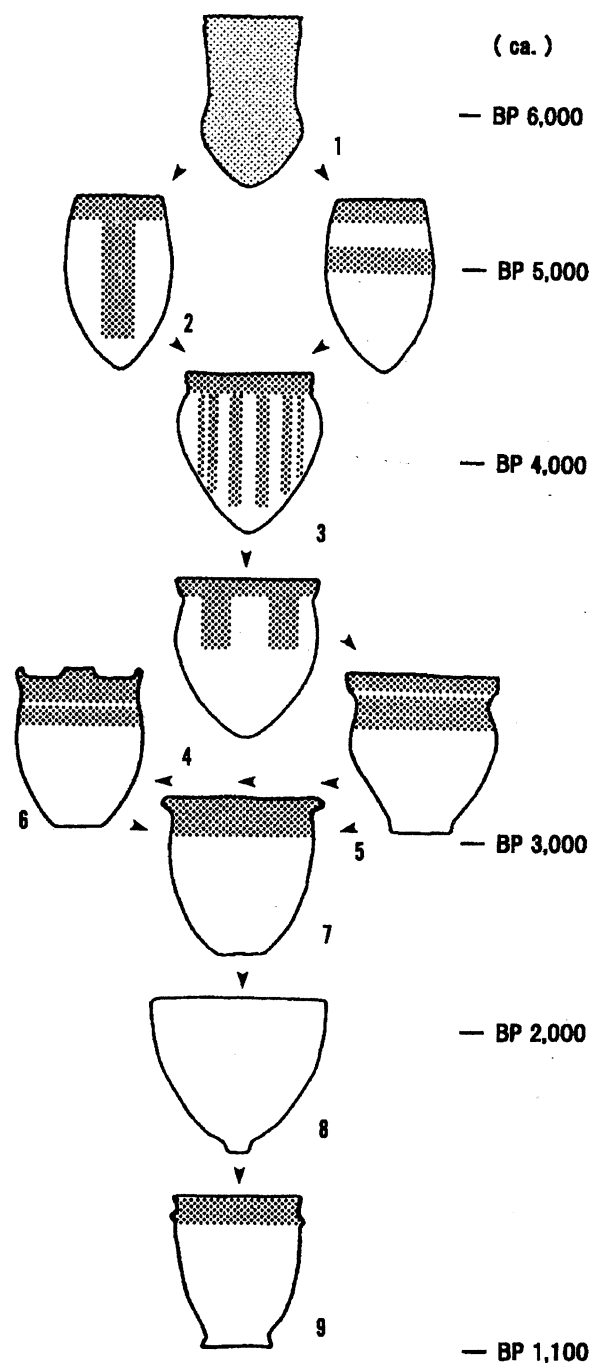


Figure 1. Successive pottery styles in the northern Ryukyu Islands. 1: finger- and fingernail-like impression; 2: grooved; 3: linear-relief; 4: multi-linear incised; 5: woven bamboo pattern; 6: dotted and incised lines; 7: thickened rim style; 8: plain and pointed base style; 9: waisted flat-based style. Ornamented zones are shaded.

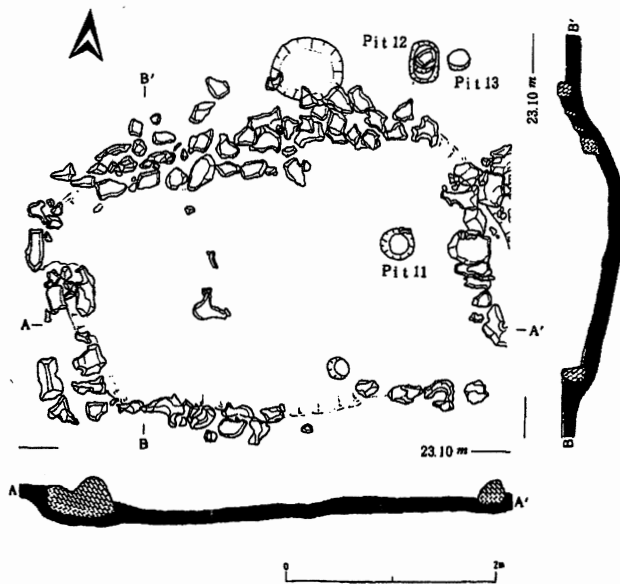


Figure 2. A pit dwelling of the Ryukyu Jomon culture at the Nakabaru site (after Toma and Uehara 1981).

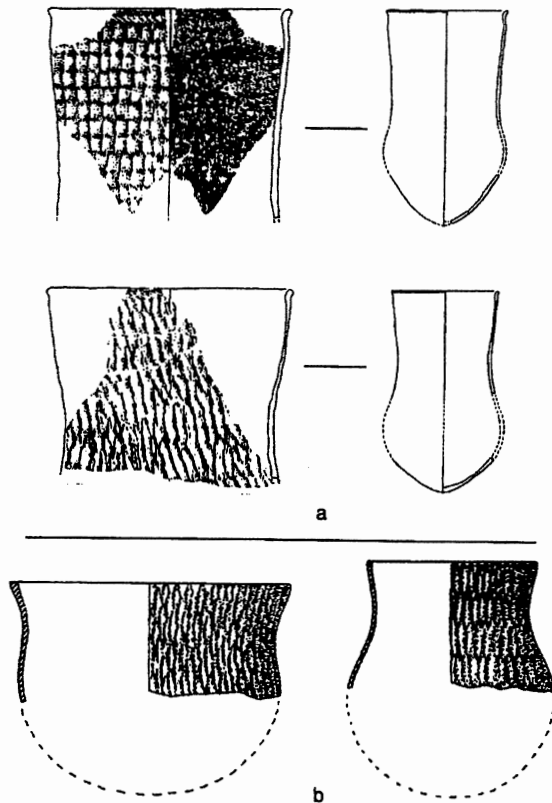


Figure 3. a: finger- and nail-like impressed pottery from Ryukyu (after Kishimoto 1984); b: pottery of the Vietnamese Da But culture (after Nguyen and Nguyen 1990).

understand possible influences from across the South China Sea on Ryukyu Jomon pottery.

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