

Praying for Okinawan war dead

As part of his continuing effort to assuage the souls of the victims of war and to pray for world peace, the Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the founder of the Agon Shu Buddhist Association, on Nov. 8 held a ceremony in Okinawa to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the battle between Japanese and Allied forces.

The 30th Agon Shu prayer for world peace and memorial service for the World War II dead, Shinto and Buddhist Dai Saito Gomaku (fire rites festival), was held at the Okinawa Peace Memorial Park in Itoman at the southern end of the main island of Okinawa.

The members of Agon Shu think there will be no national peace until the souls of the war dead are at peace, and that there will be no family peace and prosperity until the spirits of the deceased have been consoled.

Colorful and tragic history

The islands of Okinawa have a colorful and tragic history. The archipelago, which lies between Taiwan and Kyushu, was once an independent kingdom. It was a cultural crossroads, blending elements of Chinese, Japanese and Pacific island cultures in a unique fusion. As Japan's power expanded, Okinawa was formally incorporated into the Japanese



Agon Shu members march from the Peace Memorial Hall in Okinawa as part of a Shinto and Buddhist Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony. AGON SHU

Empire in 1872.

The Battle of Okinawa began in March 1945 when the Allies, mainly comprising American forces, began landing on the islands of Okinawa. It lasted for three months and claimed the lives of upwards of 200,000 people, including more than 90,000 civilians caught in the crossfire.

Continuing pain

As a man of religion, Kiriya has long been sensitively attuned to the continuing pain of the souls of those who died in war. The tragedy of the fighting in Okinawa deeply moved

him and so in 1977 he and other members of Agon Shu held a Dai Saito Gomaku to console the spirits of the war dead at Gokoku Shrine in Okinawa and Koror Island, Palau.

Since then, Agon Shu has held several similar ceremonies at locations where Japanese soldiers fought and died in World War II.

Legacy of Okinawa

But the legacy of Okinawa always weighed heavily on Kiriya's mind. And so he decided to finally return to Okinawa this year to hold another Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony there.

The day's activities began with a performance of a traditional Okinawan *eisa* folk dance. Local people perform it during the midsummer o-Bon festival when ancestors are venerated. The songs that accompany *eisa* are based on themes such as love, respect for one's elders and the key message that life is to be treasured.

Performing the *eisa* on Nov. 8 were 20 members of the Ryukyu Kajimaya dance group, which is mainly comprised of students from Okinawa International University.

Solemn pledge

The dancers offered their per-



Rev. Seiyu Kiriya performs the Himitsu Kuji ceremony to pray for world peace. AGON SHU

formances to the souls of those who died in the war, solemnly pledging that they would strive to build a peaceful world by resolutely keeping the preciousness of life in mind.

Representatives of eight Agon Shu branches (Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kanto, Tokai, Hokuriku, Kyushu, Taiwan and Kansai) then rang a peace bell to mark the beginning of the formal religious part of the day's ceremony.

As in the Hoshi Matsuri (star and fire rites festival) event that Agon Shu holds in Kyoto each Feb. 11, a procession of 250 Agon Shu members dressed as yamabushi mountain priests marched from the Peace Memorial Hall. Kiriya then arrived at the podium to oversee the traditional *yamabushi* ceremony, during which two *gomadan* pyres were ignited.

Believers write their messages of condolence and prayers for peace on small *gomagi* prayer sticks, and Agon Shu attendants throw the *gomagi* into the fire in the belief that in this way their wishes and prayers will be conveyed to Shinto and Buddhist deities.

Search for spiritual truth

Kiriya founded Agon Shu in 1978 after he had spent many years in search for spir-

itual truth. He decided that he needed to get back to the source of the religion to understand the Buddha's message of salvation. Eventually he realized that the Agama Sutras — the purest source of Buddhist doctrine — provided the answer.

Agon Shu has since grown into a community of Buddhist followers with 73 institutes in Japan, 35 ordained priests, and nearly 400,000 followers in Japan with thousands more overseas.

As the flames from the *gomadan* leapt skyward, Kiriya then performed a special Himitsu Kuji ceremony. Among those taking part in the Nov. 8 Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony was Yorihito Kaji, the chief priest of Okinawa Gokoku Jinja Shrine.

"It was in 1977, or 38 years ago, that I first met with Agon Shu people, when they held a Dai Saito Gomaku at Okinawa Gokoku Jinja," Kaji said.

"I congratulate you on having successfully held the 30th Agon Shu world peace ceremony, a memorial service for the World War II dead and the Okinawa Dai Saito Gomaku today," Kaji continued.

Continuing work

"In Okinawa, work to recover the remains of those who died



Two *gomadan* pyres were lit on fire as part of the ceremony. AGON SHU

in the war is ongoing," Kaji noted. And he pointed out that as the members of bereaved families grow old, the feeling of need to console the spirits of the war dead is fading.

"So, I'm really grateful to Kiriya and his followers for holding the Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony solemnly and magnificently," Kaji said.

A speech by Kiriya was then read to those attending the ceremony.

"When I held the first Gomaku service here, I felt strong karma and deep-rooted grudges in Okinawa," Kiriya said. "I told my disciples in Okinawa that we couldn't eliminate the evil karma with only one or two ceremonies."

Personal commitment

Kiriya described his personal commitment to helping to cleanse the karma of Okinawa.

"I performed today's service at any cost with all my strength and heart, positioning it as the one to complete those past services and as a great battle to fight the evil karma hanging over not only Okinawa, but all over Japan. My aim this time was, of course, to console the souls of the war dead and, in addition, to pray for national peace and the creation of a new Japan."



Local people perform an *eisa* traditional dance. AGON SHU

Kiriya then shifted his focus to the broader world.

"Today, the world is in extreme confusion, and the wave of chaos is about to reach Asia and Japan, including Okinawa," he warned. "It is only prayer that can bring peace and safety to a world in confusion, as well as Japan, including Okinawa, and carve out a future full of hope."

Kiriya has a very specific idea about what kind of prayer is needed.

"The prayer must be the one carrying Buddha's spiritual power and the power of gods from ancient Japan," he

said. "The prayer can console the souls of dead people, and revive the spirituality of people still living. With this belief in mind, I performed today's Dai Saito Gomaku service with all my body and spirit, using the secret Buddhist and Shinto power inherited by Agon Shu."

Okinawa's violent history must never be forgotten. Kiriya and Agon Shu believe that by reflecting on the tragedy of its wartime history and prayer, a new and peaceful world can be created, with the island being the crossroad for people in East Asia.



A Dai Saito Goma ceremony takes place in Okinawa in 1977. AGON SHU