Okinawa: a different Japan? A historian's perspective

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The question of whether Okinawa is Japan inevitably leads us to another one, namely what Japan is, it also creates a temptation to search for the essence of Japaneseness. Indeed, if we think of Japan in terms of *sakura*, *sake*, *samurai*, *salaryman* and *sushi* then definitely Okinawa is a different Japan. *Sakura* hardly blossom in Okinawa and does not even try to compete with local *deigo*[1]. The Okinawans do not drink *nihonshu*, but *awamori*[2]. Yes, they eat *sushi*, but above all they love pork. Time goes by much slower in Okinawa and punctuality is considered a rather rare virtue. With their easy going lifestyle the Okinawans fit neither the image of hard-working salarymen nor stern samurai.

The list of stereotypes used to highlight a lack of compatibility between the two countries is as long as the Ryūkyū Archipelago. Among the more interesting ones are odd stories that the Okinawans do not speak Japanese, or that they do not use chopsticks but knives and forks. Not all stereotypes, however, are negative. Okinawa is also being portrayed as a "better" Japan – a tropical paradise, where one can relax from the stress of life in Japan proper. It is a "pacifist" Japan, without the ugly face of nationalism.

The question of "Japanese-ness" has long preoccupied the attention of scholars. Whilst the prewar generation of scholars embarked on a mission to prove that Okinawa was and always had been Japanese, their postwar critics took the opposite stance. Nevertheless, Okinawan studies were for many years kept hostage by a dichotomy of "Japan(ese) or not" and it has been only in the past two decades that scholars have reformulated their academic inquiries by simply asking what Okinawa is.

So, is Okinawa Japan or not? As a historian, I do not have a problem with answering this question. If it is highly inappropriate to dump the whole Ryūkyūan past into the same sack as Japan, then it is also wrong to deny that present-day Okinawa is Japan – even though a different one. One may say that Okinawa is an "invented tradition" of Japan, but "invented" does not mean "not true". And even if Okinawa, hypothetically, should separate from Japan in the future (which I highly doubt), it will not be able to erase easily the Japanese chapter from its history.

The concept of "invented tradition" can tell us a great deal about how Okinawa has been made Japanese. This concept, introduced first by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), enjoyed a world-wide success, being adopted by many scholars, including Japanologists.[3] The concept not only explains how people invent traditions in order to legitimize their rights to nationhood, but also how they invent the past. Put differently, "inventing traditions" concerns the problem of collective memory: what people want to remember and how they want it to be remembered. Thus, the past serves as a "mirror of modernity" (Vlastos 1998), reflecting national values and virtues. It is a source of national identity.

Okinawa was "invented" by the Japanese as well as the Okinawans. Japanese policymakers needed a justification for the appropriation of the Ryūkyū Islands. Japanese scholars, obsessed with the idea of Japanese uniqueness, performed intellectual acrobatics to adjust Okinawa to their vision of Japanese civilization and race. And the Okinawans simply wanted to find some comfort to their troubled identity.

Okinawa as a reservoir of Japanese ancient traditions

Okinawa as a reservoir of Japanese ancient traditions was conceptualized in the 1920s by scholars who were highly concerned about the negative effects industrialization and modernization might have upon Japan. Since 1920 Japan was coping with a long economic crisis that made many people critically reconsider Japan's relations with foreign countries and cultures. Some scholars, including Yanagita Kunio, Yanagi Muneyoshi and Orikuchi Shinobu, believed that what Japan needed was not only a program for economic recovery, but also a cultural revival. In Yanagita's eyes, for example, the reason for rural distress lay in the weakening of religious consciousness of the people.[4] Hence scholars embarked on a mission to find an antidote for Japan's ills. They found it in Okinawa – a country which they saw as being rich in relics of Japanese culture in its purest, unchanged form. They discovered in Okinawa archaic forms of the Japanese language, of Shintoism and art that unlike its Japanese counterparts had not been affected by influences from China and the West. "Things that have been lost in Japan proper", Yanagita Kunio wrote, "are perfectly preserved on [Okinawa] island" (Yanagita 1997: 293). Okinawan customs and

beliefs, which were thought to reflect the spirit of ancient Japanese collectivity, were supposed to help the Japanese rediscover principles of social configuration. Okinawan dialects, on the other hand, were supposed to provide a solution for the ongoing corruption of the Japanese language.

One needs to give credit to prewar scholars for depicting Okinawa in very positive colors, considering the fact that Japanese people of the time usually associated Okinawa with poverty and backwardness. Their attitude, however, was highly idealistic, if not paternalistic. In that sense they resembled Western scholars who were engaged in an anthropology of "rescuing cultures". Being obsessed with the search for a "real" Japan they ignored the fact that Okinawa had developed its own genuine culture. In a manner typical of scholars representing the synchronic paradigm in anthropology, they put Okinawa outside the historical context, as if it was a land frozen in time.

Yanagi Muneyoshi's Okinawa deserves special attention. Being deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy, Yanagi placed Okinawa within the context of a philosophical discourse about the nature of art.[5] He was profoundly concerned with the negative effects of industrialization which, in his opinion, had brought about a rapid disappearance of art from people's daily lives in Japan. He was displeased with the introduction of machinery into crafts, as people began to seek easy profits by producing cheap but ugly wares. Yanagi believed that the main reason crafts were losing their beauty was that fine art had been separated from crafts, lost its utilitarian character and turned into art for art's sake practiced only by specialized artists.

Thus, Yanagi began the search for perfect art: an art that was present in every aspect of human life; a perfect state of art where beauty was not separated from practicality, and where crafts and fine art constituted one whole; art that did not require any differentiation between its creators and recipients, or the artist and the public, as it was produced by all people, anonymous bearers of tradition. Such art was perfect because there was no dichotomy of beauty and ugliness; accordingly, beauty and ugliness were not separated but together constituted one whole.

Yanagi believed that such art had existed in the remote past. He found one example of it in the poems of the *Man'yōshū*. The pursuit of perfect art led him to the peripheries of Japan, far away from the "center" which, he felt, was distorted by modernity. He found what he was looking for in the culture of the Ainu and in Okinawa. He considered Okinawan crafts and music superior to its Japanese counterparts in every respect. Full of enchantment he wrote about Ryūkyūan dances:

> [In Okinawa] everybody dances, everybody sings. The dances spring from the life of the people. The Japanese songs and dances of the Bon festival are also impressive, but less alive than these expressions of intensity of spirit. I beg you my readers to waste no time before coming to see such dance as this, whether of fishermen, or farmers, or the slow, quiet, and deep dances of the old court (Yanagi 1972: 165).

In Okinawa Yanagi found a remnant of perfect art which he would put in a museum and preserve it as it was. He was critical about the modernization of Japan, but after all he did not reject it and acknowledged that Japan was changing. He assigned to Okinawa the role of an antidote to the negative side effects of Japan's modernization. Was Yanagi's Okinawa entitled to undergo the same changes as Japan? Perhaps not. If it did, the antidote would lose its potency.

In a manner of speaking, Yanagita, Yanagi and others found in Okinawa the essence of Japanese culture. Yet they did not necessarily place Okinawa within the frame of Japan proper. They assigned to Okinawa only a passive role in the process of shaping Japan. Okinawa became a recipient of Yamato culture and its preserver, but it was Yamato, not Okinawa, that had created Japan.

Okinawa and the ideology of expansion

Generally speaking, the Japanese of the prewar generation did not show much interest in Okinawa. Okinawa was a remote and forgotten land with very few resources to offer. In terms of business opportunities it could not match neighboring Taiwan. Japanese public officials preferred going to Korea, perceived by many as a springboard for their careers. Academics, on the other hand, were too busy with their research on the mainland, and hence only a dozen of them noticed Okinawa at all.

The situation changed in the 1930s, when Japan engaged in the war with China and started preparing for a confrontation with Western powers over domination in Asia. The Japanese moved their eyes to the South and rediscovered Okinawa, which in many ways resembled the countries they wanted to colonize. Studies of *nan'yōdo*, or "southern seas countries" had a positive impact on Okinawan studies, and Okinawa itself took deeper roots in the consciousness of the Japanese people.

One aspect of this state of affairs was that some patriotic scholars began confusing ideology with scholarship and, consciously or not, subjugated their work to the political needs of the Japanese state. An Okinawan-born historian, Higashionna Kanjun (1882–1963), openly glorified Japanese expansionism and supported the vision of Japan's advance to the south by referring to the history of Ryūkyūan overseas trade. In his article "Hōshin motomeyo" (Let us demand a policy, 1939) he wrote that the Ryūkyūans had been imbued with the spirit of *hakkō ichiu* ("the whole world under one – Japanese – roof")[6] (Higashionna 1978: 374). In a similar fashion Akiyama Kenzō described Ryūkyūan merchants as Japanese pio-

neers who had advanced to the South (Akiyama 1939: 64–94).

Needless to say, the spirit of *hakkō ichiu* qualifies as a typical "invented tradition" produced by an aggressive ideology of expansionism. What is remarkable is that this tradition was extended to the Ryūkyūan people. The Japanese perceived themselves as the best qualified nation in Asia to colonize the world, with the most superior racial and cultural attributes. Okinawan people, on the other hand, were seen as "Japanese but not quite" – they were "country bumpkins" who first needed to be civilized and educated. This view was shared even by some Okinawan intellectuals which is why they eagerly supported the Japanese policy of assimilation. But when Japan embarked on a colonial expansion in Asia, Japanese ideologists all of a sudden discovered truly Japanese virtues among the Okinawans' ancestors.

Iha Fuyū's vision of Okinawan history

Having accepted a new identity as Japanese nationals, the Okinawan people faced a dilemma of how to deal with their past. How was the history of their country, with no glorious episodes of samurai wars and without the poetical life of the Imperial Court in Kyōto, supposed to reassure them in their new identity? The first historian from Okinawa, Iha Fuyū (1876–1947),[7] frankly admitted that through his works he intended to enhance Japanese patriotism among his countrymen and give some comfort to their troubled identity (Iha G. 1909). Iha depicted Ryūkyūan history in terms of first a separation from and then a reunification with Japan. The "Theory of a Common Japanese-Ryūkyūan Ancestry" (*Nichiryū dōsoron*), combined with Social Darwinism, provided several useful arguments: Okinawans were Japanese by ancestry. By a strange twist of fate, however, in ancient times they had parted from the Japanese people and began to follow an independent path of development. The Ryūkyūan Kingdom experienced a short period of greatness in the 15th–16th century, owing its prosperity to overseas trade, but in 1609 it was invaded by Lord Shimazu of the Satsuma domain in Japan. In the wake of this invasion, Ryūkyū entered a dark and miserable period of enslavement which lasted until the end of the 19th century. Satsuma's policy of colonization resulted in a widening spiritual gap between the Japanese and the Ryūkyūans – the Japanese no longer perceived their Southern neighbors as their countrymen. Fortunately, the Meiji Government, by abolishing the Ryūkyū Kingdom, "liberated the Okinawan people from enslavement" (Iha 1974a: 493) and put their country back on the path of progress and prosperity. From the perspective of evolution, the reunification with Japan was not only desirable, but also inevitable.

In his early years Iha was highly optimistic about Okinawa's future and believed that a quick assimilation with Japan would be the best solution for all social and economic problems. Yet, seeing the disastrous effects of the economic crisis that badly hit Okinawa in the 1920s, he had to revise his opinions about assimilation. He no longer believed that Japan provided the ultimate solution for Okinawa's problems, but on the other hand he did not feel in a position to question the idea of national unification. Iha abandoned his ideas of social evolution; Okinawa was not proceeding on a path of progress any more, but rather helplessly floated in history, with no control over its own fate. This was the Okinawa he depicted in *Kotōku no Ryūkyu shi* (The history of the ordeal of the lonely islands of Ryūkyū, 1926) (Iha 1974b).

In this book Iha ascribed the misery of Okinawa to its geographic location and climatic conditions. As he argued, Okinawa was a poor, tiny island, with few resources, frequently harassed by natural disasters. The Ryūkyūans constantly had to struggle for survival, whilst their neighbors in Japan enjoyed a richer life. They had had no choice but to embark on overseas trade which eventually brought wealth and prosperity to their country. But then, again, disaster struck – the invasion by Satsuma which was followed by a miserable period of enslavement. Three hundred years under the rule of Satsuma brought the Ryūkyūan people to a state of complete exhaustion. Without help from the outside – Iha referred to the crisis of 1920s – the Okinawans as a society would not be able to recover. They had even lost the capability of expressing pain in their own language. They had been completely "crushed by their own history", but the Japanese government and society remained indifferent to their misery.

Iha's pessimistic vision of Okinawan history was eagerly accepted by his countrymen. On the one hand it enhanced their sense of belonging to the Japanese nation, and on the other it provided an explanation for all the misfortunes they had suffered at the hands of Japan. The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 and the American post-war occupation only strengthened their complex of being Japan's victim. But was Okinawa's history indeed as dark and miserable as described by Iha? Not necessarily. Post-war scholars have pointed out that stories of colonization by Satsuma should be treated with great caution. Satsuma had neither the will nor enough resources to meddle with the domestic affairs of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. The Kingdom enjoyed wide autonomy until its very last days. It is hard to speak of "dark times of enslavement" in the light of the fact that in the 18th century Ryūkyū enjoyed such prosperity that scholars named this period the "Second Golden Age". The historian Araki Moriaki (1982) went even further arguing that in the long term Satsuma's invasion left a positive legacy, as the Ryūkyūans had to introduce numerous reforms in order to stimulate the growth of local production and to satisfy Satsuma's demands for

tribute. No physical colonization of Ryūkyū took place because Japan did not keep any troops in Okinawa, and the Japanese, apart from a small group of licensed merchants from Satsuma, were forbidden to travel to the Ryūkyūs.

National unification

Iha was not the only one haunted by the problem of "national unification". At the end of the 1960s, as the day of Okinawa's Reversion to Japan was approaching, the Okinawans started being concerned about the negative consequences the reversion might bring. Old fears and ill-will against the Japanese people resurfaced with double force. In the meanwhile, scholars engaged in a hot debate about the problem of reunification. Some of them contested the prewar argument that the annexation of Ryūkyū in 1879, or the "Disposition of Ryūkyū", had been an example of "national unification". Interestingly, no one had questioned the very possibility of unification in the 19th century. Okinawa was "Japanese" by default and hence all intellectuals perceived unification as desirable and in accordance with the course of history. Accordingly, if Japan had failed to embrace Okinawa, it was entirely Japan's fault. The discussion thus concerned the question of what measures Japan should have taken in the past so that a truly national unification could have taken place.

Shinzato Keiji (1967, 1970) and Makise Tsuneji (1971) questioned the problem of national unification from the position of Marxism. They argued that a true unification could only take place in the course of a bourgeois revolution; it would have to be initiated by the masses ("bottom-up unification") and not imposed by the state ("top-down unification"), as had in fact happened. They placed importance upon civil rights movements, which, in their opinion, disclosed positive symptoms of a "bottom-up" unification. Kinjō Seitoku (1967: 55) raised a similar argument; in his opinion a true unification would only be possible if it came at the initiative of the people. Kinjō challenged the advocates of unification by noting that in the year following the annexation of Okinawa, the Japanese government was about to cede half of the Ryūkyūs to China in exchange for trading privileges (the agreement with China was signed in 1880 but never put into practice). How could you explain, Kinjō rhetorically asked, that the same government that had "liberated" the Ryūkyūans and carried out "national unification", could come up with the idea of dividing Ryūkyū which would be a *de facto* split-up of the nation?

Not all agreed with these arguments. For Araki Moriaki, for example, unification had indeed taken place. Araki argued that the Ryūkyū Kingdom had already become a part of Japan much earlier – after the Satsuma invasion in 1609. In the light of economic integration with the Japanese *bakuhan* state, Ryūkyū should be perceived as a *han* domain. The "Disposition of Ryūkyū" in 1879 thus should be seen as a link in the chain of events of the Meiji Restoration – it fell under the process of Japan's centralization when *daimyō* had to return their lands to the Emperor (the so-called *hanseki hōkan*, or "reversion of registers"). What makes Okinawa's experience unique is the fact that the Ryūkyūan King, unlike Japanese lords, did not return the land voluntarily, and thus the unification with Japan was not carried out "autonomously" (*jiritsuteki*), but was rather directed from above (*taritsuteki*) (Araki 1980:199).

A younger colleague of Araki, Takara Kurayoshi (1989, 1998), raised a similar argument. Takara introduced the idea of "gradual unification". Whilst recognizing Old Ryūkyū (prior to the Satsuma invasion) as an absolutely independent country, he agreed that post-invasion Okinawa had been incorporated into the *bakuhan* system, though not entirely. The Satsuma invasion constituted the first step in the unification process, which continued after the "Disposition of Ryūkyū". The last step was Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972.

The question of *bakuhan*

But had Ryūkyū indeed been a part of the *bakuhan* system? This question concerns the problem of how to understand the term *bakuhan* and, in a broader context, how to define the early modern Japanese state. Takara Kurayoshi has described Ryūkyū as a foreign country (*ikoku*) within the *bakuhan* system (Takara, 1998: 176; 1989b: 243): The *kokudaka* system[8], the ban on Christianity and a number of Japanese institutions were introduced to Ryūkyū, but the kingdom itself functioned within the system under slightly different conditions.

Such perception of Ryūkyūan matters, however, is very much Japan-centric. Is it appropriate to apply a concept like *bakuhan*, which was coined for one particular state, namely Japan, to other countries in Asia? By the same token, we may ask whether it is correct to discuss early modern Japan using a European notion of statehood, and the answer would be definitely in the negative. Putting aside the question of Japan-centrism, most Japanese of the Edo period would have agreed that Ryūkyū was a foreign country – politically as well as culturally. The Japanese conceptualized their country by drawing upon the Chinese concept of *huayi* (Jap. *ka-i*, "civilization and barbarity"). Like the Chinese they assumed that they represented the most civilized country located at the very center of the world and thus expected all other surrounding peoples to recognize their superiority. *Huayi* became very helpful in imagining the cultural representation of "us" and "others", Japan and non-Japan.

Yet, contrary to the case of China, *huayi* had few practical implications for Japan: except for the Ryūkyūans

and the Ainu no one had recognized Japan's superiority, not to speak of suzerainty. Relations with Korea remained ambiguous, as the Korean king treated his Japanese counterpart as equal in rank. The Dutch, who believed in the principle of *pecunia non olet*, did not mind going through humiliating rituals whenever they visited Edo, but they by no means perceived themselves as inferior to the Japanese. Japan had its own vision of the world, but, as Jurgis Elisonas put it, remained *prima in vacuo* (1991: 300). Ryūkyū and Ezo (present-day Hokkaidō) remained the only countries validating the Japan-centric world order. This explains why Edo period Japan tried to distance itself from Ryūkyū and Ezo. The Japanese banned the Ainu people from adopting Japanese customs. In a similar fashion they did not want the Ryūkyūans to become too Japanese. Whenever Ryūkyūan envoys traveled to Edo, they received strict orders to present themselves as exotically as possible. For the sake of the *huayi* vision the *bakufu* had to keep Ryūkyū dependent on, yet separate from Japan.

The early modern Japanese state, described by scholars as *bakuhan kokka* (*bakuhan* state) or *bakuhan taisei* (*bakuhan* system), should not be understood only in terms of its institutions and administrative organization, detached from and situated above society. In his book *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in its Place* (1990) Bob Jessop emphasized the relationship between state institutions and society. While recognizing the institutional and operational autonomy of the state and its function of maintaining the integrity of society, he argued that the state constitutes only a part of society. Accordingly, the state is not a fixed and coherent system, but a relatively open system that is constantly renegotiated and subject to social forces (Jessop 1990: 338–367). Put simply, if the state defines and determines society, then society and social changes shape the state, too. Although Jessop wrote about capitalist states, his main argument could also be applied to some premodern states, like, for example, Japan.

In Edo period Japan social changes were very dynamic. Whatever the vision of the state the *bakufu* officials might have had, they constantly had to adjust laws and regulations to cover such phenomena as migration, urbanization and the emergence of a free market. They also had to cope with the rise of a powerful class of townsmen who had challenged the social status of the samurai. All these changes were slowly yet successfully undermining the Confucian social order which the shogunate was determined to defend even at the cost of a relaxation of some regulations.

Okinawa, however, was irrelevant to everything that was happening in Japan – at least not more relevant than China, Korea and the northern territories across the border from the Matsumae domain in Ezo. Under Japanese law Ryūkyū was a foreign country and no migration was allowed between Japan and the kingdom. The Ryūkyūans were not part of Japanese society and therefore they had no share in shaping Japan. They could not even be compared with the *eta* and *hinin* outcastes, who in spite of being marginalized by the *bakufu* authorities were recognized and assigned a clearly specified position in society. Only in Kagoshima was there a tiny community of Ryūkyūan officials and merchants, but they had the status of foreigners, similar to the Dutch and Chinese in Nagasaki. Put simply, Ryūkyū should not be perceived other than as a separate state, even if it was to a certain extent economically and politically dependent on Japan.

Conclusions: Okinawa and the "making of modern Japan"

Marius Jansen (2000), Kenneth Pyle (1996), Andrew Gordon (2003) and many other scholars agree that the Tokugawa period is crucial for understanding the rise of modern Japan. Social and cultural changes that took place in Edo period Japan laid a firm foundation for future modernization. As previously stated, premodern Okinawa was a separate country and therefore it had no share in the process of making modern Japan in its early stage. Japan's modernization in the Meiji period and afterwards was an extremely dramatic process, but not without continuity between premodernity and modernity. In this respect Okinawa's experience was utterly different from that of Japan: Modernization was imposed from above, Western civilization had first been filtered and digested by Japan, and the legacy of Ryūkyū little contributed to the rise of modern Okinawa. It was primarily Japanese traditions, not Okinawan ones, that became a "mirror of modernity". And this is what makes Okinawa a "different Japan."

Notes

1 Known in English as Tiger's Claw or Indian Coral Tree.
2 Rice brandy, similar to Japanese *shōchū*.
3 See for example the papers in Vlastos 1998.
4 For more on this subject see Harootunian 1998.
5 Tonaki 1996 discusses Yanagi's concept of art in detail.
6 Lit. "eight corners, one world"; a propaganda slogan expressing a vision of the whole world united under one – Japanese – roof.
7 For more on Iha's work see Kano 1993, Kinjō/Takara 1994.
8 A system of determining the value of land based on the productivity of rice, which was calculated in *koku* (1 *koku*= ca. 180 liters)

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