

Between a Forgotten Colony and an Abandoned Prefecture: Okinawa's Experience of Becoming Japanese in the Meiji and Taishō Eras

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Abstract:

Japan's attitude towards Okinawa during the Meiji and Taishō periods defied concrete definition. Although nominally a prefecture, Okinawa retained a semi-colonial status for two decades after its annexation in 1879. Despite the fact that Okinawan people accepted Japanese rule with little resistance, which ultimately turned into active support for the assimilation policy, Japanese policy makers never lost their distrust of Okinawan people. Similarly, Japanese society did not fully embrace them, perceiving them as backward and inferior, and even questioning their Japanese-ness. The experience of discrimination strengthened the Okinawan people's motivation to fight for recognition as true Japanese citizens. Local intellectuals, such as historian Iha Fuyū, embarked on a mission to prove that Okinawa was and always had been Japanese.

From a certain perspective, Okinawan modern history falls into the paradigm of colonization or integration under the Japanese nation-state. The crucial clue to understanding Okinawa's case lies in the fact that it was a poor country, with little natural resources to offer. Unlike Hokkaido, there was no mass migration from mainland Japan to Okinawa. Unlike Taiwan and Korea, Okinawa did not attract skillful and ambitious administrators. Accordingly, Okinawa was turned neither into a model colony, nor a modern prefecture, but remained

a forgotten and abandoned region.

Keywords: Japan, Okinawa, history, Meiji period, colonialism, modernization, nation-state, nationalism, identity

In 1888, Prince Paul John Sapieha (1860–1934), a member of a respected, Polish noble family, embarked on a journey to East Asia. The journey brought him to Japan, making him one of the first Polish people to set foot on Japanese soil. Sapieha kept a journal on his travels, which he published eleven years later under the title *Podróż na wschód Azyi* (A Journey to East Asia).¹ In Tokyo, he met an Austrian painter, Francis Neydhart (1860–1940), and together they made a short trip to Okinawa at the end of March 1889.

Sapieha spent less than a week in Okinawa and he described his impressions of the island in only a few pages. Yet this short account presents valuable testimony about Okinawa in the late nineteenth century. He remembered this journey with great nostalgia, in particular the treatment he received from the governor, who assigned personal guards, interpreters, a carriage and a rickshaw to his entourage. "They must mistake me for some Austrian prince of the blood," he wrote with amusement.²

The Okinawan people captured his heart. He was enchanted by the local culture, especially by the dances and music, which he found more appealing and interesting than those of Japan. He depicted the local people in exceptionally warm words that sharply contrasted with what he wrote about the Japanese administrators of the island:

towards the so-called Japanese colonies, that is, the territories lying beyond the extent of the main archipelago. Looking at this royal castle, at the castle abandoned by the Ryukyuan king who had been forced to dwell in Tokyo, and today is occupied by Japanese soldiery with uniforms reminding me of the Prussian army, I felt as if I saw Wawel or Warsaw Castle.³

Yesterday, in the evening, the governor of this country - or better to say, this Japanese colony - held a banquet in my honor. Although the dinner was served in accordance with old customs of the Shuri Court, wine and vodka, called *sake*, that stands for wine in these [Asian] countries, were served by sons of former senators of this country; none of the representatives of local aristocracy sat with us at the table, only paper pushers, pencil necks, Japanese officials, and kulturtraegers [culture bearers]. And during the feast, when local dancers started to perform wonderful old dances, which were followed by one act of a great tragedy or national epepee, where a son avenged the death of his father, I found irrefutable proof that the Japanese understand not a single word of the local language, does not know and does not want to know it; he perceives it as lower, stupid, and inferior. But because being in possession of this land seems to him beneficial and important for his trade and strategy, he captures this land, imposes his language upon local people, detains the king, stupefies the royal son with liquor and debauchery, and bleeds the country with taxes; but in front of himself and the world he pretends to be a philanthropist and enlightener.

That is the history in a few words of Japanese rule in this country over the past dozen years! That is the attitude of Japan, namely of her present-day centralized government

Sapieha called Okinawa 'a Japanese colony.' His testimony is a valuable contribution to the long-standing dispute between Japanese and Okinawan scholars, specifically as to whether or not prewar Okinawa should be discussed in the context of colonialism.⁴ Of course, one should not take his words at face value. After all, his sympathies for the Okinawan people might have come from the fact that he himself came from a country torn between three powers and struggling to preserve its culture and identity. But he was not alone in his opinions. Henry B. Schwartz (1861-1945), an American missionary who lived in Okinawa from 1906 to 1910, also called Okinawa 'Japan's oldest colony.' But what makes Sapieha's testimony particularly valuable is the fact that he visited Okinawa in the early stages of Japanese rule, when not many foreigners had a chance to visit Okinawa. The first two decades of Japanese rule are described by scholars as a time of 'preservation of old customs' (*kyūkan onzon*).⁵ Having annexed the Ryūkyū Kingdom in 1879, Japan decided, for several reasons, to postpone structural reforms in Okinawa. Until the late 1890s, the wave of modernization had barely reached Okinawa Prefecture. At the time of Sapieha's visit, Okinawa had no new infrastructure, its economy was backward, the society was largely illiterate, not a single newspaper was in circulation, and the first public library would not open for another 26 years. By the time Henry B. Schwartz was in residence, Okinawa

was already a different country: the land reform had been completed and a modern taxation system had been introduced, local autonomy had been gradually expanded and Japanese education had begun bearing fruit. Above all, Okinawan people had already abandoned the dream of restoring the Kingdom and were subjected to the process of assimilation, leading Schwartz to conclude that the “complete assimilation of the islands to the Japanese language and customs is only a matter of years.”⁶

By 1919, administrative integration with Japan was complete and Okinawa became a fully-fledged prefecture. Japan and Okinawa seemed to have been united for good or ill. The following year, however, Okinawa plunged into a long economic crisis that had disastrous effects on Okinawan society. The crisis triggered a large wave of emigration to mainland Japan, where migrant workers from Ryūkyū were treated no better than their Korean counterparts. Not only had the crisis made Japan’s negligence in modernizing Okinawa evident, but it also revealed the serious issue of Okinawan alienation, disproving the myth of ‘national unification.’ Furthermore, subsequent developments proved that Japan never hesitated to sacrifice Okinawa for the sake of national interest. One example was in 1945, when Okinawa was designated the bulwark protecting mainland Japan against American assault, resulting in the death of more than one quarter of the Okinawan population; and another after the war, when Japanese policymakers accepted the transfer of Okinawa to the United States as a military colony and the cornerstone of the US-Japan Security Treaty. These developments are difficult to ignore when interrogating Japan’s policy and intentions for Okinawa in both the prewar and postwar periods to the present.

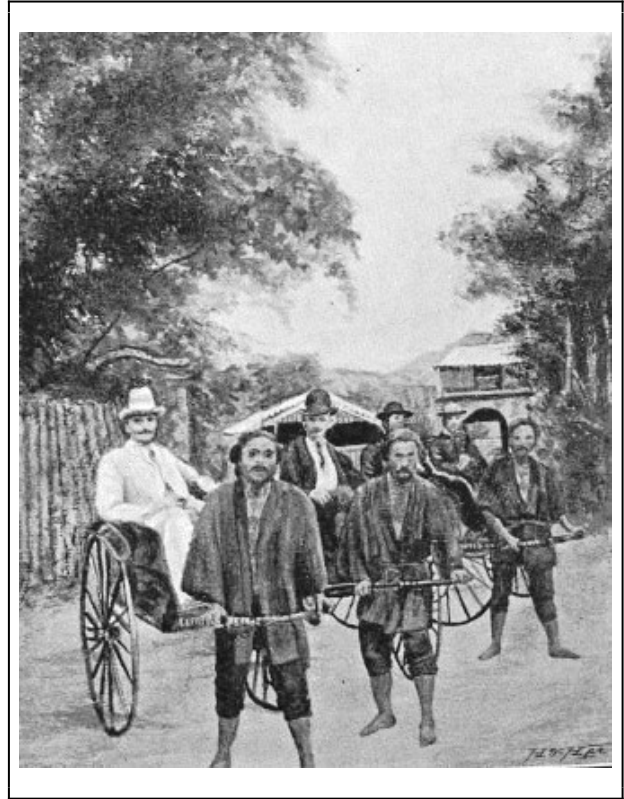


Figure 1: Prince Paul John Sapieha (first to the left) in the front of the Kankaimon Gate at the Shuri Castle, Okinawa, March 1889. The picture was originally published in Sapieha’s book *Podróż na Wschód Azyi*, p. 189. [Public domain](#).

Embracing Okinawa

Japanese rule in Okinawa had a touch of colonialism, particularly during the first two decades. Although nominally a prefecture, Okinawa remained under a separate system of administration. Most of the government agencies and institutions, starting with the prefecture office, were manned by appointees from Japan. Japanese merchants took control over the local economy and monopolized trade

with other prefectures. Paternalism and arrogance characterized Japanese expatriates' attitudes towards the local people. Because Okinawa was poor in natural resources and generally unattractive to settlers⁷, its development was low on the list of government priorities. Unlike Hokkaidō, Taiwan or Korea, Okinawa had little potential for furthering one's political career, and consequently, it did not attract highly qualified officials. Uesugi Mochinori (1844-1919), the second governor of Okinawa Prefecture, whose attempted reforms were torpedoed by Tokyo, was an exception. So it was Governor Narahara Shigeru (1834-1918), who paved the way to Okinawa's modernization at the end of the 1890s. Most officials, however, bore attitudes closer to that of Governor Odakiri Iwatarō (1869-1945), who viewed his appointment in 1916 as a disgrace and resigned after just one week, without even going to Okinawa. As local journalist Ōta Chōfu (1865-1938) observed, Okinawa had been treated like a 'dumping ground' for poor officials.⁸

Under these circumstances, Okinawa's development and modernization proceeded slowly. In the middle of the 1920s, nearly fifty years after the annexation, and five after becoming a fully-fledged prefecture, Okinawa lagged behind mainland Japan in every aspect. It had the worst infrastructure, with a very poor network of roads, and only one, 48-km long railway line, as well as the worst healthcare and education system, with virtually no industry. Moreover, with its quasi-colonial economy based on sugar cane production, developed at the cost of paddy fields acreage, Okinawa was heavily dependent on food importation. No other prefecture was hit by the post-World War One economic crisis as badly as Okinawa.

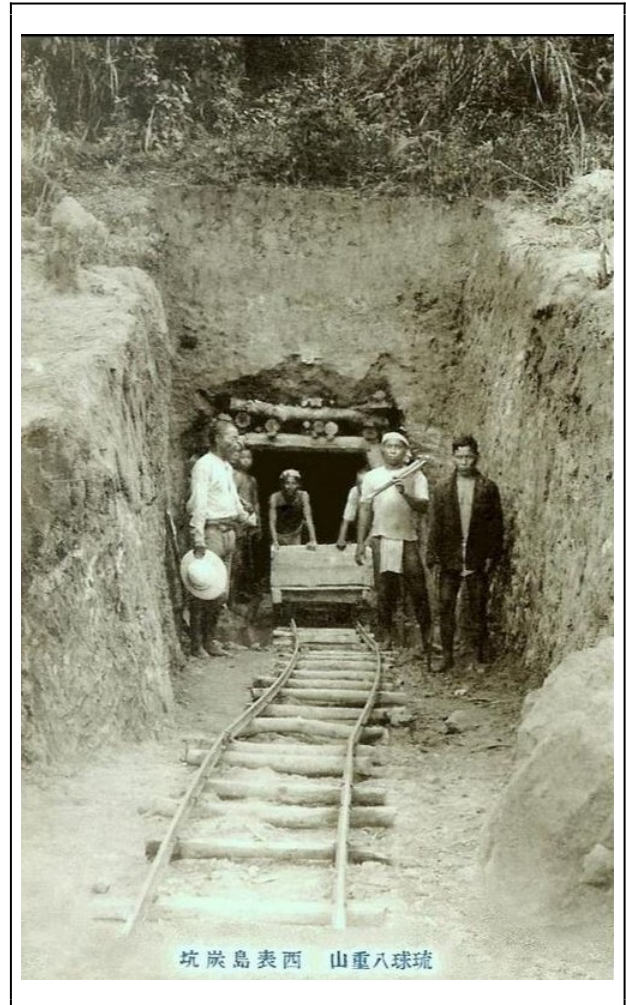


Figure 2: Ryukyu Yaeyama Iriomote Island Coal Mine. Photographer unknown, Japanese souvenir postcard c. 1905-1910. Public domain. The mine operated from 1906 to 1943 using convicts and workers from Taiwan under horrific conditions and facing rampant malaria.

The government's policy towards Okinawa, however underdeveloped, nonetheless aimed at its integration rather than exclusion. After all, in the decades after 1879, Okinawan people received legal status equal to that enjoyed by

Japanese people on the mainland. This was certainly not the case among the Ainu, who faced segregationist regulations as well as attacks on Ainu culture and intense pressures for assimilation. Nevertheless, in light of nearly two decades of resistance from the Okinawan aristocracy, Japanese administrators long remained distrustful of Okinawan locals, frequently reproaching them for their allegedly pro-Chinese sentiments. When Okinawa Prefecture was finally granted suffrage in 1912, the ‘uncivilized’ islands of Miyako and Yaeyama remained excluded from the electoral system, and Okinawa received only two seats in the Diet – fewer than other prefectures with the same population.

The decision to postpone structural and social reforms at the beginning of the 1880s was a response to local noblemen’s opposition, and a measure taken in light of continued Ryūkyūan ties to China. Some noblemen took refuge in China, where they lobbied for Chinese military intervention, and many continued passive resistance at home. To ease the situation, the government pressed former King Shō Tai (1843–1901) to encourage Okinawan people to accept Japanese rule. The Japanese administration, however, correctly concluded that its primary focus should be on rearing new generations of Okinawans with a focus on mass education from 1880. Fortuitously for Japan, the Ryūkyū Kingdom had no existing system of public schooling that could otherwise have become a source of alternative education and, by extension, a potential hotbed of resistance.

In 1880, the Okinawa Teachers College (*Okinawa shihan gakkō*) was established, which became the cradle of Okinawan new elites. The following year, the government launched a program of prefectural scholarships to Japan. Schools became the primary channel of Japanese culture and patriotic education. In 1887, Okinawa became the first prefecture where, under the policy of promoting patriotism, portraits of the Emperor were

introduced in schools.⁹ The Okinawan Association of Education, with its journal *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, played a crucial role in fostering a new identity among the future elites of Okinawan society. By 1911, Okinawa had 159 elementary schools and 1342 teachers, with 96% of children of elementary school age enrolled.¹⁰ By that time, most of the teachers were Okinawan locals, who took up the task of promoting the assimilation policy. The prefectural authorities leveraged young, enthusiastic teachers like Kuba Tsuru (1881–1943), the first woman to graduate from the Teachers College, and who created a sensation after shedding her traditional dress for a Japanese kimono. At the same time, however, the government was uninterested in developing education at the middle and high school levels. By 1924, Okinawa had only two middle schools and no high schools.¹¹ Students who wanted to pursue higher education had to travel either to mainland Japan or to Taiwan.

The Japanese administration was well aware of the potential danger posed by Ryūkyū traditions, including tributary relations with China from the fourteenth century forward, and tried to discourage memories of Ryūkyūan statehood. It is not a coincidence that the newly established prefecture was named ‘Okinawa’ and not ‘Ryūkyū.’ The term ‘Ryūkyū,’ which derived from the Chinese ‘Liuqiu,’ had been bestowed by a Chinese emperor and served as a reminder that Okinawan rulers had been vassals of China. ‘Okinawa,’ on the other hand, was a Japanese term.

Japanese ideologues made attempts to ‘de-Ryūkyūanize’ Okinawa. Between 1896 and 1897, a Japanese teacher, Nitta Yoshitaka, published a long series of articles called “Okinawa wa Okinawa nari Ryūkyū ni arazu” (Okinawa is Okinawa and not Ryūkyū) in *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* (Ryūkyū Education), where he argued that the terms ‘Ryūkyū’ and ‘Ryūkyūan’ connote negative meanings of ‘foreign’ and ‘barbarian,’ and should be discarded:

(...) Since we know that Okinawans belong to the Japanese race, since we know that they are our [Japanese] countrymen, and since Okinawa has broken all relations with China, there is no Chinese Ryūkyū anymore, only the Japanese islands of Okinawa. Therefore, we shall not use the term 'Ryūkyūan' (*Ryūkyūjin*). 'Okinawan' sounds much nicer than 'Ryūkyūan.' The word 'Ryūkyūan' reminds us of the past when Okinawa was a [foreign] territory belonging to Lord Shimazu. It harasses our ears like the 'Dutch' (*Orandajin*), 'Nankinese' (*Nankinjin*) or 'Korean' (*Chōsenjin*), leaving us with an impression that the Okinawans are foreign barbarians (*gaibanjin*). People of Okinawa may receive the same treatment as foreign barbarians because of this unfortunate appellation. Therefore, I urge everyone, beginning with the Society of Education, to stop using this term.¹²

Nitta disparaged the concept of 'Ryūkyū' by arguing that in the past, it also referred to Taiwan. Old Chinese chronicles recorded barbarian customs in 'Ryūkyū,' such as head hunting and cannibalism, but these customs, Nitta argued, obviously did not refer to Okinawa, as the Okinawan people were pure Japanese.¹³ He insisted that the Okinawan people's best interests lay in ending use of the term 'Ryūkyū' to avoid being confused with Taiwanese indigenous peoples.

Nor did Nitta forget to reproach the Okinawan Society of Education for naming its journal *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*.¹⁴ The title was reportedly proposed by Shimogoni Ryōnosuke,¹⁵ who, like Nitta, was a Japanese expatriate on Okinawa. Apparently, Japanese citizens were not all in agreement with the aggressive rhetoric of 'de-Ryūkyūanization.' Another Japanese teacher, Tajima Risaburō, countered: "It really does not

matter who introduces names. If we dislike the name 'Ryūkyū' for its Chinese origin, then what shall we do with 'Nippon,' which was also introduced by the Chinese?"¹⁶ Governor Narahara Shigeru, too, believed that one should handle the matter of Ryūkyūan past with a great caution. After all, the new generation of open-minded Okinawans, who had granted him responsibility, were descended from the former Ryūkyūan aristocracy. It was strategically unwise to disparage everything Ryūkyūan. Therefore, Narahara accepted the fact that the first Okinawan newspaper, established in 1893, would be called *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, a name that continues to the present.

Even so, the 'de-Ryūkyūanization' campaign was quite successful. Nitta was right to predict that 'Ryūkyūjin,' intentionally mispronounced by many Japanese people as 'Rikijin,' would eventually be seen as a derogatory term. The word came to be associated with lazy aristocrats, anti-Japanese reactionaries, or, at best, backward losers, as portrayed by Japanese writer Hirotsu Kazuo (1891-1961) in his novel *Samayoeru Ryūkyūjin (Ryūkyūan Drifters)*.¹⁷ Most importantly, Japan succeeded in erasing 'Ryūkyū' as a self-identification category of Okinawan people. It is worth mentioning that after World War Two, when the Americans tried to revive the 'Ryūkyūan nation,' they failed as Okinawans rallied for return to Japan.

On the other hand, the Japanese administration acknowledged that instead of fighting local traditions on all fronts, it was easier to embrace and incorporate them into their Japanese counterparts. Ryūkyūan religions, for example, came to be recognized as archaic forms of Shintō, while Ryūkyūan heroes were declared Japanese heroes and enshrined in Shintō shrines. The greatest Ryūkyūan statesmen, Shō Jōken (1617-1675), Giwan Chōho (1823-1876) and Sai On (1682-1761), received Japanese court ranks posthumously.

Japanese ideologists shrewdly used the Japanese figure of Minamoto no Tametomo (1139 - 1170) - the alleged father of the Ryūkyūan King Shunten (1166-1237) - in order to link the Japanese and Okinawan peoples.¹⁸

However, in the decades following Okinawan incorporation as a prefecture in 1879, Japanese administrators were undecided on how to handle Ryūkyūan history and whether to introduce the subject in schools. In 1906, a debate over history textbooks broke out in Okinawa. Local histories (*kyōdoshi*) had already been recognized on mainland Japan as an important pedagogical tool that furthered the project of nation-building, but the issue was problematic in Okinawa. The Japanese administration expressed concern that teaching Ryūkyūan history might jeopardize the inculcation of “national spirit” among Okinawan youth.¹⁹ The Okinawan Society of Education called for the introduction of Ryūkyūan history to the school curriculum, but given these concerns, and in the absence of an appropriate textbook, the project was shelved. When the authorities continued to ignore the issue, the local press accused the Japanese of “annihilating Okinawan history” (*rekishi immetsu saku*).²⁰

Okinawans had many reasons to criticize Japanese attitudes toward their culture, but these attitudes were not necessarily the result of anti-Okinawan policy. Sometimes, they reflected the lack of a decisive Japanese policy. The Japanese administration constantly hesitated over how and to what extent to embrace Okinawa. The assimilation campaign had little to do with *kulturkampf*. It primarily targeted Ryūkyūan customs and habits that were perceived as signs of backwardness. Occasionally, such efforts were met with resistance, as was the case when schoolchildren were ordered to cut off their traditional topknots. But at other times, the Ryūkyūan people abandoned their customs, such as the mortuary ritual *senkotsu* (bone-

washing), with little sign of regret. Even the campaign against Ryūkyūan languages, which has been best remembered through the *hōgen fuda*, or ‘dialect tablet,’²¹ was not as radical as one can get the impression from the so-called ‘dialect debate’ (*hōgen ronsō*) of 1940, when Japanese scholars divided over the value of preserving or eliminating Okinawan languages.²² The ideological climate of the wartime mobilization, when Japan aggressively pursued national unity, shall not becloud our view on the whole prewar period. Ultimately, the Japanese administration not only failed to eradicate indigenous culture in Okinawa, but also, by abolishing feudal laws and lifting constraints in social mobility, it unintentionally created propitious conditions for Ryūkyūan high culture to spread throughout the islands, which ultimately gave rise to what is today understood as Okinawan culture.²³ Most importantly, the Okinawan people ultimately retained control over significant elements of their cultural heritage, a luxury out of reach for, among others, the Ainu people, who lacked control of their homeland and became dependent on Japanese state patronage for their very survival.



Figure 3: Transporting pigs in Okinawa. Photo taken by Rev. Earl Bull (1876-1974) at the beginning of the 20th century. Courtesy of the University of the Ryukyus Library.

Embracing Japan

How did Okinawans during the Meiji era perceive Japanese rule? Did they see themselves as victims of Japanese colonization?

Okinawa's assimilation gained momentum in the second half of the 1890s, when China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War snuffed all hopes for the Ryūkyū Kingdom's restoration and reinvigoration of its tributary relations with China. Governor Narahara had just won the unconditional support of young Okinawan progressives, largely by encouraging the establishment of the prefecture's first newspaper - the *Ryūkyū Shinpō*. The *Shinpō* turned out to be a loyal organ, rarely criticizing the governor and his administration at a time when Okinawans were adopting a Japanese identity. Already during the war, a number of young Okinawans volunteered for service in the army (conscription went into effect only after the war, in 1897).

The voices of Okinawans in the early twentieth century reveal pride in being Japanese, together, however, with a fear of becoming colonial subjects. Okinawans were extremely sensitive to any attempt to call their Japanese-ness or loyalty into question. In 1903, for example, the *Ryūkyū Shinpō* protested against including Ryūkyūan people in an exhibition of native peoples for the World Trade and Industrial Exhibition in Osaka. Ōta Chōfu was particularly offended to learn that the organizers had dared presented the Okinawans together with the Ainu and Taiwanese 'savages'

(*seiban*).²⁴ In 1908, the Okinawan press reacted angrily to reports that the government was considering a plan to merge Okinawa and Taiwan. As the *Ryūkyū Shinpō* warned, this would relegate Okinawa to Taiwan's status as a colony in contrast to its status as a prefecture.²⁵ The famous philosopher and Marxist intellectual Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946) inadvertently sparked a wave of criticism during his visit to Okinawa in April 1911, when he publicly praised the Okinawan people for their supposed indifference to patriotism.²⁶

Once the Okinawan people accepted Japanese rule, there was no debate over the necessity of integration with the Japanese state. One notable exception was the Kōdōkai movement of 1896-97, the only attempt made by Okinawan leaders to win some degree of autonomy for Okinawa. The movement united conservative noblemen, who had finally come to terms with their defeat, and Okinawan progressives, who opted for swift integration with Japan. Together, they petitioned the government for a separate administrative system in Okinawa, with a hereditary office of governor headed by former King Shō Tai. The Japanese government, however, refused and threatened to prosecute movement leaders. Subsequently, there was close cooperation between Okinawans and Japanese authorities. Years later, Ōta Chōfu, who had co-authored the petition, acknowledged that the movement leaders had jeopardized Japanese confidence in the Okinawan people.²⁷ The Kōdōkai exemplified an incipient Okinawan indigenous nationalism. Japanese policymakers, however, neutralized it, or, more precisely, redirected it to foster Japanese nationalism. In the following years, demands for 'autonomy' (*jichi*) appeared frequently in Okinawan narratives. What Okinawan intellectuals understood by 'autonomy,' however, was not autonomy but equality. That is, they sought the same status and rights that people in other prefectures enjoyed. This understanding of autonomy

required Okinawans to assimilate and prove their ‘Japanese-ness.’

The project of assimilation was directed at old customs, as well as at the ‘reactionary mentality’ of Ryūkyūan people. Iha Fuyū (1876-1947), a celebrated scholar of Okinawan studies and a fervent advocate of assimilation, complained about the slave mentality of his people, by which he meant their failure to appreciate the value of unification with Japan.²⁸ Ōta Chōfu went further, describing Okinawans prior to the Sino-Japanese War as ‘parasites’ - people without subjectivity, completely dependent on others.²⁹ But such perspectives do not mean that Okinawans looked uncritically at Japan or that they blindly accepted assimilation, which in Ōta’s interpretation, entailed that Okinawans should even “sneeze like Japanese.”³⁰ Rather, they criticized Japan for its delayed reforms, its unequal treatment of Okinawa, and its failure to recognize Ryūkyūan cultural heritage. Ōta went to extremes in calling Ryūkyūan people “parasites,” but he simultaneously held Japan responsible for the mental state of Okinawan society. The postponement of reforms for the sake of taming Ryūkyūan opposition, or strict adherence to the principle of ‘peace at any price’ (*kotonakareshugi*), which he saw as characterizing the first two decades of Japanese rule, was a great mistake, the price that Okinawans were paying even five decades later in the 1930s.³¹

Assimilationist ideology left a strong mark on early Okinawan scholarship. Iha Fuyū subordinated his work to one goal: to prove that Okinawa was and always had been Japanese. By doing so, he sought to help Okinawans to overcome their inferiority complex and enhance their Japanese identity. He stated:

Since my early years, I have had a feeling

that there was a huge gap between the Okinawans (*Okinawajin*) and the Japanese (*tafukenjīn*), and I thought that I should try to fill this gap. Later on, I wanted to build a spiritual bridge between the two peoples by providing academic arguments that Okinawans were part of the Yamato people. I came to hold the belief that this would also be an expression of loyalty and patriotism to my country.³²

Iha’s earlier scholarship was strongly influenced by social Darwinism. He was convinced that assimilation was the best option for the Okinawan people, and he toured the prefecture with public lectures on ‘race hygiene,’ encouraging people to change their life habits. Throughout his life, he wrestled with the dilemma of how to recognize the Ryūkyūan people’s independent subjectivity as members of a highly civilized nation, and at the same time, recognize them as Japanese.³³ He developed the theory of ‘Japanese-Ryūkyūan common ancestry’ (*Nichiryū dōsorōn*), and presented Ryūkyūan history in terms of a divorce and reunification with Japan. The annexation of Ryūkyū, in his view, was not only inevitable, but also desirable for Okinawa’s development. Put simply, Japan set Okinawa back on the path of progress. His claim that the “disposition of the Ryūkyūs (*Ryūkyū shōbun*) was a kind of liberation from slavery”³⁴ became his manifesto, one that he repeated numerous times in his publications. Iha did not regret the passage of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, because, as he argued, “a system that has completed its function should give way to a new one, (...) otherwise it becomes a prison that enslaves people.”³⁵ He justified the drastic measures that the Meiji government introduced, arguing that, faced with Ryūkyūan resistance, which he also saw as understandable, Japan had no choice but to enforce “negative socialization” (destruction of statehood and local cultures). Had it not done so, unification would not have

been possible.³⁶ At the same time, Iha recognized Ryūkyūan heritage as an element that enriched Japan, and therefore warned against total assimilation. Okinawa had the right to preserve its “uniqueness,” and this would also serve Japan’s interests:

There is infinite uniqueness in Japan, and an infinite amount of new uniqueness will continue to emerge. A nation that has the composure to embrace people with such varied kinds of uniqueness is none other than a great nation.³⁷

Iha was convinced that the rules of evolution were universal and thus applied equally to Japan. Japan was changing, so “old systems” should give way. In particular, Japan was no longer a homogenous nation, so it needed to proactively respond by setting out new values that could embrace new peoples – the Ainu, the Ryūkyūan, Korean, Chinese and Malay peoples – and create a great multiethnic nation. Iha warned Japan not to indulge its old ideas of ‘Japanese-ness,’ lest it risk meeting the same fate as the Roman Empire, which, faced with new cultures, had tried to preserve its old values at all costs and eventually collapsed.³⁸

In his later years, after witnessing the devastation of Okinawa from the economic crisis of the 1920s, Iha’s faith in the power of assimilation waned. He departed from social evolutionism at the ontological level, revised his views on Ryūkyūan history, and depicted it in more pessimistic colors, as if Okinawa had always been a lonely, impoverished place, unable to control its fate. Even so, Iha never changed his opinion that Okinawa’s destiny was reunification with Japan.

Iha’s younger colleagues, Higashionna Kanjun (1882–1963), Higa Shunchō (1883–1977),

Nakahara Zenchū (1890–1964) and others, all subscribed to the concept of *Nichiryū dōsoron*, trying to establish stronger ties between Ryūkyū and Japan. Higashionna might have been reaching too far, when, swept up in nationalist fervor, he ascribed the Japanese spirit of *hakkō ichiu* (‘eight corners, one world,’ a nationalist slogan justifying Japan’s territorial expansion in the 1940s) to Ryūkyūan merchants, who in the 15th–16th century had traded with remote countries in Southeast Asia.³⁹ The efforts of Higashionna and the others to situate Okinawa within the scope of Japanese civilization reflected their true feelings and identity.

Conclusion

At the early stage of territorial expansion, namely before the Sino-Japanese War, Japan was acting more like a ‘territorial state’, rather than ‘nation state’, eager to incorporate new peoples who had been traditionally lying beyond the scope of Japanese society. Japan did not yet have a system of modern citizenship, or a clear concept of nationality. The transition period towards a nation state ended by the end of 1890s., when the Meiji government decided to set a clear boundary separating Japan proper from Taiwan, and introduced the first citizenship law (1899), which was based on the *jus sanguinis* principle. It is worth noting that in the preceding years the system of *koseki* (household registry) functioned as an ersatz of citizenship, and it covered all newly incorporated peoples, including even a tiny community of white settlers from the Ogasawara Islands.⁴⁰ Ryūkyūan people thus, in a manner of speaking, were granted Japanese citizenship ‘on credit,’ although initially unable to enjoy the rights and benefits it granted. Their racial and cultural qualifications for Japanese citizenship were later reconfirmed by scholars in the social sciences,⁴¹ whose revelations, however, did not necessarily

correspond with the sentiments of everyday Japanese citizens who tended to exoticize Okinawa.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, it is worth noting that Okinawa was nearly absent from Japanese colonial discourse. First of all, the Ryūkyūan peoples did not undergo the process of modernization with the same burden of negative stereotypes in Japanese eyes that the Ainu did, the latter having been demonized from the Edo era onwards. This is not to say that the Japanese were free of racial prejudices towards the Ryūkyūans or that they never happened to juxtapose the Ryūkyūans with ‘savage’ Ainu or Taiwanese – just to mention the infamous Mankind Hall at the Osaka Expo in 1903. But generally speaking, the Ryūkyūan people escaped classification as ‘natives.’ No ‘natives protection act’ was applied to the Ryūkyūans, as it was the case of the Ainu. Indeed, many Japanese expatriates in Okinawa experienced cultural shock. Newspapers and magazines reported on the exotic customs in Ryūkyū, confirming Japanese preconceptions that it was culturally alien territory. Nevertheless, with the 1879 incorporation of Okinawa as a prefecture, it did not register among Japanese people as an internal colony, and, in comparison to other Japanese territories including Hokkaido and later Taiwan and Korea, it was relatively absent from public discourse. Hypothetically, the lackluster appeal of Okinawa might have saved the Ryūkyūan people from being deemed ‘natives’ or ‘colonial subjects.’ Had it been rich in oil, iron, coal, timber or other natural resources, had it offered vast lands for settlers, then Japan might have coined an ideology justifying its appropriation in the name of progress and civilization. But this was not the case. Okinawa was simply a poor and forgotten province. Even the Imperial Army appreciated its strategic value not earlier than in 1944.

Finally, assimilation was imposed by Japan as much as it was willingly pursued by many

Okinawans. Okinawan leaders quickly took many of their cues from Japanese teachers and officials. Okinawa’s integration with Japan, therefore, falls under the paradigm of the rise of modern nation-states, where people of various cultural and social backgrounds eagerly assimilate into so-called ‘high culture,’ which opens the doors to citizenship, higher standards of living and, in general, opportunities for a better life. To put it simply, the Okinawan people found ‘high culture’ in Japan. Their drive towards assimilation reflected their will to live in a modern, centralized country with a unified culture and standardized language. The question remains as to why they did not find ‘high culture’ in their Ryūkyūan heritage, as well as why they did not evoke their own indigenous nationalism as a means to resist Japan. Indeed, under American military rule in the decades after 1945, they organized effectively to return to Japanese sovereignty. There is no simple answer, but at the very least, we can understand, based on Ernest Gellner’s theoretical work on nationalism, that there was nothing unusual in that. As Gellner argued,

The clue to the understanding of nationalism is its weakness at least as much as its strength. It was the dog who failed to bark who provided the vital clue for Sherlock Holmes. The number of potential nationalisms which failed to bark is far, far larger than those which did, though *they* have captured all our attention.⁴²

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Notes

- ¹ Paweł Sapieha, *Podróż na wschód Azji* [A journey to East Asia] (Lwów: Nakład Księgarni Gubrynowicza i Schmidta, 1899).
- ² *Ibid.*, 189.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 185-186.
- ⁴ The question of colonialism extends to early modern times. In 1609, Satsuma invaded the

Ryūkyū Kingdom and imposed vassal relations on it. The extent to which Satsuma had been interfering in the Kingdom's sovereignty and economically exploiting it has been a matter of a heated debate among scholars. On the one extreme, we find the view that Ryūkyū had been colonized by Satsuma. On the other, scholars argue that early modern Ryūkyū had been incorporated (though not entirely) into the *bakuhau* system. The latter view has been widely accepted by scholars for the past thirty years. Gregory Smits, for example, following Okinawan historian Takara Kurayoshi, describes early modern Ryūkyū as a "foreign country (*ikoku*) within the *bakuhau* system." See Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Politics in Early Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 48.

⁵ See: Nishizato Kikō, *Okinawa kindai shi kenkyū: kyūkan onzonki no shomondai* [Studies on Okinawan modern history: on the period of 'preservation of old customs'] (Okinawa: Okinawa jiji shuppan, 1981).

⁶ Henry B. Schwartz, *In Togo's Country: Some Studies in Satsuma and Other Little Known Parts of Japan* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1908), 141.

⁷ As to 31 December 1912, the community of Japanese expatriates in Okinawa Prefecture numbered only 6368. See *Okinawa Mainichi Shinbun*, July 30, 1913, in: *Ishigakishi shi: shiryō hen, kindai* [History of Ishigaki, compilation of documents, modern times], vol. 4 (Ishigaki: Daiichi hōki shuppan, 1983), 561.

⁸ Ōta Chōfu, *Okinawa kensei gojūnen* [Fifty years of Okinawa prefecture] (Tōkyō: Kokumin Kyōikusha, 1932), 301.

⁹ Matayoshi Seikiyo, *Taiwan shihai to Nihonjin* [The rule over Taiwan and the Japanese] (Tōkyō: Dōjidaisha, 1994), 48.

¹⁰ *Okinawaken shi* [History of Okinawa prefecture], ed. Ryūkyū seifu, vol. 20 (Haeburu: Ryūkyū seifu, 1967), 775, 835, 859.

¹¹ *Kyōiku nenkan* [Education yearbook], vol. 1/7 (Shōwa 2) (Tōkyō: Nihon tosho sentā, 1983), ha65-ha67, ha194-ha196.

¹² Nitta Yoshitaka, "Okinawa wa Okinawa nari Ryūkyū ni arazu," [Okinawa is Okinawa and not Ryūkyū], *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* 4 (1896), in *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, vol. 1, ed. Nishizuka Kunio (Tōkyō: Hompō shoseki, 1980), 129 (hereafter cited as *RK*)

¹³ *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* 10 (1896), in *RK*, vol. 1, 408-11; *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* 14 (1897), in *RK*, vol. 2. 107.

¹⁴ *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* 8 (1896), in *RK*, vol. 1, 311.

¹⁵ *Ryūkyū Kyōiku* 41 (1899), in *RK*, vol. 5, 28.

¹⁶ Hiyane Teruo, *Kindai Nihon to Iha Fuyū* [Modern Japan and Iha Fuyū] (Tōkyō: San'ichi Shobō, 1981), 18-19.

¹⁷ Hirotsu's novel, though sympathetic towards the Ryūkyūan people, outraged the Okinawan community on mainland Japan, who accused Hirotsu of perpetuating negative stereotypes about Okinawa. See Ōta Masahide, *Okinawa no minshū ishiki* [The Okinawan popular consciousness] (Tōkyō: Shinsensha, 1995), 321-322.

¹⁸ Interestingly, there is a similar legend linking the Ainu to Japanese people. It is a story of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the brother of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the founder of the Kamakura shogunate. Allegedly, Yoshitsune did not die in the war against his brother, but escaped to Ezo, where he became an Ainu chieftain. See David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in*

Nineteenth-Century Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 147–148.

¹⁹ *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, October 27, 1906, in *Okinawaken shi*, vol. 19, 302.

²⁰ *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, October 31, 1906, in *Okinawaken shi*, vol. 19, 303.

²¹ *Hōgen fuda* was used in schools to stigmatize students violating the “no dialect” rule.

²² The ‘dialect debate’ was sparked by Japanese ethnologist Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961) during his visit to Okinawa in January 1940, when he publicly criticized Okinawan authorities for their over-zealousness in promoting standard Japanese. In response, the local press launched an attack on Yanagi, accusing him of failing to understand Okinawa’s special circumstances. For details see Hugh Clarke, “The great dialect debate: the state and language policy in Okinawa,” in *Society and the State in Interwar Japan*, ed. Elise K. Tipton (New York: Routledge, 1997), 193–217.

²³ Like other countries in East Asia, early modern Ryūkyū adopted a Confucian model of society with a highly elaborate system of statuses with different rights and privileges. The feudal system hardened cultural barriers between the aristocrats and commoners, townsmen and peasants, and between Okinawa and remote islands. The culture of Shuri and Naha, which aspired to the status of high culture, had thus a limited range of influence. It was after the fall of the Ryūkyū Kingdom that it started disseminating in the countryside. This process was stimulated by the ongoing pauperization of aristocracy, who had no choice but to mingle with commoners, and, in extension, by the fall of feudalism, which was dismantled by Japanese officials.

²⁴ See Ōta Chōfu, “Dōhō ni taisuru bujoku” [An insult to our countrymen], *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, April 7, 1903, in *Ōta Chōfu senshū* [Selected works by Ōta Chōfu], vol. 2., eds. Hiyane Teruo and Isa Shin’ichi (Tōkyō: Daiichi Shobō, 1995–1996), 211–212; “Jinruikan wo chūshi seshimeyo” [Stop the Mankind Hall!], *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, April 11, 1903, in *Ōta Chōfu senshū*, vol. 2, 213–214.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁶ Ōta Masahide, *Okinawa no minshū ishiki*, 316–317.

²⁷ Ōta Chōfu, *Okinawa kensei gojūnen*, 251–252; “Seiryoku no keitō” [The system of power], in *Ōta Chōfu senshū*, vol. 1, 250.

²⁸ Iha Fuyū, “Ryūkyūjin no kaihō” [Liberation of Ryūkyūans], in *Iha Fuyū senshū* [Selected works of Iha Fuyū], vol. 1 (Naha: Okinawa Taimususha, 1961), 274.

²⁹ Ōta Chōfu, *Okinawa kensei gojūnen*, 235.

³⁰ Ōta used this expression in a public lecture with the intent to emphasize the need for women’s education. Because of these words, he has been remembered by future generations as an advocate of radical assimilation. For more on this, see Richard Siddle, “Colonialism and Identity in Okinawa before 1945,” *Japanese Studies* 18, no. 2 (1998): 130–131; Stanisław Meyer, “Ōta Chōfu, an Okinawan journalist (1865–1938),” in *Civilisation of Evolution, Civilisation of Revolution: Metamorphoses in Japan 1900–2000*, eds. Arkadiusz Jabłoński, Stanisław Meyer, and Kōji Morita (Kraków: Museum of Japanese Art & Technology Manggha, 2009), 397–406.

³¹ Ōta Chōfu, *Okinawa kensei gojūnen*, 70–72, 288–289.

³² Iha Getsujō, “Iha bungakushi no dan” [The talk of Mr. Iha, Bachelor of Arts], *Okinawa Mainichi Shinbun*, June 15, 1909, in *Okinawaken shi*, vol. 19, 393–394. Note the usage of the word ‘tafukenjūin’ (lit. people from other prefectures). Iha tried to avoid any suggestion that

the Japanese and Okinawan peoples were of two different nations. A similar strategy can be found in Ōta Chōfu's works, where Ōta used the word 'honkenjin' (people from this prefecture) for Okinawan people and 'tafukenjū' for Japanese people.

³³ Iha had no doubt that the Ryūkyūan people constituted a 'nation,' and this was what made them superior to the Ainu, whom he dismissed as 'a people' (he used neologisms 'nēshon' and 'piipuru'). He praised the efforts of the Okinawan people to highlight their Japanese-ness by distancing themselves from inferior 'natives.' See Iha Fuyū, "Ryūkyūshi no sūsei" [The current of the Ryūkyūan history], *Okinawa Shinbun*, August 1, 1907, in *Okinawa rekishi monogatari* (Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 1998), 285.

³⁴ Iha Fuyū, "Ryūkyūjin no kaihō," 274.

³⁵ Iha Fuyū, *Ko Ryūkyū no seiji* [Politics of Old Ryūkyū], in *Iha Fuyū zenshū* [Collected works of Iha Fuyū], vol. 1, eds. Hattori Shirō, Nakasone Seizen, Hokama Shuzen (Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 1974-1976), 484.

³⁶ Iha Fuyū, "Ryūkyūshi no sūsei," 290.

³⁷ Ibid., 292, quoted and translated in Tomiyama Ichirō, "The Critical Limits of the National Community: The Ryūkyūan Subject," *Social Science Japan Journal* 1, no. 2 (1998): 170.

³⁸ Iha Fuyū, *Ko Ryūkyū no seiji*, 488-489.

³⁹ See: Higashionna Kanjun, "Hōshin o motomeyo" [Let us demand a policy], *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, August 14, 1943, in *Higashionna Kanjun zenshū* [Collected works of Higashionna Kanjun], vol. 10 (Tōkyō: Ryūkyū Shinpōsha, 1982), 374.

⁴⁰ American and British settlers in Ogasawara were included in the *koseki* registry in 1882, although they were prohibited to move to mainland Japan. See: Kamoto Itsuko, *Kokusai kekkon no tanjō: 'Bunmeikoku Nihon' e no michi* [The birth of international marriages: the road to 'civilized Japan'] (Tōkyō: Shin'yōsha, 2001), 200-202. In Japan citizenship and the *koseki* system remain closely intertwined, as the household registry serves as a certification of citizenship. Note that whereas the Taiwanese and Koreans were covered with separate *koseki* systems, and thus they received at least a promise of full citizenship in the undefined future, it was not introduced to the Mandate Territories in Southern Pacific. We can observe that with the imperial expansion the institution of Japanese citizenship was becoming exclusionary.

⁴¹ For early anthropological studies in the Ryūkyū Islands and the beginning of Okinawan folklore studies, see Julia Yonetani, "Ambiguous Traces and the Politics of Sameness: Placing Okinawa in Meiji Japan," *Japanese Studies* 20, no. 1 (2000): 15-31; Patrick Beillevaire, "Assimilation from within, appropriation from without: The folklore-studies and ethnology of Ryūkyū/Okinawa," in *Anthropology and Colonialism in Asia and Oceania*, eds. Jan van Bremen and Akitoshi Shimizu (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 172-196.

⁴² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 43.