

The rhetoric of the assimilation ideology in the remote islands of Okinawa: becoming Japanese or Okinawan?

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Abstract: *Being seen as peripheries of civilisation, the remote islands of Miyako and Yaeyama suffered from political, social and cultural marginalisation in the Ryukyu Kingdom. With the fall of the kingdom and the establishment of the Okinawa prefecture in 1879, these islands, like other regions in the prefecture, were subjected to the policy of assimilation and 'Japanisation'. Assimilation was promoted in Okinawa in the name of modernisation and the idea of Japanese culture was closely associated with the notion of modernity and civilisation. Pre-war newspapers in Miyako and Yaeyama demonstrate, however, that the advocates of assimilation skilfully exploited the issue of local identities and complex relations between Okinawa and the remote islands. They encouraged local people to combat their inferiority complex by presenting themselves as more 'modern' and 'civilised' than Okinawans. Japanese culture was appropriated as a device for negotiating one's status within Okinawan society, and hence assimilation came to concern the matter of 'becoming Okinawan'.*

Historians have been long debating on whether the history of modern Okinawa should fall under the study of Japanese colonialism, or should be seen as a process of modernisation and integration with the Japanese nation-state.¹ Undoubtedly, pre-war Okinawa had an ambiguous status: although nominally a Japanese prefecture, for many years it remained under a semi-colonial system of governance. Even if the government had eventually recognised Okinawans as fully-fledged citizens, local people could never fully benefit from the privilege of having Japanese citizenship. Okinawa remained the poorest region in the country, with the lowest rates of income-per-capita, an underdeveloped infrastructure, and the worst access to healthcare, education and other modern institutions. Put simply, Okinawan people were underprivileged in terms of what Thomas Marshall

called 'social citizenship', namely the rights to security, to economic welfare and to the life of a 'civilised being as determined by the standards prevailing in the society'.² In that sense their situation did not differ much from that of Taiwanese and Koreans.

And yet it is hard to deny that among all the peoples absorbed into Imperial Japan the Okinawans assimilated best and confirmed their will to remain Japanese after the Second World War. More importantly, the pre-war generation of Okinawans did not necessarily see themselves as victims of Japanese imperialism. However harsh the judgment the Okinawans today pass on pre-war times, voices of their fathers and grandfathers cannot be ignored. Hence Richard Siddle was correct to say that the matter of whether Okinawa was a colony or not largely depends on how local people want to remember it. It is a subject of the 'politics of memory'.³

The problem that concerns us here is assimilation. Scholars Arakawa Akira and Ōta Masahide depicted assimilation as a tool of oppression used by state-authorities to subjugate and colonise Okinawa.⁴ Indeed, the policy of assimilation here seemed to be much harsher than in other parts of the country and in some respects resembled *Kulturkampf*.⁵ The government was constantly questioning Okinawans' loyalty, remembering that not many years ago they used to feel a strong sentiment toward China. This attitude was well reflected in the language policy, where the authorities readily tolerated dialects on the mainland, but showed zero tolerance toward dialects in Okinawa.⁶ Okinawans were constantly

under strong pressure to prove their ‘Japanese-ness’. But on the other hand it is hard to deny that assimilation was promoted by Okinawans themselves as much as imposed by the state authorities. We discover that throughout the whole pre-war period Okinawa was always seeking a close integration with Japan, believing that the importation of Japanese know-how was the shortest way to modernity and prosperity. Hence the case of Okinawa falls rather under the paradigm of a Gellnerian process of nation building, where people of various social and cultural backgrounds assimilated a designated culture, being promised in exchange the benefits of modern citizenship and prospects for a better future in general.⁷

Assimilation concerned primarily two objectives: modernisation and ‘becoming Japanese’. Pre-war advocates of assimilation put equal emphasis on these two aspects. As far as concerns the modernisation issue, we discover that the Okinawans responded to Japanese civilisation in a similar way as the Japanese did with respect to the West. They perceived Japan as a road towards modernity and prosperity. Ōta Chōfu (1865-1938), a graduate of the Keiō Gijuku College and founder of Okinawan journalism, remained under the strong intellectual influence of Fukuzawa Yukichi: Japan’s most prominent enthusiast for Westernisation. His younger colleague Iha Fuyū (1876-1947), who became a distinguished scholar in studies of Okinawan history, justified the need of Japanisation by referring to the theories of evolutionism and Social Darwinism. Japan, Iha argued, put Okinawa back on the path of progress and prosperity. From the perspective of evolution, the unification with Japan was not only desirable, but also inevitable.⁸ It is worth noting that Okinawan intellectuals never

remained uncritical about Japanese culture. They encouraged people to accept only those values and customs which they recognized as beneficial for their future. As Ōta Chōfu put it:

I do not say that Okinawa should assimilate with other prefectures in every detail from A to Z. There are many ugly customs in Japan and therefore I do not think we should adopt all of them without distinguishing between good and bad ones. Let the Japanese first do away with their bad habits (...).⁹

The issue of ‘becoming Japanese’ was more complex, as it was touching the sensitive problem of social discrimination. This problem was particularly acute in Japan proper, where thousands of Okinawans settled down at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many people believed that the best solution for discrimination was to abandon one’s local culture and identity and to ‘Japanise’ to the full extent. Even Ōta Chōfu, who himself was proud of his Okinawan origin, acknowledged that sometimes it was better not to expose anything that might have argued for Okinawan distinctive ethnicity: ‘Okinawan people cannot accomplish harmony with the rest of the country, because the [Japanese] people bear in their minds an idea that [Okinawan] customs and feelings are entirely different’.¹⁰ In other words, since the Japanese did not perceive the Okinawans as Japanese, it was in the interest of Okinawan people not to expose their distinctiveness and thereby confirm the inaccurate beliefs of the Japanese.

As the image of Japan was closely associated with the notion of modernity, representations of ‘Japanese-ness’ included such virtues as entrepreneurship, hard work, openness to new ideas and rejection of feudal mentality. These virtues were highly celebrated in the writings of Okinawan intellectuals such as Ōta, who lamented over the parasitic nature of the Ryukyuan aristocracy. The local press frequently addressed the issue of modernity, encouraging people to improve their manners. We discover, however, that some preachers of assimilation skilfully exploited the issues of local identities and old animosities between different regions in the prefecture. People from Okinawa Island, for instance, always tended to perceive their cousins from Sakishima (Miyako and Yaeyama) as primitive ‘country bumpkins’ and hence the newspapers in Sakishima encouraged readers not only to become modern, but also to surpass their neighbours from other districts in Okinawa. Miyako and Yaeyama closely watched each other, mutually criticizing their shortcomings and trying to present themselves as more civilised than Okinawa Island.

At this point one needs to emphasise that the Japanese did not colonise Okinawa physically. Unlike Hokkaido or Taiwan, Okinawa had few natural resources to offer and consequently did not attract many settlers from Japan. By 1912, over thirty years after the annexation of Ryukyu (1879), Japanese expatriates in the prefecture numbered six thousand, which was only slightly more than one per cent of Okinawa’s overall population.¹¹ Most of them resided in the city of Naha, working in public administration or running their own private businesses. Japanese authorities simply had no power to work at the grass roots in every

corner of Okinawa and had no choice but to shift the task of modernising the country to local agents. Hence Japanese civilisation reached the remote regions of the prefecture indirectly, being first absorbed and digested by citizens of Shuri (the old Ryukyuan capital) and Naha.

Ethnic frictions between the Japanese expatriates and local people were much smaller issues in the remote islands than in Naha and the surrounding towns. In this respect we discover an important difference in the language of newspapers in Sakishima and Okinawa. The language of Okinawan newspapers was dominated by the rhetoric of ‘we Okinawans, they Japanese’. Japan seemed to be the primary point of reference against which the Okinawans from Shuri and Naha were trying to identify themselves. This rhetoric in fact only accentuated the boundary between the Japanese and the Okinawans. Being aware of a dangerous potential hidden behind the words ‘Ryukyu’, ‘Okinawa’ and ‘Japan’, journalists tried to substitute neutral terms for them, such as *honken* (our prefecture) and *tafukun* (other prefectures). Similarly, instead of writing ‘Japanese merchants’ newspapers preferred to use the term *kiryū shōnin* (literally ‘temporarily visiting merchants’).

Newspapers in Sakishima, on the other hand, used terms *hongun* (our district) and *tagun* (other districts). The term *tagun* had a wide meaning and, depending on the context, could refer to neighbouring islands, Okinawa Island or Japan proper. The term *kiryū shōnin* denoted here all foreign merchants, not only from Japan, but also from Okinawa Island. The point is that in the remote islands the

boundary separating the locals from the foreigners was more ambiguous and the ethnic boundary with Japan seemed to be less tangible.

Historically speaking, the problem of assimilation concerned with the issue of relations within Okinawan society, was very complex. High-cultured residents of Shuri disregarded their neighbours from Naha, proud aristocrats tended to look down on commoners, and people from Okinawa discriminated against their country fellows from the remote islands. These relations reflected the legacy of feudalism, where social inequalities had been justified and institutionalised by the Ryukyuan state. In the seventeenth century the Ryukyu Kingdom introduced a system of class division. The law segregated commoners from aristocrats and determined their life in nearly every aspect, including professions, clothing, housing and cultural entertainments. The commoners, for example, were not allowed to wear silk or carry umbrellas, and the noblemen, as a class of officials, were expected not to engage in farming and crafting. The social configuration was very complex and people enjoyed different rights and privileges depending on their court rank, official rank and place of habitation. The top of the social ladder was occupied by noblemen from Shuri, who had monopolised the most lucrative positions in the state administration and enjoyed the best access to education and refined culture. People from the remote islands of Kume, Miyako and Yaeyama, on the other hand, represented an inferior class of citizens. These islands were excessively drained of taxes and treated like penal colonies, where convicts from Okinawa were exiled. For many years the Shuri Court had

hesitated about recognising the status of local aristocrats and barred them from participation in political and cultural life in the capital.

These problems did not disappear instantly after the annexation of Ryukyu. The infamous *nintōzei* tax – the symbol of oppression of Miyako and Yaeyama – continued to be enforced until the very end of the nineteenth century.¹² Local people in Sakishima had to endure social discrimination at the hands of Okinawans and complained about being forgotten by state authorities. As one journalist from a local newspaper sadly noted: ‘If Okinawa prefecture is a stepchild [of Japan] then the people of Sakishima are like abandoned children’.¹³

Nonetheless, the fall of the kingdom brought about changes on an unprecedented scale. With the abolition of feudalism and the removal of all social constraints (which was done at the hands of Japanese officials), commoners and petty aristocrats could finally seek an opportunity to raise their social and material status. The aristocratic culture of Shuri and Naha began to spread to the countryside, being seen by local people as a marker of high status. The most notable phenomena related to this process were changes in the kinship system. That is to say, commoners began to reorganise their traditional kinship organisations by adopting patterns of aristocratic clans (so-called *munchuu*). Many of them took pains to trace their roots and establish ancestry in the class of noblemen, or even in the royal family (though all their claims to aristocratic origin were usually based on fictional evidence). On the remote islands, where

Okinawan background had always been a matter of great prestige, people all of sudden began to ‘discover’ ancestors on Okinawa.¹⁴

The process of assimilation, therefore, was two-folded and concerned the spread of Japanese and Ryukyuan high culture. It is impossible to detach the two aspects from each other and not to ask about the issue of social status and power relations within Okinawan society. Japanese culture offered a ticket to modern citizenship and this was the primary reason that encouraged people to assimilate it. Narratives in local newspapers, however, suggest that it was also used as a device for negotiating one’s status within Okinawan society. Japanese culture – however imagined by local people – thus acquired a new meaning and a new function.

Taiwan and the idea of Modernity

If Japan served as a source of images of modernity, Taiwan was supposed to symbolize the antithesis of the civilised world. The origin of this rhetoric dates back to the ill-fated ‘Taiwan Incident’. In December 1871 a Ryukyuan ship from Miyako met a typhoon and drifted away to eastern Taiwan. When the survivors went ashore to seek help, they were captured by local aborigines and slaughtered. Japan made use of this incident to affirm its claims to the Ryukyu Islands. In the course of events Tokyo sent a retaliatory expedition to Taiwan and forced the Chinese court to recognise the Ryukyuan as Japanese subjects. The military action was backed by an ideological campaign that made a clear

distinction between the Ryukyuan and the Taiwanese, categorising the former as Japanese and the latter as cruel ‘savages’.

In the following years ideologists continued to use images of ‘barbarian’ Taiwan while trying to ‘de-Ryukyuanise’ Okinawa. In 1896-7, a Japanese teacher and activist in the Society of Okinawan Education, Nitta Yoshitaka, published a series of articles entitled ‘Okinawa wa Okinawa nari Ryūkyū ni arazu’ (Okinawa is Okinawa and not Ryukyu), in which he depreciated the entire Ryukyuan history. Nitta recalled the fact that in the remote past the term Ryukyu referred to both Okinawa and Taiwan. Because Taiwan had been associated with ‘barbarian’ customs such as head-hunting and cannibalism, he argued, it was in the interest of Okinawans not to use the term ‘Ryukyu’ and be confused with Taiwanese aborigines.¹⁵

In 1899 governor Narahara Shigeru set 4 April as the day to commemorate the ‘Taiwan Incident’.¹⁶ The ceremony held by the Japanese authorities on this day was in a manner of speaking a symbolic confirmation of Okinawans’ ‘Japaneseness’, thus enhancing the gap between Okinawa and Taiwan. The Okinawans took pride in being ‘civilised’ and ‘Japanese’, and consequently they followed the rhetoric of the Japanese ideology. The word ‘Taiwan’ came to be associated with negative patterns of behaviour. Local newspapers urged people to abandon certain customs, claiming that they looked Taiwanese-like and thus could harm Okinawa’s image. The *Sakishima Shimbun* in Miyako, for example, published the following article:

In order to pursue the development of Miyako, first of all we have to work on the improvement of local traditions. The improvement of local traditions means the [cultural] unification with people from other prefectures – the so-called unification of nation.... It is the most pending task that we do away with our evil customs. The customs of Miyako resemble those of Chinks (*Chankoro*). For example, people [in Miyako] mourn the dead in the same manner [as the Chinese do], loudly crying. Like the Taiwanese, we burn paper imitations of money in an act of offering to God. Also, we display vulgar behaviour during drinking parties. There is absolutely no difference between us and the Taiwanese. All that makes us different is in our dress.¹⁷

And yet the Okinawans could not ignore the fact that Taiwan under Japanese rule was becoming modern. In many respects it was better developed than Okinawa; it could boast of the large commercial cities of Taipei and Kaohsiung and an impressive infrastructure of roads and railways. Taiwan, along with Japan proper, was a country of opportunities. Numerous Okinawans migrated to Taiwan to work in the public administration, at schools and in the police forces. Many of them succeeded, such as Teruya Hiroshi (1875-1939), who made a career as an engineer working on the construction of railways. Also, many Okinawan students travelled to Taiwan to pursue higher education.¹⁸

The increasing dependency of the prefecture upon the Taiwanese market raised anxiety among Okinawans. When in 1908 two members of the Diet came up with a proposal to merge Okinawa and Taiwan into a large administrative unit – Nan'yōdō – local people vehemently protested, fearing that Okinawa's status would fall to that of a colony. The *Ryūkyū Shimpō* emphasised that Okinawa constituted an integral part of Japan and thus it was unjustified to compare it with Taiwan.¹⁹ The plan of Nan'yōdō was eventually aborted, but the process of Okinawa's economic integration with Taiwan proceeded. The case of Yonaguni Island was most instructive.

Yonaguni, the most remote island in Okinawa prefecture, lies in close proximity to Taiwan (occasionally Taiwanese mountains can be seen from Yonaguni). After Japan had colonised Taiwan, Yonaguni was gradually incorporated into the sphere of the Taiwanese economy. A great part of Yonaguni's production was designated for the Taiwanese market. By 1930, Taiwan represented approximately thirty per cent of Yonaguni's overall trade.²⁰ The island exported dried fish (including bonito and tuna) and pigs, and imported commodities of all varieties. Local people were travelling to Taiwan to work, and sending their children to Taiwanese schools. Taiwanese currency circulated on the island along with the Japanese yen. With the establishment of a direct postal service in 1933, Yonaguni became connected with Japan proper via Keelung in Taiwan.²¹ Also, Yonaguni (as well as Miyako and Yaeyama) belonged to the same time-zone as Taiwan, and so remained one hour ahead of Okinawa and Japan. Relations between the two islands further intensified after the Second World War,

when Yonaguni functioned as a major smuggling centre connecting Japan with China. The Taiwanese currency was in use here until 1948.²²

'History of Yonaguni Town' (*Yonaguni chō shi*) contains a captivating photo with students from Yonaguni Primary School on a school excursion in Taiwan.²³ The picture was shot sometime in 1940 and presents pupils visiting a Shinto shrine. The scenery with a large gate (*torii*) and stone-lanterns (*torō*) looks very Japanese, and only a sago palm indicates that the setting is not in Japan. The meaning of this photo is significant if one considers that the objective of school excursions was not purely recreational; it was also about raising the nation. The Ministry of Education promoted such excursions so that students could be exposed to Japanese civilisation and experience at first hand the greatness of their nation. The children from Yonaguni, however, found Japan not in Kyoto, Tokyo or Shuri, but in Taiwan. Indeed, there must have been a lot of truth in what a publicist from a local newspaper stated, namely that in Yonaguni 'the whole culture comes from Taiwan'.²⁴

Narratives from the remote islands

After education, the press was the secondary instrument serving the policy of assimilation. Journalism in Okinawa marked its beginning in 1893 when Governor Narahara Shigeru gave his consent to the establishment of the first local newspaper *Ryūkyū Shimpō*. The *Shimpō* was to become the most fervent advocate of assimilation and a loyal supporter of prefectural authorities. After a

decade, the monopoly of *Shimpō* was challenged by *Okinawa Shimbun* (1905), *Okinawa Mainichi Shimbun* (1908) and other titles. With the establishment of *Miyako Asahi Shimbun* (1915) in Miyako, and *Sakishima Shimbun* (1917) in Yaeyama, journalism reached the remote islands of the prefecture. Due to a limited readership, many titles did not last long. Their fate often depended on the personal engagement and individuality of one person, namely the chief-editor, who perceived his job as a mission of enlightenment. The *Sakishima Shimbun*, for instance, ceased to exist with the death of its founder Matsushita Bansui in 1926, and *Yaeyama Shimpō* (1921) disappeared from the market in 1934 after its chief-editor Higa Tōki had decided to quit.²⁵ The newspapers in the remote islands had an average circulation of a few hundred copies and were issued, at most, once or twice a week. It needs to be emphasised that the local press did reflect accurately how ordinary people responded to the policy of assimilation, as they primarily represented the voices of its propagators, yet they give some insight into the social and cultural context within which the issue of assimilation was addressed.

The stigma of being ‘backward people’ had important legal implications for islanders from Miyako and Yaeyama. For many years they remained underprivileged in terms of civil rights. When in 1906 the Diet debated on introducing suffrage to Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama realised that they would not be covered by the election bill. They swiftly sent a mission to Tokyo and jointly petitioned the government for the revision of the bill:

Compared with times of old, people in our districts have changed tremendously, and nowadays we have all the qualifications to fulfil duties to the country as Japanese citizens. We regret to see, however, that we have been differentiated from other citizens in Okinawa, being not covered by the election law, in spite of the fact that we are equal citizens to other people in the prefecture.²⁶

People were frustrated to see that the government differentiated between them and the Okinawans on the ground of their alleged 'backwardness'. It was not before 1919 – seven years after Okinawa – that Miyako and Yaeyama finally received suffrage. But even then they could hardly compete with Okinawans for the status of a high-cultured people. They could however, position themselves as better 'Japanese' or as genuine patriots. The following article, published in the *Sakishima Shimbun* on New Year's Day 1920, aimed at enhancing the self-esteem of people in Yaeyama. Playing a patriotic tune the article discussed the meaning of the New Year and why it was important to celebrate it. Then it launched an attack on Okinawans who continued to follow the tradition of observing the Chinese New Year:

We, the people from remote Yaeyama, absolutely do not observe the Chinese New Year. There is not even one stupid fool among us who would do that. Last year, however, many people in Okinawa and Itoman openly celebrated it. They even slaughtered pigs for that occasion. How can we call them true nationals, if

they neglect the observance of the right New Year? Are they all right with respect to the Emperor and the nation? No, and therefore they are condemned as barbarians. Listen carefully, if you understand what human shame is. This year in April the special administrative status of Yaeyama will finally be abolished [i.e. Yaeyama will receive the same status and rights as other regions in Japan proper]. This provides a good occasion to purify our heads with water on the eve of the New Year. Do not behave like non-nationals, do not celebrate the Chinese New Year, abandon this barbarian practice! What can we gain from stupidly aping other people? Nothing, our Yaeyama culture may only suffer many disadvantages...²⁷

The Chinese calendar was a hot issue in Okinawa. In the past the Ryukyans had been using the lunar calendar with Chinese names of eras. Naturally, Japanese authorities launched a campaign against its usage, as they were trying to erase all those traditions that would call to mind Okinawa's independence and its affiliation with China. The *Ryūkyū Shimpō* dismissed the Chinese calendar as a symbol of backwardness posing a serious obstacle to the advance of modernity.²⁸ The journal *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, which represented the vanguard of advocates for assimilation, frequently urged people to stop observing the Chinese calendar, arguing also that the celebration of the Japanese New Year was a matter of patriotism. 'People who observe the Chinese calendars are

criminals', wrote one publicist.²⁹ Another one argued: 'Those who do not observe the proper calendar do not understand what [being a member of] nation is'.³⁰

The authorities generally succeeded in eradicating the Chinese calendar, but not everywhere. The tradition of observing the New Year and other festivals in accordance with the lunar calendar has been preserved, for example, in Itoman in the south of Okinawa Island.

The author of the article in *Sakishima Shimbun* resorted to a rhetorical device of 'barbarising' Okinawa in order to promote and present Yaeyama as a civilised country. His argument gains peculiar significance if one considers that Itoman (which he mentions in the text) was one of the most successful cities in Okinawa, highly esteemed by Japanese expatriates. Fishermen from Itoman were said to have no match in the whole of Okinawa, being the vanguard of the Japanese deep-sea fishing industry. Women, too, enjoyed a reputation for being hard-working, strong and independent. If Yaeyama could claim to be more 'Japanese' and civilised than the famous Itoman, then obviously it did not deserve to be perceived by Okinawans as an inferior country.

Nevertheless, people from Okinawa always tended to discriminate between Miyako and Yaeyama, perceiving the latter as more civilised. Miyako gained a reputation as an island inhabited by stubborn, violent and hot tempered people, as opposed to the nice and easy-going islanders from Yaeyama. Some of those negative stereotypes of Miyako remain prevalent, and even today one can hear

odd stories of Miyako (such as that it is dangerous to walk the streets there after dusk).

This is not to say that Yaeyama was portrayed as an idyllic country. As a matter of fact, due to malaria it was badly stigmatised. People feared travelling to Iriomote Island where a number of villages had been ravaged by malaria. Yet in contrast to Miyako, Yaeyama had been more open to cultural influences from Okinawa and developed a culture that later enchanted Japanese ethnologists, such as Yanagita Kunio and Yanagi Muneyoshi. Miyako somehow did not impress ethnologists to the same extent as Yaeyama. It is Yaeyama that has attained fame as a paradise of art and poetry. It is the people of Yaeyama who nowadays boast of themselves as representatives of truly Ryukyuan culture, whilst their countrymen in Miyako still struggle against being stereotyped as inferior and backward.

Pre-war newspapers in Sakishima eagerly exploited popular images of ‘good’ Yaeyama and ‘bad’ Miyako. The people of Miyako, for instance, were portrayed as ‘mean’ and ‘cunning’, in contrast to the people of Yaeyama, who allegedly were of a ‘simple’ and ‘docile’ nature.³¹ The newspapers pointed out the envious and money-oriented nature of Miyako people and reproached them for having no respect for moral values and no sense of public duty.³² People in Miyako, disclosing symptoms of an inferiority complex, reacted with a tacit acknowledgment that something must have been wrong with them:

People dismiss Miyako as a country that has only faults and no virtues that could be turned into advantages... Miyako may indeed have more vices than virtues, but it is unfair to say that vices are all [that define Miyako].³³

What positive things could be said about Miyako people then? They were said, for instance, to be superior in commerce. They might have been 'mean' and 'cunning', but at least they had an 'enterprising spirit', which the Yaeyama inhabitants were reportedly lacking.³⁴ Miyako claimed to be more successful because its society had managed to get rid of remnants of the feudal era, such as the social division into samurai and commoners:

In other regions one can still find commoners who do not dare to raise their head in front of an aristocrat and prostrate themselves in absolute obedience. Above all, people continue to follow an old custom of discriminating people by striped patterns of clothing: these patterns are for samurai, those are for peasants... Hence they look bizarre, despite the fact they are Japanese like us... In Miyako [on the other hand] the spread of modern ideas seems to be more advanced than in other districts and wards [tagunku].³⁵

The overcoming of feudal habits reportedly prompted the rise of a spirit of rivalry among all people, regardless of their former status. Miyako society boasted of its

aristocrats who, unlike their colleagues in Yaeyama, did not hesitate to take jobs which used to be regarded as inappropriate for persons of their status. Besides, Miyako was proud of overcoming the mentality of *kanson mimpi* (making much of officialdom and little of the people), which was allegedly preventing aristocrats in Yaeyama from considering jobs outside the bureaucracy.³⁶

Miyako people also claimed to be better at standard Japanese (*hyōjungo*). This was a claim of a great significance, because the Okinawans in general were known for their poor knowledge of Japanese language, which was a cause of discrimination against them on the Japanese mainland. Central and local authorities made great efforts to improve their language abilities, often by employing drastic measures, such as the infamous *hōgen fuda* (dialect tablet) at schools, or financial penalties for civil servants, if they were caught speaking dialect at work.³⁷ Among all the Ryukyuan dialects the Miyako one was regarded as particularly odd and incomprehensible and even today the Okinawans make fun of the Miyako accent. Yet, as the local press wrote:

That everyone in Miyako, old and young, men and women, speak standard Japanese is the most remarkable virtue... Even in the countryside one would not find oneself being unable to communicate in Japanese... On this point [Miyako] surpasses other regions.³⁸

Besides that, local newspapers reported that soldiers of Miyako origin attained better reputations in the army than other Okinawans, also because of their *hyōjungo* skills.³⁹

We can recognise that Miyako people responded to being depicted as ‘inferiors’ with the following strategy: instead of denying their shortcomings they tried to turn them into virtues. They might have been rough and hard but these were desirable features in commerce. They might have been less cultured than the Okinawans and people from Yaeyama, but instead they could produce tough soldiers speaking decent Japanese.

One may ask whether Miyako people were indeed better skilled in *hyōjungo*. Most probably not, considering the fact that today Okinawans still make fun of their accent. Perhaps the information that the society of Miyako had successfully overcome the mentality of *kanson mimpi*, or that people had abolished the tradition of differentiating between aristocrats and commoners, reflected not the truth, but only wishful thinking. In Okinawa social boundaries between aristocrats and commoners were disappearing very slowly. Local newspapers continued to use terms *shizoku* (aristocrat) and *heimin* (commoner) long after these classes had been abolished by law. Rural aristocrats from communities called *yaadui* resisted marrying women of non-aristocratic origin until the Second World War.⁴⁰ Therefore, if people in Miyako could claim to have got rid of feudal traditions, they would appear to be more advanced and civilised than other Okinawans.

As already mentioned, Yaeyama was viewed differently. Yaeyama was highly valued for its unique craft and poetry and hence it enjoyed a much better reputation than Miyako. Many scholars visited Yaeyama in search of ‘truly’ Japanese culture and traditions. Local newspapers in Yaeyama eagerly exploited images of a cultural country, introducing catchphrases such as ‘the land of poetry’ and ‘the land of songs’ (*shi no kuni, uta no kuni*).

The country was relatively sparsely populated. There were vast stretches of land waiting to be reclaimed and cultivated. Japanese corporations rushed to Yaeyama after coal beds had been discovered on Iriomote Island. Indeed, the country seemed to offer great opportunities for settlers from overpopulated Okinawa and Japan proper. Newspapers promoted Yaeyama as the ‘treasury of the southern gate’ (*nanmon no hōko*) or the ‘treasury of the southern islands’ (*nantō no hōko*).

Yet Yaeyama turned out to be a land of unfulfilled dreams and expectations. Japanese capital had escaped to neighbouring Taiwan before it really entered Yaeyama. In the 1920s Yaeyama was badly hit by economic crisis. Land development was hindered by malaria which drove away and discouraged settlers. Great expectations were eventually replaced by a sense of abandonment. People lamented that the authorities treated Yaeyama like an unwanted stepchild. Questions about the reason for the misery and how to make Yaeyama recover came to dominate in the narratives of local newspapers.

Local journalists were displeased to discover that Miyako was doing much better in terms of commerce and industrial production. Miyako, for instance, reportedly had a much higher rate of private savings, and exceeded Yaeyama in the production of sugar by thousands of tons.⁴¹ With the growing dependency upon the Taiwanese market some people became concerned that Yaeyama might be taken over by foreign capital. In the 1930s the newspaper *Kainan Jihō* frequently addressed the problem. As one publicist wrote:

Whilst Yaeyama people abandon their precious homeland and leave for other prefectures, the number of settlers from other regions [*tagun*] gradually increases. Taiwanese peasants come as well. If we let this continue, we may gain no benefit from the Recovery Plan, even if it brings concrete results. As a consequence, Yaeyama will be developed by alien people. If we do not wake up now I am afraid that Yaeyama may suffer the fate of becoming a Yaeyama of non-Yaeyama people [*Yaeyama wa Yaeyamajin no Yaeyama de nai hiun ni sōgū suru*].⁴²

While Miyako tried to present its shortcomings as virtues Yaeyama discovered that certain features, which used to be perceived as good and desirable, turned out to be seen as disadvantageous. People came to associate Yaeyama's love of art and music with laziness and passiveness. Yaeyama's image ceased to fit national expectations after Japan launched the campaign of national mobilisation for war. In 1935, an army officer who was assigned to Yaeyama published a

letter in which he criticized local people for being too soft. Yaeyama was maybe a country of a refined culture, he argued, but it lacked a strong spirit:

I wish people here were more energetic... If they tend only to artistic pursuits, the development of Yaeyama will become impossible... I wish people were manlier... Instead of playing *jabisen* [a string instrument] and singing folk songs people should write more manly songs and cultivate the spirit of nation.⁴³

Conclusions

In his anthropological study on Kume Island in Okinawa Mathew Allen emphasised the significance of local identities negotiated at the level of small communities and the neglect shown to this by scholars who were preoccupied with the problem of 'Okinawa versus Japan'. In daily life, he argued, local identities supersede 'Okinawan' identity, which becomes salient only in specific situations, namely when people come to confront Japan and the USA (particularly in relation to US military bases which have been maintained on Okinawa since the Second World War).⁴⁴ Assimilation precisely concerned the problem of confronting Japan, but, as we have seen, even in this case local identities resurfaced, making people concerned about how they looked in the eyes of their close neighbours. Put simply, Japan was not the only mirror people were staring at.

We have also seen that the state authorities were not in power to assume a monopoly on the interpretation of Japanese culture and consequently could not exercise full control over the assimilation process. Because Okinawan people associated Japan with the notion of modernity, the matter of ‘becoming Japanese’ acquired a new dimension: ‘becoming modern’. Secondly, narratives in local newspapers demonstrate that the notion of ‘Japanese-ness’ (and modernity) was appropriated as a tool for negotiating one’s status within Okinawan society. Did the authorities predict that the idea of ‘becoming Japanese’ would eventually work for the benefit of ‘becoming Okinawan’, and eventually would challenge the vision of a unified nation? Did they expect Okinawan people to import Japanese values not from Japan, but from the ‘barbarian’ country of Taiwan? After all, it turned out that it was up to the Okinawan people where they found Japan, how they imagined Japan, and what purpose they were going to use Japanese culture for.

¹ This article is a revised version of a chapter of my PhD dissertation ‘Citizenship, Culture and Identity in Prewar Okinawa’ (University of Hong Kong, 2007). Unless otherwise cited, translations appearing in this article are those of the author.

² Thomas Humphrey Marshall, *Citizenship and social class, and other essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1950, p.10.

³ Richard Siddle, ‘Colonialism and Identity in Okinawa before 1945’, *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1998, p. 132.

⁴ Arakawa Akira, *Izoku to tennō no kokka* [An alien people and the emperor’s state], Tokyo, Nigatsusha, 1973; Ōta Masahide, *Okinawa no minshū ishiki* (Okinawan mass attitudes), Tokyo, Shinsensha, 1995.

⁵ The *Kulturkampf* was Otto von Bismarck's campaign to subjugate German (particularly Prussian) Catholics to the new German state after 1871. A variety of policies, including anticlerical legislation, state educational laws and the forcible closing of Catholic social organisations, ultimately failed to destroy German Catholic solidarity, and actually raised political awareness (benefiting the standing of the Catholic-based Centre party in the *Reichstag*). Bismarck largely discontinued his policies after 1879.

⁶ The anti-dialect policy eventually raised protests among scholars who began to fear that the destruction of Ryukyuan dialects would cause a loss of a source of knowledge about ancient Japanese. For more on this subject see: Hugh Clarke, 'The great dialect debate: The state and language policy in Okinawa', in Elise K. Tipton (ed.), *Society and the state in interwar Japan*, New York, Routledge, 1997, pp.193-217.

⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983.

⁸ See for example: Iha Fuyū, 'Shinkaron yori mitaru Okinawa no haihan chiken [The annexation of Okinawa seen from the perspective of evolutionism]', in Hattori Shirō, Nakasone Seizen, & Hokama Shuzen (eds.), *Iha Fuyū Zenshū* [Collected works of Iha Fuyū], Tokyo, Heibonsha, 1974-6, Vol.1, pp. 66-9; 'Ryūkyū shobun wa isshu no dorei kaihō nari [The Ryukyu Disposition was a sort of liberation from enslavement]', in *Iha Fuyū Zenshū*, Vol. 1, p. 493.

⁹ Ōta Chōfu, 'Shin Okinawa no kensetsu [Building New Okinawa]', *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 5 April 1901, in Hiyan Teruo & Isa Shin'ichi (eds.), *Ōta Chōfu senshū* [Selected works of Ōta Chōfu], Tokyo, Daiichi shobō, 1995-6, Vol. 1, p. 254.

¹⁰ Ōta Chōfu, 'Ōsaka hakurankai to Ryūkyū teodori [The Expo in Osaka and Ryukyuan dances]', *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 25 February 1903, in *Ōta Chōfu senshū*, Vol. 2, p. 210.

¹¹ Statistics on Japanese expatriates on Ryukyu: *Okinawa Mainichi Shimbun*, 30 July 1913. The population of Okinawa prefecture in 1906 numbered 489,000 (*Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 14 December 1907).

¹² The *nintōzei*, or head-tax, was introduced to Sakishima at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was imposed on every person aged between fifteen and fifty, regardless of how much land he or she possessed. After Japan had annexed Okinawa in 1879, the government refrained from abolishing the old system of taxation in order not to provoke resistance from the Ryukyuan aristocracy, and thus the tax remained in force until the land reform of 1899-1903. For more on this subjects see: Okinawa Kokusai Daigaku Nantō Bunka Kenkyūjo (ed.), *Kinsei Ryūkyū no sozei seido to nintōzei* [The taxation system in early modern Ryukyu and the head-tax], Tokyo, Nihon keizai hyōronsha, 2003.

¹³ *Sakishima Asahi Shimbun*, 10 June 1929.

¹⁴ The social phenomenon of tracing ancestors of a noble origin has been discussed in length by Adachi Yoshihiro, in *Okinawa no sosen sūhai to jiko aidentiti* [The worship of ancestors and personal identity in Okinawa], Fukuoka: Kyūshū Daigaku Shuppankai, 2001. See also Oguma Makoto, 'Kiroku sareta keifu to kioku sareta keifu: Okinawa ni okeru munchuu no variēshon [Remembered genealogy and recorded genealogy: variations of munchuu in Okinawa]', in Tsukuba Daigaku Minzokugaku Kenkyūshitsu (ed.), *Toshi to kyōkai no minzoku* (Metropolis and peoples in peripheries), Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2001.

¹⁵ *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, No. 10/1896, in Nishizuka Kunio (ed.) *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, Tōkyō: Hompō shoseki, 1980, Vol. 1, pp. 408-11; No. 14/1897, in *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, Vol. 2, p. 107.

¹⁶ Matayoshi Seikiyo, *Taiwan shihai to Nihonjin: Nisshin sensō hyakunen* [The Japanese and the rule of Taiwan: one hundred years after the Sino-Japanese War], Tokyo, Dōjidaisha, 1994, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 25 February 1919.

¹⁸ It should be noted that Okinawa prefecture with only three high schools, one teachers college and a few vocational schools badly lagged behind the rest of the country in terms of education. The closest universities were located in Kyushu and Taiwan.

¹⁹ *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 29 November 1908.

²⁰ *Sakishima Asahi Shimbun*, 8 October 1930.

²¹ *Yaeyama Mimpō*, 21 June 1933.

²² Miyagi Seihachirō, *Yonaguni monogatari* [A story of Yonaguni], Niraisha, Okinawa, 1993, pp. 77-82.

²³ *Yonaguni chō shi, bekkani ichi: kiroku shashin shū* (History of Yonaguni Town, appendix 1: collection of documents and photos), Yonaguni: Yonaguni chō yakuba, 1995, p. 289.

²⁴ *Yaeyama Shimpō*, 15 May 1933.

²⁵ Ishigaki shiyakusho (ed.), *Ishigakishi shi* [The history of Ishigaki], Ishigaki: Ishigaki shiyakusho, 1983, Vol. 4, p. 47; Vol. 5, p. 40.

²⁶ *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 18 April 1906.

²⁷ *Sakishima Shimbun*, 1 January 1920.

²⁸ *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, 4 October 1908.

²⁹ Kawakami Toyokura, 'Honken jidō ni Nihon kokumin taru no seishin wo hakki seshimu beshi [We must make Okinawan children express the spirit of the Japanese nation]', *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, No. 8/1896, in *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, Vol. 1, p. 321.

³⁰ Nitta Yoshitaka, 'Okinawa ken shinnen gashōkai wa meishi kōkankai ni arazu [New Year's parties in Okinawa prefecture are not for the purpose of exchanging business cards]', *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, No. 59/1900, in *Ryūkyū Kyōiku*, Vol. 6, p.305.

³¹ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 15 July 1918.

³² *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 15 July 1918; 25 August 1918; 25 April 1919; 5 August, 1919.

³³ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 25 April, 1918.

³⁴ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 15 July 1918.

³⁵ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 25 May 1918.

³⁶ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 15 July 1918; *Sakishima Asahi Shimbun*, 20 May 1929.

³⁷ Literally a 'dialect tablet', a plate which the penalised student had to wear around his/her neck until he/she caught another student who had violated the 'no dialect' rule.

³⁸ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 25 May 1918.

³⁹ *Sakishima Shimbun* [Miyako edition], 15 August 1918; 25 August 1918.

⁴⁰ In the premodern era, aristocrats were in principle not allowed to cultivate land. In the face of increasing unemployment among the aristocracy in the eighteenth century, however, the government loosened this restriction. Aristocrats who had moved to the countryside refrained from mixing with local peasants, hoping that some day they would be able to return to the city. See: Dana Masayuki, 'Minbunsei: shi to nō [System of social division: aristocrats and peasants]', in Ryūkyū Shimpōsha (ed.), *Shin Ryūkyū shi: kinsei hen* (2) [A new history of Ryukyu: early modern times, part two], Naha, Ryūkyū Shimpōsha, 1992.

⁴¹ *Sakishima Asahi Shimbun*, 9 July 1925; 24 July 1925.

⁴² *Kainan Jihō*, 8 January 1936.

⁴³ *Kainan Jihō*, 8 September 1935.

⁴⁴ Matthew Allen, *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, pp. 3-11.

