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On the Internal Diversity and Complexity of Okinawan Identity[1]

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Introduction

In Japan, the media tend to represent Okinawa and its people, culture and community as a homogeneous and coherent collective entity. It is true that Okinawa has distinct features vis-à-vis Yamato (mainland Japan) in many respects, and the Okinawan people have collectively stressed a common identity and expressed their widely shared interests in certain circumstances. However, at the same time, Okinawa is more diverse and complex than is often imagined. In this paper, I will discuss the Okinawan responses to the NHK Taiga Drama *Ryūkyū no Kaze* (*Winds of the Ryūkyūs*) that reveal the internal diversity and complexity of Okinawan identity.

Taiga Drama (literally, Great River Drama) is an annual historical drama series broadcast by Japan's sole public broadcaster NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan Broadcasting Corporation), and is one of the most popular TV programs in Japan. Taiga Drama has more than 40 years of history, and NHK has released 50 series so far (as of 2011), most of which have featured well-known actual historical characters from the Sengoku and Edo periods. Many people visit places or exhibitions related to Taiga Drama, and local governments all over Japan make a great effort to attract location shooting for Taiga Drama. The plot, characters, setting and theme of the next year's Taiga Drama are in the news every year. Carol Gluck suggests that Taiga Drama has greatly affected the historical consciousness of the Japanese people.[2]

Ryūkyū no Kaze, the 31st series of Taiga Drama, was broadcast in 1993. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki puts it, it was NHK's "first attempt to present the history of the frontier [of Japan] in the format of ...TV drama".[3] At that time, one of several "Okinawa Booms" took place across Japan. This Okinawa Boom was different from the prior ones in that it highlighted the traditional culture of Okinawa and the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom rather than Okinawa's unique subtropical nature. Okinawan popular music

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[1] This paper is based primarily on interviews with those who were involved in the production of *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, and also on the analysis of all the episodes of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* and almost all the newspapers and magazines that circulated in Okinawa from 1991 through 1994. A part of this paper appeared in my preceding publications; Hara, T. *Minzoku Bunka no Genzai: Okinawa Yonaguni Jima no "Minzoku" eno Manazashi*. Tokyo: Dōseisha, 2000; Hara, T. "Okinawan Studies in Japan, 1879-2007," *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology*, 8, 2007, pp. 101-136.

[2] Gluck, C. "The Past in the Present," in A. Gordon (ed.), *Postwar Japan as History*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 64-95.

[3] Morris-Suzuki, T. *Re-Inventing Japan : Time, Space, Nation*. Armonk, N.Y. ; London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998, p. 33.

(known as Uchinaa Pop) and films that featured Uchinaaguchi (the Okinawan language) gathered media attention.[4] Among these, Shuri Castle, the royal court of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, was reconstructed and partially opened to the public in 1992, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the 1972 return of Okinawa to Japan.

In the midst of this Okinawa/Ryūkyū Boom, most people in Okinawa watched *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, anticipating that the drama would offer a valuable opportunity for a nationwide audience to learn about the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom. As the drama unfolded, however, many Okinawans found fault with the program, and soon *Ryūkyū no Kaze* became a battlefield for the critique of contested collective identities.

Where is "Okinawa"?

Before any discussion of the Okinawan responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, it is necessary to identify the area called Okinawa. The chain of more than 200 islands that stretch over 800 miles between Kyūshū Island and Taiwan is generally called the Nansei Islands, with the southern part of this chain called the Ryūkyū Islands. The Ryūkyū Islands consist of the Okinawa Islands, the Miyako Islands, the Yaeyama Islands, and the disputed Senkaku Islands. These islands—160 in all— belong to Okinawa Prefecture.

In Japan today, "Okinawa" generally denotes Okinawa Prefecture, which is functionally the same as the Ryūkyū Islands. Historically, however, "Okinawa" was the name given only to Okinawa Island, the largest of the Ryūkyū Islands. Even today, when people from Miyako and Yaeyama speak of Okinawa, they are likely referring only to Okinawa Island and are not including themselves in the reference. Much the same is true of the Daitō Islands. The Daitō Islands, a part of the Okinawa Islands, had been uninhabited until the Meiji period but have since been settled, largely by people from parts of Japan other than Okinawa Prefecture.

"Okinawa" has not been a self-evident concept in academic discourse as well. Some scholars divide Okinawa Prefecture into three cultural areas: Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama. Others promote the concept of an "Okinawan Cultural Area," consisting of not only Okinawa Prefecture, but also the Amami Islands as well, which were once part of the Ryūkyū Kingdom.[5] When their focus of study includes the Amami Islands, some scholars employ such terms as "Ryūkyū(s)," "Ryūkyū-Okinawa," or "Amami-Okinawa" instead of just "Okinawa." "Nantō" (the Southern Islands), "the Nsansei Islands," and "the Ryūkyū Archipelago" have also been used as substitutes for the term "Okinawa." The complicated situation regarding what to call these islands

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[4] See Roberson, J. E. "Uchinaa Pop: Place and Identity in Contemporary Okinawan Popular Music," *Critical Asian Studies*, 33(2), 2001, pp. 211-242.

[5] See Tsuha, T. "Tai Yamato no Bunka Jinruigaku," *Minzokugau Kenkyū*, 61(3), 1996, pp. 449-462; Watanabe, Y. *Okinawa no Shakai Soshiki to Sekaikan*. Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1985.

suggests their cultural and historical diversities and complexities. In this paper, I will not broaden the scope of my discussion to the Amami Islands, and refer only to Okinawa Prefecture in focusing on Okinawan Identity.

A Perspective from Yonaguni Island

My interest in *Ryūkyū no Kaze* developed through my anthropological research in Yonaguni Island. Yonaguni is the westernmost island of Okinawa prefecture, 67 miles from the east coast of Taiwan. Its total area is 11.2 square miles and it has a population of 1,614 as of January 2011. The history and culture of Yonaguni are unique and distinct from those of Okinawa Island, the main island of Okinawa. From an archaeological point of view, the prehistoric material culture of Yonaguni was quite different from that of Okinawa Island.[6] According to historical documents, Yonaguni was incorporated into the Ryūkyū Kingdom in the 1520s, about 100 years after the establishment of the kingdom on Okinawa Island. The Yonaguni language is almost incomprehensible to Okinawan language speakers. Linguists agree that the Yonaguni language, along with the Yaeyama and Miyako languages, constitute the Southern branch of the Ryūkyūan languages, while the Amami, Kunigami, and Okinawan languages constitute the Northern branch.[7]

When I was a graduate student in the 1990s, I stayed in Yonaguni for a year and a half in total, and conducted intensive fieldwork. During my fieldwork, I found that the Yonaguni people called themselves "Dunantu" (the Yonaguni people) and considered themselves neither "Unnantu" (the Okinawan people) nor "Damantu" (the Yaeyama people), although Yonaguni is geographically regarded as a part of the Yaeyama Islands. Some people told me that Yonaguni is an independent country (kuni) as its name (Yona "kuni") implies. It must be noted, however, that the people and culture of Yonaguni are by no means homogeneous or coherent. For example, Kubura district, one of the three districts in Yonaguni, was formed mainly by the Itoman people of Okinawa Island after the Taishō period.[8] Through my field experiences in Yonaguni, I perceived a tendency in the Japanese media to represent Okinawa as a homogeneous and coherent entity, and I was therefore surprised to discover that Yonaguni was

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[6] Pearson, R. J. *Archaeology of the Ryūkyū Islands: A Regional Chronology from 3000 B.C. to the Historic Period.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1969.

[7] The Yonaguni language, as well as the Yaeyama language, are recognized as severely endangered languages in the latest edition of UNESCO's *Atlas of the World Languages in Danger*, UNESCO, 2009.

[8] The majority of the people of Itoman Village were engaged in the fishing industry. In the Meiji period, a unique style of fishing called "agiya" was developed in Itoman, and the growth of this agiya fishing prompted the Itoman people's move to the Miyako and Yaeama Islands, and later to Micronesia and the Philippines to seek new fishing grounds.

featured in an episode of *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, and was described in the show as a distinct community independent from the Ryūkyū Kingdom.

Ryūkyū no Kaze as a "Cultural Movement"

Ryūkyū no Kaze presents a dramatized version of the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom from the end of the 16th century through the early 17th century. The production of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* was proposed by Yoshimura Yoshiyuki, a TV director for NHK Enterprise.[9] For Yoshimura, producing a drama based on the history of Okinawa was a long-cherished dream.[10] One of his intentions was to problematize the pervasive idea that Japan is a culturally homogeneous nation through presenting the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom to a nationwide audience.[11] Yoshimura saw Taiga Drama as a "cultural movement". During an interview, he said:

> I believe Taiga Drama is not just a drama, but it's a kind of cultural movement. I wanted to heighten momentum toward the reconsideration of the history of Japan, and stir up educational circles by *Ryūkyū no Kaze*.

The story follows the brothers Keitai and Keizan,[12] and those around them, who lived in an era of significant changes throughout East Asia: Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Korean invasion, the Battle of Sekigahara, the fall of the Ming dynasty, and the invasion of the Ryūkyū Kingdom by the Satsuma domain. Yonaguni Island appears in the drama as the location where Tokugawa Ieyasu had planned the construction of a fort to prevent an invasion by various Western powers. Keitai, as an officer of the Shuri government, met with the people of Yonaguni and their female chief Isoba, and experienced their unique culture. Isoba declined Tokugawa's plan to build the fort since it would damage the friendly relationship between Yonaguni and Taiwan. Isoba told Keitai:

> We have cooperated and coexisted with the people of Taiwan. This is only natural since Taiwan is the closest neighbor island for us... They are more important for

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9 NHK Enterprise is an affiliate company of NHK. *Ryūkyū no Kaze* was the first Taiga Drama that NHK Enterprise produced.

10 Yoshimura's interest in Okinawa derived from his involvement in the student movements of the late 1960s in which the US rule of Okinawa was one of the major issues.

11 This was but one of many goals which Yoshimura and other staff members had for *Ryūkyū no Kaze*. As a result, various messages were weaved into *Ryūkyū no Kaze* and it became a complex text that requires careful reading, as I have discussed elsewhere; Hara, *Minzoku Bunka no Genzai*.

12 They are fictional characters.

us than the Shuri government.

Although this episode is completely fictitious, Yoshimura and other staff members had carefully researched the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom before producing the drama, and were aware of the multilayered center-periphery relationships not only between the Ryūkyūs and Yamato, but also between Yamato and the Western powers, and between the Shuri government and the outer islands. He tried to present such multilayered center-periphery relationships and cultural diversity within Okinawa through *Ryūkyū no Kaze,* as well as problematizing the idea that Japan is a culturally homogeneous nation.

The Okinawan Responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze*

After NHK announced the production of *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, there were intense emotions surrounding the drama in Okinawa:

> We have heard the voices calling for utilizing *Ryūkyū no Kaze* to stimulate Okinawa's economy and culture since the announcement of its production. We would like the mainlanders [the Yamato people] to learn about the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, and also would like to take advantage of the drama for the development of tourism. It is our sincere hope that *Ryūkyū no Kaze* will cause a "storm" all over Japan.[13]

Ryūkyū no Kaze premiered in January 1993. According to a poll conducted by *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* right after its first airing, [14] viewership for *Ryūkyū no Kaze* reached 82 percent in Okinawa, and most people had positive comments. [15] Favorable responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze* filled the letter columns of newspapers during its first several weeks on air. Soon, however, critical comments about the drama gradually began to appear in the letter columns:[16]

> You could just say it's the best we can expect from Yamatunchu's [the Yamato

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[13] *The Okinawa Times* Morning Edition, editorial comment, Jan. 10, 1993. All translations into English are my own.
[14] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* and *The Okinawa Times* are the two major newspapers in Okinawa.
[15] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Morning Edition, Jan. 12, 1993.
[16] It must be noted that this tonal change in the letter columns does not necessarily only reflect a change in the Okinawan responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze.* As media scholars have argued, the media not only reflects reality but also creates it; cf. Anastasio, P. A., Rose, K. C., and Chapman, J. "Can the Media Create Public Opinion? A Social-Identity Approach," *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* 8(5), 1999, pp. 152-155.

people's] Ryūkyū historical drama. But still, I must say that the historians and other professionals from Okinawa, who are involved in the production of the drama, are too invisible." [17]

I'm a little disappointed by the Okinawa Shibai performed by the mainlanders.[18] Their Uchinaaguchi and Kachaashi are awkward, and Mr. Sawada hardly fits the image of King Shō Nei. That's how I feel and it couldn't be helped since I was born and raised in Uchinaa." [19]

The majority of these criticisms on *Ryūkyū no Kaze* can be summarized in the following three points:

1) There is a heavy reliance on the standard Japanese language instead of Uchinaaguchi.
2) Most of the actresses and actors are from Yamato, and not from Okinawa.
3) Some parts of the plot are quite different from historical facts.

In addition to these key points, various other complaints were voiced, such as the fact that the main characters are Kunindanchu (the Kume people):[20]

I feel uneasy because the main characters of the drama are the Kume people and Chinese.[21]

We cannot get a big picture view of the Ryūkyūs at that time, because the drama has focused on Kume Village so far.[22]

On the other hand, some Kume people complained that the behavior of one Kunindanchu character, Keitai's mother, was inaccurate.

What a rude attitude Keitai's mother show against her husband. At that time, Kume women never behaved like that.[23]

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[17] *The Okinawa Times* Morning Edition, Mar. 25, 1993.
[18] The Okinawan people, especially those of Okinawa Island, were already familiar with Uchinaaguchi theatrical performances called Okinawa Shibai or Uchinaa Shibai. This is probably one of the reasons why some Okinawan people thought *Ryūkyū no Kaze* was awkward.
[19] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Evening Edition, May 22, 1993.
[20] Those who immigrated to Okinawa Island from China after the late 14th century and their descendants lived in Kuninda (Kume Village) which is now part of Naha City. They were called Kunindanchu.
[21] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Evening Edition, Feb. 13, 1993.
[22] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Evening Edition, Feb. 27, 1993.
[23] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Morning Edition, Jan. 22, 1993.

> I've heard that the traditions and customs of Kume Village were based on Confucianism. Then, what do you think of that [the behavior of Keitai's mother]? [24]

While the above comments were made mostly by the people of Okinawa Island,[25] the people of the Yaeyama Islands made critical comments from a different point of view. For example, *The Yaeyama Mainichi Shimbun*, the major newspaper in the Yaeyama Islands, carried feature articles on Oyake Akahachi and the nintouzei (poll tax) during the airing period of *Ryūkyū no Kaze*. Akahachi was a Yaeyama chief who led his people in resistance against the Ryūkyū Kingdom in the late 14th century, and nintouzei was a heavy poll tax imposed on the people of Miyako and Yaeyama by Ryūkyū's Shuri government for more than 260 years after the 17th century. In effect, these feature articles on Akahachi and nintouzei were a censure of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* and the Ryūkyū Boom:

> *Ryūkyū no Kaze* is blowing, showing the history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom dramatically. However, what do they think of the discrimination against the people of the Sakishima Islands [the Miyako and Yaeyama Islands]? [26]

Even so, the positive comments on *Ryūkyū no Kaze* that appeared in Okinawan newspapers and magazines surpassed the negative ones in terms of numbers. According to a poll conducted by *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* after the airing of the last episode of *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, 37.3 percent of respondents said "the drama was interesting" while 21.4 percent said "it was disappointing." The remaining 37.3 percent said "it was so-so" and 4.1 percent said "I don't know."[27]

Nevertheless, the Okinawa branch office of NHK took the negative comments into consideration and produced an Uchinaaguchi version of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* in which Okinawan actresses and actors dubbed the drama. It was broadcast in Okinawa in 1994, and received a high evaluation in Okinawa Island:

> This one [the Uchinaaguchi version] was overwhelming as expected. I couldn't

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[24] *The Monthly Yuntaku*, Mar. 1993.

[25] Some critical comments were also made by those who were born in Okinawa, but who lived in Yamato.

[26] *The Yaeyama Mainichi Shimbun*, May 11, 1993. Norma Field criticized *Ryūkyū no Kaze* in the same manner; Field, N. "Fuhensei, Ko Naru Mono, Shōhin: Okinawa eno Kitai," in Fukki 20 Shūnen Kinen Okinawa Kenkyū Kokusai Symposium Jikkō Iinkai (ed.), *Okinawa Bunka no Genryū wo Saguru: Kan Taiheiyō Chiiki no naka no Okinawa*. Naha: Fukki 20 Shūnen Kinen Okinawa Kenkyū Kokusai Symposium Jikkō Iinkai, 1994, pp. 439-443.

[27] *The Ryūkyū Shimpo* Evening Edition, Jun. 19, 1993.

take my eyes off the television, and was caught up in the story.[28]

> The Uchinaaguchi version of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* was splendid and fascinating. I even thought it was a different drama [from the original version]...Uchinaaguchi fit perfectly into the images, and I could feel the atmosphere of the era of the Ryūkyū Kingdom.[29]

On the other hand, some Miyako and Yaeyama people commented that they could not understand and appreciate the Uchinaaguchi version:

> There are a lot of islands in Okinawa, and each island has its own dialect. So there are many people in Okinawa who can't understand Uchinaaguchi. I think the production of the Uchinaaguchi version was a good idea, but the idea was only for the people of the main island [Okinawa Island].[30]

> My family doesn't understand the dialect [Uchinaaguchi], so they said they couldn't appreciate the Uchinaaguchi version.[31]

Thus the Uchinaaguchi version was criticized as fundamentally main-island-centric by some Miyako and Yaeyama people.

Conclusion

When considering the negative responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze* in Okinawa, we should, firstly, embed these responses within the history of modern Okinawa: on the whole, the Okinawan people were forced to assimilate into the mainstream Japanese culture and their pre-modern history and culture were suppressed consciously and unconsciously.[32] Thus, I argue that this history of assimilation begot the Okinawans' desire for a more complete and nuanced representation of the history and culture of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, which eventually led to some negative responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze*.

At the same time, the Okinawan responses to *Ryūkyū no Kaze* reveal the internal diversity and complexity of Okinawa, its people, culture and identity, as we have seen above. Although some Okinawans appreciated *Ryūkyū no Kaze*, other Okinawans denounced it from various standpoints: that of Uchinaanchu, Kunindanchu,

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28 *The Okinawa Times* Morning Edition, Feb. 19, 1994.
29 *The Okinawa Times* Morning Edition, Mar. 10, 1994.
30 *The Monthly Yuntaku*, Apr. 1994.
31 *The Monthly Yuntaku*, Apr. 1994.
32 Roth, H. J. "Political and Cultural Perspectives on Japan's Insider Minorities," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, April 10, 2005.

Yaimanchu (the Yaeyama people), etc. The Uchinaaguchi version of *Ryūkyū no Kaze* was produced as a response to some of these negative comments. However, it was criticized as main-island-centric by the people of the "outer" islands.

This multivocality within Okinawa, especially the voices from the "outer" islands, evokes the concept of "kotōku" (the predicament of solitary islands) coined by Yanagita Kunio, the founder of folklore studies in Japan.[33] Pondering the past and present situations of Okinawa and other islands in the Pacific, he gave name to the difficult position of peripheral areas that have been politically and economically dominated, and then forgotten, by central areas. Yanagita thought that the hardships which the outer islands in Okinawa had endured under the Ryūkyū Kingdom were akin to those which Okinawa faced in relation to Yamato, and to those which the entirety of Japan would face in relation to the Western powers in the near future. In sum, Yanagita saw Okinawa as a microcosm of Japan, or, for that matter, of the entire world.[34] For Yanagita, studying the multilayered center-periphery relationships surrounding Okinawa would contribute to finding "remedies" not only for Okinawa but also for Japan and other areas that suffered from kotōku.[35]

As Yanagita's discussion of kotōku suggests, stressing the internal diversity within Okinawa does not imply that the idea of the common Okinawan identity is an illusion. Rather, this internal diversity demands a more subtle analysis of the culture and identity of Okinawa without sacrificing their complexities, and such a study of Okinawa will have rich implications for studies in other regions embedded in multilayered center-periphery relationships.

Acknowledgements

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[33] Yanagita, K. "Nantō Kenkyū no Genjō," *Yanagita Kunio Zenshū* Volume 4. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1998 [1925], pp. 78-99.
[34] See Tanaka, T. "Kotōku no Seijigaku: Nantō Kenkyū no Shatei," in Yanagita Kenkyūkai (ed.), *Yanagita Kunio Kenkyū Nenpō 3: Yanagita Kunio Minzoku no Kijutsu.* Tokyo: Iwata Shoten, 2000, pp. 165-204.
[35] Yanagita, op. cit., p. 84.