

New Values, New Identities: Becoming Okinawan and Japanese in 19th-Century Ryukyu

Gregory Smits, Penn State University

The residents of the Ryukyu Islands became Japanese in a legal sense in 1879 when Okinawa Prefecture replaced the Ryukyu Kingdom. The process whereby Meiji Japan annexed Ryukyu is known as the *Ryūkyū shobun*. It began in 1872. Broadly defined, the *shobun* process lasted until 1895, when Japan's military victory over China settled lingering territorial questions. In recent years, territorial questions concerning the Ryukyu Islands have begun to reappear as China becomes more militarily and economically assertive.¹

The *Ryūkyū shobun* broadly defined overlapped to a large degree with the era retrospectively called "preservation of old customs" (*kyūkan onzon*). This problematic term refers to a policy of permitting Ryukyuan elites to retain some of their former benefits and privileges in return for their cooperation in stabilizing society. Some scholars have seen it as a calculated attempt by Japanese authorities to exploit Okinawa economically in the manner of a colony. Others have argued that it was a short-term expedient measure in response to extreme conditions, with no broader significance. In any case, the "old customs" briefly preserved were limited to a few economically significant practices and institutions. In the realm of culture more broadly defined, the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture had relatively rapid and disruptive effects on the daily lives of ordinary people. Here I argue that between approximately 1880 and 1910,

¹ For an analysis of these matters, see Gregory Smits, "The Ryūkyū Shobun in East Asian and World History." Josef Kreiner, ed., *Ryukyu in World History* (Bonn, Germany: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), pp. 279-304.

circumstances thrust two new identities onto the residents of the Ryukyu Islands. Superficially, they simultaneously became both Ryukyuan and Japanese. This paper examines this process with respect to identity and values.

Background: Before the *Shobun*

From the late eighteenth century onward, Ryukyu was formally a two-class society, divided into hereditary elites (*yukkatchu*, *shizoku*, and other terms) and commoners (*hyakushō* and other terms). In this general way, Ryukyu resembled Japan, although the Ryukyuan elites were theoretically scholar-officials in the Chinese mold, not warriors. Moreover, like Japan, the reality of social divisions, gradations, and distinctions, was complex. Occupations, for example, did not correspond neatly to formal elite status. In theory, Ryukyuan hereditary elites were urban dwelling government officials, but many eked out livings as farmers in rural villages during the nineteenth century. Local officials in the districts (*magiri*) often wielded considerable power and enjoyed a relatively high standard of living, but technically, they were commoners. Local officials outside of Okinawa were all commoners until the late eighteenth century, but even after some of them became elites insofar as they possessed lineage registers recognized by the state, they were of lower status than Okinawan elites. Moreover, it was possible to purchase elite status (*shinzanshi* and other terms), but those who did so were not as “elite” as those who were *yukkatchu* by virtue of high birth.

Besides taking note of the de facto complexities of Ryukyuan social distinctions, however, we need not concern ourselves here with details. Let us simply regard as “elite” those members of society who were literate and who were relatively wealthy or influential vis-à-vis the surrounding society. In this sense, the term “elite” would include most but not all of those with formal *yukkatchu* status and most commoners who worked as local government officials, whether in Okinawa or in other islands. Such elites constituted roughly 8-10% of the population.

To what extent did these elites regard themselves as “Ryukyuan” or the equivalent during the 1870s? Certainly, those in the upper echelons of elite society possessed a strong Ryukyuan identity. One manifestation was their vigorous campaign to preserve the kingdom after it became clear that the Meiji state intended to annex and abolish it. The *shobun* era rhetoric of Ryukyuan elites is notable for defining Ryukyu not as a sovereign state in a modern sense but as a state defined in terms of its relation to China and Japan. Indeed, Ryukyuan arguing against annexation typically characterized China and Japan as Ryukyu’s mother and father. Ryukyu should continue to exist as a distinct kingdom, they argued, so that it could carry out its family-like obligations to each of its parents. Lower echelon elites such as local officials also possessed a strong sense of the king in Shuri as the center of a polity that included them. Their consciousness of Ryukyu situated in an international milieu, however, may have been less clear or intense relative to central government officials.

Nevertheless, most local officials probably regarded themselves as Ryukyuan at least to the extent of identifying with a polity centered at Shuri.

Watanabe Miki has examined the formation of Ryukyuan elite identity during the early modern era from several angles. Ryukyu's international status within East Asia helped constitute its domestic society. For example, during the eighteenth century, a consensus about the nature of formal elite (*yukkatchu*) status developed within the government. Ryukyuan elites bore the responsibility of fulfilling the kingdom's obligations to China and Japan, a duty made possible by superior knowledge and behavior. Moreover, elites who excelled in this function were eligible for promotion or other formal rewards from the state. Similarly, elites bore the responsibility of maintaining and enhancing Ryukyu's reputation (*o-gaibun*) vis-à-vis its larger neighbors. Partly they did so by carrying out trade and diplomacy in a ritualistically correct way and partly they did so through their cultivation of the literary arts and other relevant knowledge. Moreover, the very existence of *yukkatchu* in society as cultivated exemplars of moral excellence served to enhance the small kingdom's respectability in the eyes of outsiders.² After 1879, the only *yukkatchu* social function of any interest to Japanese officials was basic governance and the maintenance of order.

Returning the focus to identity, although elite Okinawans possessed at least some degree of Ryukyuan or Okinawan identity, the horizons of ordinary

² Watanabe Miki, *Kinsei Ryūkyū to Chū-Nichi kankei* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2012), esp. p. 264. For an analysis of the theatrical aspects of Ryukyuan diplomacy vis-à-vis China, see Gregory Smits, Gregory Smits, "Making a Good Impression: Cultural Drama in the Ryukyu-China Relationship," (part of Parades and Processions of Edo Japan, February 6-11, 2013, University of Hawai'i at Manoa) http://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/edoparades/symposium_papers.

people was much more limited. All indications are that identities were local, typically centered on a rural village or urban neighborhood. Ordinary people would certainly have been aware of the royal court and the local officials empowered by it. In contrast to a distant state, however, ordinary Ryukyuans maintained close ties to unofficial but influential religious leaders, who formed the core of their communities. I am referring here especially to the *niigan*, literally “root deity.” These women generally enjoyed higher levels of trust than did the state-sanctioned *noro* (O. *nuru*) priestesses. No common language bound Ryukyuans together, and other forms of culture varied significantly from one island to another. Symbols of royal authority were largely limited to the vicinity of the court itself or its obvious extensions such as ships. There were no common symbols of Ryukyu, such as flags or anthems, which circulated throughout the kingdom. Rugged terrain and a lack of roads and transportation infrastructure served to isolate communities within the larger islands. Indeed, a common Okinawan word for districts or neighborhoods was *shima*, also meaning island. Few ordinary Ryukyuans would have had more than a rudimentary knowledge of China and Japan or a sense of Ryukyu as a part of a larger East Asia. In short, it is unlikely that the majority of the residents of the Ryukyu Islands identified themselves as “Ryukyuans” in 1870.

Background: Disputing the Significance of *Kyūkan-onzon*

When King Shō Tai relinquished his throne on March 30, 1879 and left Okinawa for Tokyo, the roughly 600 Japanese officials, soldiers, and police who had arrived to enforce Tokyo's annexation decree lacked the necessary knowledge of local conditions and infrastructure to administer Japan's newest prefecture. The former officials of the royal government initially refused to cooperate with their new overlords. Two days after the *shobun*, Okinawa's first governor decreed that although the offices in the former royal government had been eliminated, local officials are to continue to carry out their duties as before. However, many of these local officials closed and abandoned their offices, refusing any cooperation with the new rulers. A large group of former central government officials gathered at Nakagusuku Palace and vowed not to obey directives from Japan. They met with delegations from the villages and told them that they need not obey Japanese orders. This show of resistance encouraged further resistance. The former officials agreed to the following pact: "Those who obey Japanese orders and serve the Japanese government will be beheaded. Anyone executed by the Japanese government for refusing to cooperate shall be assured that his family will receive money from a pool of funds and will be cared for." Soon thereafter, Matsuda Michiyuki, who led the *shobun*, called together local Okinawan officials to berate them for abandoning their duty. One by one, each came forward, and claiming poor health, turned in their resignations. At the Naha *yakusho*, even those officials newly appointed by the prefecture and clerks and assistants of low status resigned. Officials on Yaeyama and Miyako refused to obey orders of the

new government. There was, in short, initial widespread defiance of Japanese control.³

Confounding Japanese control even further, some of these officials and other elite Ryukyans began fleeing to China. There, these “absconders” (*dasshinsha*) lobbied Chinese officials to intervene on Ryukyu’s behalf, thus complicating and drawing out the annexation process. Indeed, the practice of fleeing to China in response to undesirable policy changes continued throughout the nineteenth century. In 1898, for example, the (late) implementation of military conscription in Okinawa resulted in a wave of local residents fleeing to China.⁴ It was to stem to flow of elite Ryukyans fleeing to China and to restore basic governance that Japanese officials in 1879 and 1880 agreed to the temporary continuance of a limited set of former practices in return for cooperation from former officials. In retrospect, this policy came to be called *kyūkan-onzon*.

In the sense described above, *Kyūkan-onzon* worked as intended. Ōwan Satonushi Chōkō provided a firsthand account of the rapid change in attitude. He reported on the speed with which most Okinawans embraced—or at least tolerated—Japanese control. In Ōwan’s account, Okinawa’s *yukkachu* had grown lazy and useless owing to the effects of hereditary privilege. Furthermore, the top officials regarded the peasants under them as little more than farm animals. They loaned money to peasants at usurious rates, often by force. Ōwan explicitly

³ Arakawa Akira, *Ryūkyū shobun ikō*, vol. 1, Asahi sensho #175 (Asahi shinbunsha, 1981), pp. 34-36.

⁴ Articles in the *Ryūkyū shinpō* reported on this phenomenon in detail. See Okinawa seifu, ed. *Okinawa kenshi 19, shinbun shūsei (shakai bunka)* (Kokusho kankōkai, 1969, 1989), pp. 1-2, 7-8.

likened the Japanese conquerors to liberators and justified his own cooperation with the new order as an act of benevolence.

Some former officials began quietly to cooperate with the new regime. Others continued to resist. According to Kishaba Chōken, former aristocrats who secretly began to present themselves to the prefectural government office for employment were called traitors (*tanbōnin*). By day, they pretended to dislike, resist, and refuse to cooperate with the Japanese administration but made employment inquiries by night. When Matsuda left Naha in the summer of 1879, he brought two Ryukyans with him. One was a teenage aristocrat who had served the police. Another was the former high official and cultural Japanophile Giwan Chōho. Both were accompanying Matsuda to the mainland because they had incurred the severe enmity of other Ryukyuan elites for their active support of the new order.⁵

In short, loyalties in immediate post-annexation Okinawa were complex, with Japanese power interesting with long-festering social divisions within Okinawan elite society itself. The *kyūkan-onzon* policies pried loose enough Okinawan support for the new order to ensure moderately smooth incorporation of the former kingdom into Japan. Had Ryukyuan elite society been more united and had it enjoyed genuine support from the majority of ordinary people, the transition from kingdom to prefecture might well have been more violent and problematic.

⁵ Arakawa, *Ryūkyū shobun ikō*, vol. 1, pp. 53-58.

Given the literal meaning of *kyūkan-onzon*, it is worth considering what the policy preserved. Despite the name, *kyūkan-onzon* did not preserve customs or culture (*kan*, *shūkan*) in the usual sense of the term. The policy temporarily sustained institutions connected with taxation and governance. In return for continuation of customary social privileges and a continuation of stipends, former royal government officials administered the old land distribution system, taxation system, and maintained order in the countryside. Considering the importance that culture came to play in the rhetoric of Japanese and Okinawa identity around the turn of the century, it is important to stress that *kyūkan-onzon* was a limited, utilitarian expedient. It was unconnected with matters such as language, music, hairstyles, clothing, alcohol consumption, prostitution, and other aspects of lifestyle that played a key role in the construction of the dual Ryukyuan-Japanese identity and in explanations of Okinawan poverty.⁶ Moreover, by 1900 *kyūkan-onzon* policies and practices were rapidly drawing to a close.

Historians of modern Okinawa have tended to interpret *kyūkan-onzon* as either a calculated move by the Meiji state to exploit Okinawa (for example, by pressuring farmers to grow more sugar and sell only within Japan) or as a temporary expedient of little long-term significance. These different views are subsets of radically different conceptions of Okinawa's economic situation during the early decades of Japanese control. On the one hand is a narrative of Ryukyuan victimization at the hands of Japan. The *locus classicus* of the view of

⁶ For a discussion of this and relevant points see Ōsato Tomoko, "Okinawa kindaishi—'kyūkan onzon' 'shoki kensei' kenkyū ni tsuite no ikkōsatsu," *Okinawa bunka kenkyū* 29 (March, 2003), esp. pp. 290-297, 307-310.

the Meiji state as willfully exploiting Okinawa was Araki Chōkō's 1924 work, *Hinshi no Okinawa* (Okinawa on the verge of death). It reflects the widespread suffering of the so-called "sago palm hell" (*sotetsu jigoku*) era of the early and middle 1920s, when sharp declines in world sugar prices devastated the Okinawan economy and caused widespread famine conditions. The Russian Revolution was also loomed in the background. Many Okinawan scholars came to socialism as the wave of the future and discovered proto-socialistic institutions in Ryukyu's past. During the 1920s and 30s major scholars like Iha Fuyū, Araki Chōkō, and Oyadomari Kōei re-interpreted the annexation of Ryukyu. Instead of a liberating event, it became a case of a powerful outside entity exploiting or robbing Okinawa and destroying worthy, proto-socialistic institutions like the land distribution system.⁷

Subsequent history, especially the Battle of Okinawa, the long U.S. occupation, and the continuing disputes over military bases, has provided ample impetus for the continuation of this narrative of victimization. In its postwar form, the argument that the residents of Okinawa prefecture paid more per capita in taxes than those of any other prefecture while receiving less from the central government than any other prefecture is known as the Kinjō-Nishizato theory. Continuing the narrative established in the 1920s and 30s, during the 1960s and 70s Kinjō Seitoku, Nishizato Kikō, and Shinzato Keiji used statistics to advance the argument that Tokyo's relationship with Okinawa was fundamentally exploitative. Among other things, they argued that this exploitation was a means

⁷ For a summary of the influence of the Sago palm hell on interpretations of the *shobun*, see Araki Moriaki, *Shin Okinawashi ron* (Naha: Okinawa taimusu sha, 1980), 191-197.

by which Japan's central government amassed the capital necessary to fuel mainland industries.⁸ Directly criticizing the Kinjō-Nishizato interpretation, Araki Moriaki argued that in its early years, Okinawa Prefecture received much more from the central government than its people paid in taxes. Indeed, the central government used general revenues to make up the frequent deficits of the prefectural government. Furthermore, the Meiji government paid an artificially high price Okinawan sugar during the entire *kyūkan-onzon* era, a de facto subsidy. In short, Araki argues precisely the opposite of Kinjō and Nishizato: Okinawa was actually a drain on central government finances, not a source of central government revenues.⁹ Those who advocate closer Okinawa cooperation with Tokyo and see the victimization narrative as either inaccurate or undesirable have found much to cheer in Araki's interpretation. These polar opposite interpretations (often called the "Nishizato-Araki debate" as a shorthand) have dominated the basic framework of modern Okinawa history for decades. Recently there have been some attempts to move beyond this polarity or reconcile parts of it, but so far with relatively little success.¹⁰

For the purposes of this essay, it is sufficient simply to be aware of these two points of view and to take note of the strong influence of contemporary events on the interpretation of Ryukyu's past, especially the events of the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, we should bear in mind that

⁸ For the major essays establishing this interpretation, see Kinjō Seitoku, "Kinsei Okinawa no keizai kōzō" and Nishizato Kikō, "Kyūkan-onzon ka no ken keizai dōkō," Okinawa seifu, ed. *Okinawa kenshi 3, keizai* (Kokusho kankōkai, 1969, 1989), pp. 51-117, 121-292.

⁹ See Araki, *Shin Okinawashi ron*, esp. pp. 218-225.

¹⁰ See especially, Ōsato, "Okinawa kindaishi."

severe poverty was a problem not only in the Ryukyu Islands but also in many other places in Japan. Finally, I would highlight the relative lack of resistance to Japanese control on the part of ordinary people. The most basic factor was that most Ryukyuans lacked strong loyalties to the royal government and its officials. Therefore, the establishment of basic education, conscription, and other socializing institutions in Okinawa prefecture imparted to ordinary people a new identity of “Japanese” that at least partially replaced prevailing local identities. Owing to a process described in subsequent sections, this Japanese identity developed in opposition to another new identity, namely that of “Ryukyuan.”

Politics of the First Sino-Japanese War in Okinawa

On the eve of war with China, a 1994 government report analyzing Okinawan society identified two different anti-Japanese factions. The “black faction,” *kuro-tō* (O. “*kuruu*”), favored affiliation entirely with China, whereas the “stubborn faction,” *ganko-tō*, sought to restore the previous arrangement of dual relations with China and Japan. To confuse the political lines even more, not all supporters of the *kaika-tō* (roughly, “modernizers”) had given up on the idea of some kind of restoration of the old royal domain. The report’s conclusion is especially interesting. It points out that the image of China in Ryukyuan eyes has always been positive, while that of Kagoshima has long been negative. Therefore, among all Ryukyuans there is a tendency to view China and the mainland of Japan differently. Significantly, however, the *kuro-tō* and *ganko-tō*, were not

rooted in this phenomenon. Instead, they were vehicles for former elites to try to regain personal profit and authority. The report further stated that the *kuro-tō* members generally realized the trend of the times, but could not bring themselves to cooperate with the new order. The bottom line was that should a Qing army invade the Ryukyu Islands, it would be difficult to predict its reception among local residents.

Indeed, when war broke out, the *ganko-tō* became quite animated by the possibility that great Qing would liberate Okinawa. Despite the divisions outlined in the government report, there may not have been so clear a distinction between the *ganko-tō* and the *kuro-tō*. Newspaper reporters, for example, often lumped them together, calling them the “*kokugan-tō*.” When the war started, the *ganko-tō* held twice-monthly meetings in shrines and temples to offer prayers for a Chinese victory. The *kaika-tō* praised the pro-Japanese articles in the *Ryūkyū shinpō*, which had been established the previous year. Obviously, the war intensified the opposition of certain factions within Okinawan society. According to historian Shimabukuro Zenpatsu, at first only small groups would go to the various shrines and temples. Later, their numbers grew, and under the guise of praying for the health of deposed king Shō Tai, they would make the rounds of the major religious sites to pray for a Qing victory. Iha Fuyū, reported that the pro-China elites wore the ritual attire of former court officials as they made their rounds. Anti-Japanese Okinawans who hoped for a Qing victory were not necessarily limited to former Shuri elites clad in traditional attire making the rounds of religious institutions. The *gankō-tō* was splintered into several

subgroups because of the strong consciousness of social status among the former elites. In the countryside, for example, wealthy agricultural households were often rallying points for anti-Japanese/traditionalist forces. One wealthy household in Nago began a fund to assist and reward any Qing soldiers that might find their way to Okinawa after defeating Japanese forces. A popular *ryūka* of the *ganko-tō* went:

開化断髪やなまや威張らちよけ

The *kaika-tō* bastards with their cropped hair are strutting around now

黄色軍艦の入らばだいもの

Just wait until the yellow ships of the Qing navy come sailing into our ports!

When a headline in the newly created *Ryūkyū shinpō* read “Victory for Japan, Qing is Defeated,” the *ganko-tō* regarded it as baseless propaganda and refused to believe it. What made them finally realize the truth? One information source was the frequent coming and going of Japanese ships between Japan’s newly acquired colony of Taiwan and Naha. Moreover, in January 1896, Okinawans still petitioning the Qing court for aid returned to Okinawa and spread word of the situation in China.¹¹

One point to notice regarding this summary of political factions and activities is that the disputes between pro-Chinese and pro-Japanese factions was mainly an elite phenomenon. Ordinary Okinawans were relatively passive observers. After China’s victory, these political divisions continued to exist, not

¹¹ For a discussion of these political factions and additional examples of their activities, see Arakawa, *Ryūkyū shobun ikō*, vol. 1, pp. 70-79.

because anyone seriously believed China would or could liberate Ryukyu from Japan but because the political divisions were rooted in Okinawan society itself.

One significance of Japan's victory was that Okinawa became indisputably Japanese territory in the international arena. Within Okinawa, the *kyūkan-onzon* era wound down rapidly, ending entirely when stipends to former elites ended in 1910. By 1896 or so, nearly every Okinawan would have realized that they had no choice but to embrace Japanese identity, at least to a degree. Moreover, just as in the rest of Japan, a middle class began to emerge in Okinawa. It was oriented firmly towards Japan and Japanese culture, and its members' most persistent demand was for greater educational opportunities within Okinawa.

The Emerging Importance of Culture

As we have seen, the *kyūkan-onzon* policies were concerned with institutions and economic privileges such as hereditary stipends, not cultural matters in the usual sense. There was no attempt, for example, to preserve forms of culture such as traditional Ryukyuan dance or music, clothing styles, language, or popular religion. From the beginning of Okinawa Prefecture, local culture was either tolerated or suppressed, but it almost never received the active support of the state. Moreover, except perhaps for language, cultural matters were of relatively less overall importance during the nineteenth century compared with the early decades of the twentieth century. By roughly 1925, cultural practices had become a common explanation for Okinawa's economic difficulties.

Increased importance of culture corresponded to the period of “assimilation” (*dōka*), which began roughly after 1895. Like *kyūkan-onzon*, and typically in contrast with it, the era of “assimilation” is a retrospective label, not necessarily a considered policy move at the time. Japanese authorities and many Okinawans too, had long favored cultural integration of the Ryukyu Islands with the rest of Japan, opposition among some elite groups notwithstanding.

The increasing prominence of culture in debates over assimilation was probably less the result of conscious policy changes than a manifestation of particular rhetoric of identity. By the twentieth century, certain terms became stock metaphors for an alleged Japanese national character. These terms always implied a comparison with non-Japanese. “Loyalty and filial piety” (*chūkō*) is a classic example. The term was both normative vis-à-vis Japanese (you should be loyal and filial in ways the state defines) and descriptive of an alleged cultural superiority (only Japanese are capable of enacting such virtues thoroughly or on a large scale). In defining Japanese in terms of comparisons with non-Japanese, one common rhetorical formula held that Japanese are both modern and traditional. Japan and its people in this view have inherited the best of Asian cultural traditions and have mastered—or are at least well on the way to mastering—the modern technology of the Western world. In this way, Japan and its people stand apart from both other Asians and from Westerners.

When confronted with this view of Japan and its people, the possibilities for Ryukyuan responses were limited, especially after Japan’s defeat of China in 1895. Because Okinawa suffered from the stigma of being culturally different in

mainland Japanese eyes and because of its poverty and de facto dependence on the Japanese state, it would have made no sense for Okinawans to point out or celebrate cultural distinctiveness vis-a-vis an emerging “Japanese” ideal. Instead, the Okinawan rhetorical reaction to assertions of Japanese cultural distinctiveness and superiority was to claim that Ryukyuans, too, have long been Japanese—superficial differences to the contrary notwithstanding.

It is important to emphasize at this point that claims of Japanese cultural uniformity was, at least in the late nineteenth century, a political assertion with little basis in the actual lives of most Japanese. As the nineteenth century ended, there was substantial cultural diversity throughout the Japanese Islands in such areas as language, religious practices, clothing, social relationships, food habits, et cetera. The cultural differences between, Kagoshima Prefecture, for example, and Tokyo were significant, and Kagoshima Prefecture itself was home to several distinct cultural zones marked most prominently by different dialects. In the context of the geographical sweep of the Japanese Islands from Hokkaidō to Yonaguni, the various Ryukyuan cultures were at one end of a vast continuum of cultural variation. The main problem for Okinawans, however, was that while the Ryukyu Islands had come to lie firmly within the state boundaries of Japan, they remained outside the perceptual or psychological boundaries of the Japanese cultural nation.

Ryukyuan intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and others sought to dissolve this disjuncture between state and (imagined) cultural-national boundaries with the claim that Ryukyuans shared ancient cultural roots with

Japanese and were thus, essentially, the same people. The basis of this claim was usually that Ryukyuan languages retain significant elements of ancient Japanese. This case was easy to make, whether with respect to linguistic data or other aspects of culture. Returning to the formula of Japanese as both steeped in Asian traditions and fully modern, however, the claim of ancient common origins did not remove the stigma of Ryukyuan as rusticated relatives of “real” Japanese.

The usual approach to dealing with contemporary cultural differences was to blame Satsuma for the gap between “Okinawan” and “Japanese” culture. The basic line was that Satsuma forced the Ryukyu Kingdom into close political and cultural association with China. Of course, even if there were some basis to the claim, the situation would have applied only to Ryukyuan elites. In any case, in the realm of modern rhetoric this “unnatural” Chinese interlude arrested the normal course of cultural development or progress that would otherwise have taken place in the Ryukyu Islands. Consider, for example, the following assertion by historian Higashionna Kanjun as part of a 1914 address to an audience of mainland Japanese historians:

Through its policies, Satsuma, vis-à-vis, both the bakufu and China and other foreign countries, profited by preventing the Japanization (*Nihonka*) of Ryukyu. This was the fundamental policy and remained unchanged over the course of three centuries. It was because of this policy that the Meiji government had such a difficult time [assimilating Ryukyu]. In other words, at the time of the abolition of the domains and creation of

prefectures (*haihan-chiken*), breaking [Ryukyu's] ties with China proved terribly difficult—the result of three hundred years of well-established policy. My intent here today is that you kindly understand this policy [of Satsuma].¹²

Implicit in this line of argument was that had the “natural” course of development been allowed to take place, Ryukyuan of circa 1900 would have been much closer to a Japanese cultural ideal.

Putting aside the question of possible historical flaws in this line of thinking, it was only partially effective as rhetoric. There was little Okinawans at the turn of the twentieth century could say about modernity other than to repeat the tragic tale of Satsuma's oppression by way of suggesting what might have occurred had the “natural” course of historical evolution prevailed. Therefore, even in the eyes of sympathetic mainlanders, Okinawans were in need of modernizing changes to realize their potential of becoming fully Japanese. Furthermore, in the view of many mainlanders and Okinawans alike, these changes needed to be imposed thoroughly and decisively by the state and its agents.

One assumption behind renewed efforts to promote cultural assimilation circa 1900 was the assumption that assimilation would lead to economic improvement. Alan Christy summarizes the essence of the view as:

a program of assimilation (*dōka*), signifying the imperative that Okinawans transform their speech, dress, work, and leisure activities from those labeled “Okinawan” to those designated “Japanese.” . . . [T]his involved,

¹² Higashionna Kanjun, “Satsuma no Ryūkyū ni taisuru ni seisaku,” Ryūkyū Shinpō sha, comps., *Higashionna Kanjun zenshū*, vol. 4 (Daichi shobō, 1978), p. 234.

first, the construction of identities marked as “Okinawan” and “Japanese” in an overdetermined relationship to each other, and then an interiorization of the latter by Okinawans.¹³

Another important point concerning assimilation is that it came about largely from demands for change by a nascent Okinawan middle class. In other words, Okinawans themselves—or at least a significant subset of Okinawans—demanded it.

Okinawa's poverty could have been explained in terms of structural conditions such as excessive dependence on the sugar industry coupled with depressed sugar prices worldwide owing to excessive production. However, commentators, mainland or Okinawan alike, frequently de-emphasized such reasons. Instead, alleged Okinawan cultural deficiencies were the preferred culprit. Some examples of these deficiencies include a lack of Japanese language ability, concern for punctuality and time in general, lazy, drunken men content to rely on the toil of their wives, clothing habits such as the lack of shoes, strange music, widespread prostitution, and more. To illustrate some of the characteristics of this cultural discourse, let us take two examples, one rather well known and the other more obscure.

An industrial exposition in Osaka in 1903 featured a “Hall of Peoples” (*Jinruikan*) in which a man with a whip presided over a display of Ainu, Koreans, and two Okinawan women depicted as prostitutes. As visitors came through, he pointed with his whip at the people in question and explained some of the exotic

¹³ Alan S. Christy, “The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 1:3 (Winter, 1993), p. 610.

objects associated with them in this quasi-anthropological display of “primitive” peoples. *Ryūkyū shinpō* editor Ōta Chōfu expressed his rage at the exhibit in a series of editorials. He described the display of Okinawans as being no different from the display of exotic animals, but Ōta did not object to the display of primitive peoples in principle. His outrage was that Okinawans, “real Japanese,” were on display along with Koreans and “barbaric Ainu.”¹⁴

Obviously, this display portraying Okinawans as exotic outsiders belied official Japanese claims of Okinawans as integral members of the national family. Moreover, as Ōta pointed out in his critique, these exotic Okinawans were further portrayed as comparatively primitive. The display illustrates another common element in Japanese discourses on Okinawan backwardness. Specifically, Okinawa is marked as female in contrast to Japan’s maleness and, Okinawa is submissive in contrast with Japan’s dominance. The specific association of Okinawa with prostitution was also common at the time.

Next, let us consider the issue of clothing and styles of dress. This matter was in the forefront of the famous civilization and enlightenment (*bunmei kaika*) rhetoric of 1870s Japan, and it remained a prominent social issue well into the 1930s, albeit with changing emphasis. During the 1920s and 30s, for example, women’s underwear (or its lack) became a prominent issue in the discourse on

¹⁴ Hiyane Teruo and Isa Shin’ichi, comps. and eds., *Ōta Chōfu senshū*, vol. 2 (Dai’ichi shobō, 1995): 211-16. It was common, incidentally, for Okinawan intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to disparage Ainu with particular vigor. Iha Fuyū, for example, in a 1907 essay described Ainu as barbarians who, despite even longer association with Japanese than Ryukyuan, never produced anyone remotely like Sai On or Shō Shōken. Later in his career, in conjunction with his re-assessment of the significance of the annexation, Iha also changed his views on the Ainu. See Hattori Shirō, Nakasone Masayoshi, and Hokama Shuzen, eds., *Iha fuyū zenshū*, vol. 1 (Heibonsha, 1974), p. 61.

social improvement and modernization.¹⁵ Typically, discussion of ideal dress focused on its utility in making Japanese more productive, efficient, and modern. There was also a tendency to regard clothing as potentially didactic owing to its symbolic potential. Within Okinawa, concern with clothing took on similar contours, but with a greater intensity given the assumption of Okinawan backwardness as a hindrance to social and economic progress. Often the issue of proper dress merged with broader educational agendas.

A November 15, 1898 article in the *Ryūkyū shinpō* explained that there would soon be a change to western-style school uniforms for girls at Shuri Elementary School. It then outlined four principles, or ideal principles, underlying the new uniforms. The first was that the uniforms “protect against heat and cold,” with a further explanation that the uniforms need to accord with the relatively warm climate of Okinawa. The next principle is that the uniforms should be satisfying to wealthy and poor alike. The basic idea here, of course, was to avoid the outward manifestation of differences in wealth via clothing. Moreover, the uniforms could help reinforce the idea of living within one’s means, which “is a national economic norm.” The third principle is that the uniforms should “accord with the temperament (*kishitsu*) of males and females.” The article explains that “fortitude (*gōki*) and sophistication (*kōshō*) are the distinctive characteristics of males, and gentleness (*nyūwa*) and grace (*yūbi*) are the distinctive characteristics of females.” There is no specific explanation of precisely what features of the uniforms might manifest these attributes, only a faith that properly

¹⁵ See, for example, Inoue Shōichi, *Pantsu ga mieru: shu□chishin no gendaishi* (Asahi shinbunsha 2002).

designed uniforms would help amplify these supposed gender specific characteristics. Finally, the uniforms should “gradually improve barbaric (*yabanteki*) clothing customs and promote a civilized (*bunmeiteki*) appearance. Significantly, “barbaric” is defined specifically as “the dress of the Taiwanese aborigines,” namely a short skirt not long enough to cover the shin and simple, collarless attire. By contrast, “civilized” dress is the high-quality garments worn in Europe and North America (*Ōbei*). Such clothing would effect a change from “coarse” to “refined,” thus advancing society.¹⁶ There is no byline for the article, but it seems perfectly in line with the middle class editorial views of the paper. Notice that there is no explicit comparison with other prefectures, but Japan’s new colony of Taiwan, to which many Okinawans traveled, served as a point of negative comparison.

The *Ryūkyū shinpō* subsequently published two additional articles on the topic of the uniforms, which gave voice to a variety of viewpoints. The neat four-point scheme of the initial article became problematic in much of the subsequent discussion. For example, if clothing should accord with climate (and notions of climatic determinism were much in vogue at this time), then perhaps the Taiwanese aborigines are not necessarily “barbaric” in their attire. Adopting western-style clothing for the uniforms might conflict not only with the principle of climatic adaptation but also living within one’s means. Indeed, the subject of disparities in wealth came up frequently in the follow-up articles. The notion of a close connection between external appearance and one’s “spirit” (*seishin*) came

¹⁶ “Shuri joseito wasō no uwasa ni tsukite,” Okinawa seifu, ed. *Okinawa kenshi 19, shinbun shūsei (shakai bunka)* (Kokusho kankōkai, 1969, 1989), p. 20.

into question, and the issue of comparison with the rest of Japan, always implied, came explicitly to the surface. “Is not the real intent [behind the principles] that the dress of Okinawans is barbaric and that of the people of other prefectures civilized?” One article even brought Confucius into the argument, pointing out his praise for Zi Yu despite his rough clothing. The final point raised in the article series was not about clothing but an appeal to the entire society to take seriously the economic challenge of raising living standards.¹⁷

Notice that a debate over school uniforms brought to the fore major social divisions, anxieties about identity, and anxieties about the economy. Cultural matters were inextricably interconnected with political, economic, and social problems. They also intersected with questions of identity. This connection between culture and identity was common elsewhere in Japan, of course. Culture was often a proxy for debates over the nature of Japanese modernity and Japan’s relationship with the rest of the world. The difference was that in Okinawa, questions of identity were even more complex because of the ambivalent relationship with the rest of Japan.

Clothing, especially women’s clothing, continued to serve as a proxy for deeper social anxieties during the twentieth century. The following excerpt is from a speech by newly appointed Governor Takahashi Takuya in 1913 at the opening of Okinawa’s second middle school:

¹⁷ For example see, *Analects* 9:27 in which Confucius cites a verse: 衣敝緼袍、與衣狐貉者立、而不恥者、其由也與 (Standing in tattered work clothes among people clothed in fine furs without any embarrassment—it is You!), and Zi Yu constantly repeats it. For the articles, see “Shuri joseito wasō no uwasa ni tsukite (shoku)”, November 17 and November 19, 1898, *Okinawa kenshi* 19, pp. 20-23.

Because from now on, things much change in accordance with the world's progress, we must reform what should be reformed and stop adhering stubbornly to outmoded ways. In this place, women do not fasten belts around their robes . . . No matter where one might go around here, there are women without fastened belts as well as women who do not wear underpants. . . . Even in Korea, women wear underpants. . . . Try going to the mainland in your present state of dress. Not only will people laugh at you, they will hold you in contempt. However impressive and learned you may be, others will regard you as idiots.”¹⁸

In this view, improper or immodest clothing habits among women stand in the way of modern progress in Okinawa. Using Okinawans' anxiety concerning their status as “real Japanese,” the governor brings in the unfavorable comparison with Korea to enhance the rhetorical impact of his critique. Such comparisons with the colonial subjects of the Japanese empire was a common ploy in the rhetoric of Okinawan cultural inferiority. It is interesting to note that at this time, few women in the mainland of Japan wore underwear except when attired in Western-style clothing. The campaigns of the 1920s and 30s in Japan's cities to encourage women to wear underwear would have been unnecessary had Governor Takahashi's statement been accurate. In any case, however, Takahashi's ultimate concern was probably not with clothing.

¹⁸ Quoted by Ōshiro Tatsuhiko, "Kaisetsu" in Naha-shiyakusho, comp., ed., *Naha-shi shi*, Shiryō-hen, vol. 2-3 (Kumamoto: Shirono Insatsu, 1970), p. 348.

Conclusions

The transition from the Ryukyu Kingdom to Okinawa Prefecture during the 1870s and 1880s could be regarded as relatively smooth or relatively tumultuous, depending on expectations and perspectives. Ryukyuan society in the 1870s was fractured, both geographically and socially. Elites were culturally and socially distinct from ordinary people, and elites themselves were divided along factional and status lines. While elites possessed a sense of Ryukyuan identity to at least some degree, ordinary Okinawans, Miyakoans, Yaeyamans, and other inhabitants of the Ryukyu Islands generally did not. Owing to this situation, the Japanese takeover of the kingdom was bloodless and relatively easy. Governing the former kingdom, however, was more problematic. Initially, governing was impossible without at least some elite support. Enacting major social reforms quickly was out of the question. This situation led to the so-called “preservation of old customs” (*kyūkan-onzon*) policies, which were less about customs than about purchasing elite cooperation by continuing certain economic institutions and hereditary privileges. With occasional exceptions, ordinary Okinawans were generally passive participants in the new order.

This relative passivity began to change toward the end of the nineteenth century. Japan’s victory over China was one reason. It ensured that the Ryukyu Islands would be Japanese territory and therefore that Okinawa’s future was with Japan. Basic education had been in place since the 1880s in urban areas, and it helped create by the end of the century a generation of Okinawans conversant in

Japanese and oriented toward Japan. This education system (and later conscription and other institutions) also had the function of imposing on Okinawans a Japanese identity. An Okinawan middle class began to emerge, and the *Ryūkyū shinpō* became its most prominent voice. This middle class demanded an end to old institutions and privileges, along with significant social reform. These demands were roughly in line with broader Japanese policy to assimilate the islands into Japan as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, owing to the region's long history as something other than Japan and owing to real and imagined cultural divergences from an idealized Japanese norm, assimilation was often a difficult process. In the context of increasing focus on assimilation from about 1900 onward, cultural practices came to the fore in social and political debates. Indeed, food and drink, clothing, music, dance, the rhythms of daily life, and other aspects of quotidian culture often served as umbrella issues covering and partially masking debates about more substantial topics such as economic policy, social divisions, political rights, and so forth. Moreover, the rhetoric of cultural debates in a context emphasizing assimilation helped foist a "Ryukyuan" identity onto Okinawans who had only recently become Japanese. The basic dynamic was an overdetermined Ryukyuan identity in conflict with an overdetermined Japanese identity. The task of Okinawans, according to typical early twentieth century messages from the local government (public posters, for example) or the school system was to overcome their Ryukyuan identity and embrace Japanese identity. There were many ways of carrying out this task, none more important than speaking

“standard” Japanese (*hyōjungo*) and eschewing Ryukyuan languages. In 1940, for example, Yanagi Muneyoshi and other prominent advocates of *mingei* (folk arts) publicly stated that Ryukyuan languages were valuable and should be preserved. The backlash was severe, not only from local government officials but from ordinary Okinawans, apparently thoroughly invested in the notion that “Ryukyuaness” had to be overcome if one were to be genuinely Japanese.