

Thoughts on the State of Okinawan Studies in North America and Europe

19 March, 2009

Gregory Smits, Pennsylvania State University

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for providing me the opportunity to reflect on the state of Okinawan studies in North America and Europe. I would also like to thank all of the conference participants for making this event possible.

Although I will make reference to the work of specific scholars in this address, please know that it is impossible for me to mention everyone, even briefly. Not only is the field of Okinawan studies too large for complete coverage in a short talk, but there are gaps in my knowledge. I would like to thank those scholars in a variety of disciplines who generously responded to my inquiries in the course of preparing this address. Please accept my apologies in advance for being able to include only a fraction of the information you provided.

My intention here is not to provide a history of Okinawan studies in Europe and North America. I will mention some of the classic works of scholarship from the more distant past, but my focus will be on the past ten to fifteen years, the present, and the near future. Whatever the state of Okinawan studies may be at present, it is surely our goal to advance and expand Okinawan studies. With this goal in mind, I will conclude with some tentative suggestions for promoting Okinawan studies.

For the for the most part, I define Okinawan studies somewhat narrowly as academic research concerning Okinawa Prefecture, the Kingdom of Ryukyu, or the Ryukyu Islands prior to the time of their political unification. In terms of institutional structures, Okinawan studies has typically functioned as a subset of Japanese studies, a reflection in part, of modern state and language boundaries. The major omission in this definition, of course, is Okinawa's modern diaspora. Okinawan immigrant communities have become part of the histories of the United States, Brazil, and other countries, and scholarship focusing on whole or in part on these communities has begun to flourish. My omission of this scholarship in this address is the result of my lack of sufficient familiarity with it. In my concluding remarks I will return to the topic of the diaspora.

Surveying Okinawan studies very broadly, the number of published works on Okinawa in Western languages increases as the subject matter at hand draws temporally closer to the present. Even within the discipline of history, the overwhelming majority of studies deal with a period of time from the middle twentieth century to the present. In terms of topics, the problem of U.S. Military bases seems to have generated the largest number of published work. Works dealing with issues of identity and cultural diversity are also very common.

As a general rule, disciplinary boundaries are becoming increasingly porous throughout the academic world. In some cases, traditional categories themselves have become unstable. Moreover, cross-disciplinary research and the importation of ideas and methods from one discipline to another are now fairly common. Therefore, the disciplinary categories I discuss

here should be regarded as broad, somewhat arbitrary categories of convenience. I now briefly survey Okinawa-related scholarship in several disciplines.

Throughout the twentieth century and continuing today, the economic situation in Okinawa has been a matter of concern to scholars in a range of disciplines. There are several articles, papers, and book chapters in English by scholars based in Japan. Among North American- or European-based researchers, scholars of Okinawa's economy are relatively few in number. The major figure is economist Koji Taira, who has also labored tirelessly for decades as promoter of Okinawan studies in the United States and elsewhere.

Richard Pearson dominates the field of archeology and is the leading authority outside of Japan in Ryukyuan prehistory. His influential book *Archaeology of the Ryukyu Islands: A Regional Chronology from 3000 B.C. to the Historic Period* was published in 1969. More recently, Professor Pearson has examined Ryukyuan history from interesting perspectives such as in his 1997 book chapter "The Chuzan Kingdom of Okinawa as a city-state" and his 1996 essay "The place of Okinawa in Japanese Historical Identity," which appears in Donald Denoon and Gavan McCormack's book *Multicultural Japan*. Among emerging scholars, Barbara Seyock in Germany is working on trade ceramics in the Ryukyu Islands.

In the field of anthropology, very broadly defined to include folklore, folk crafts, and religion, there are several prominent scholars whose work focuses on different parts of the Ryukyu Islands. One classical study is William P. Lebra's 1966 book *Okinawan Religion: Belief, Ritual, and Social Structure*, reprinted in 1985. Perhaps the most prominent figure in the field is Josef Kreiner, who has published on a wide range of Okinawa-related topics in English, Japanese, and German. Among other things, Professor Kreiner is a specialist in the religious culture of the Ryukyu Islands. He has also played a prominent role in the promotion of Okinawan and Ryukyuan studies by organizing several major international conferences that resulted in published volumes. Another of Professor Kreiner's important contributions to Ryukyuan studies is his 1996 book *Sources of Ryūkyūan History and Culture in European Collections*. Although currently at Hōsei University, Professor Kreiner spent most of his career at the University of Bonn. In 2006, Professor Kreiner, along with Rosa Caroli, created the International Association of Ryukyuan/Okinawan Studies. One point that Professor Kreiner has made at various times is that the general field of Okinawan studies should not overlook Amami-Ōshima and nearby islands simply because they are part of Kagoshima Prefecture.

Arne Røkkum, professor of social anthropology at the Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, studies the ways in which ritual imparts authority to women. From that prospective he has produced two important book-length studies of Okinawa, *Goddesses, Priestesses and Sisters: Mind, Gender and Power in the Monarchic Tradition of the Ryukyus* (1998) and *Nature, Ritual, and Society in Japan's Ryukyu Islands* (2006). Susan Sared has written, *Women of the Sacred Groves Divine Priestesses of Okinawa* (1999), a controversial book about the priestesses of Henza. Many specialists in Okinawan studies have criticized this book, in part because it ignores the vast corpus of Japanese-language literature on Okinawan religion owing to the author's inability to read Japanese. Based in Germany, Monica Wacker's

2006 book *Onarigami: die heilige Frau in Okinawa* (Onarigami: the holy women of Okinawa) examines *onarigami*, sisters whose spiritual power functions to protect brothers and other male relatives.

Amanda Stinchecum is a scholar of material culture who specializes in textiles and clothing, with a geographic focus on Yaeyama. Her research examines textiles and clothing in their social and historical contexts. In a recent essay, for example, Dr. Stinchecum argues that *bashōfu* (banana-fiber cloth) became a vehicle whereby Okinawans and mainland Japanese defined Okinawan identity in the twentieth century in the context of the Minegi (folk crafts) Movement. ["Bashōfu, The Mingei Movement, and the Creation of a New Okinawa" 2007] She is currently working on a book-length project on the recent history of Yaeyama through the medium of the Yaeyama *minsaa* sash.

Patrick Beillevaire's wide-ranging work on Ryukyu and Okinawa treats some of the broad themes found in Dr. Stinchecum's work. Professor Beillevaire, based in Paris at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, has written about the role of Japanese folklore studies in creating modern Okinawan identity in such essays as "Assimilation from within, appropriation from without: the folklore-studies and ethnology of Ryukyu/Okinawa" (1999). He has published a massive volume of primary sources, *Ryukyu studies since 1854: Western encounter, part 2*. (2003), and recently published an essay examining changes in royal ritual in the Ryukyu Kingdom. ["Agari-umai, or the Eastern Tour: a Ryukyuan royal ritual and its transformations"]

Linda Isako Angst, an anthropologist at Lewis and Clark College, has examined questions of Okinawan women's political subjectivity, particularly as understood through their narratives about wartime experiences and memories and postwar occupation by the U.S. Military. She is currently researching the effects of developing Okinawa as a tourist site for Japanese consumption. Historian Gerald Figal of Vanderbilt University is also working on a the topic of tourism and Okinawa.

Anthropologist Christopher Nelson of The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill investigates the transformational possibilities of everyday life in contemporary Japan. From that approach he has published articles on such topics as Okinawan *moai* (revolving credit associations), the role of comedy in contemporary Okinawan life, and early Okinawan ethnographers. He has recently published the book *Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa* [Duke UP, 2008].

The Ryukyu Islands are home to distinctive styles of music and dance, and a number of theses and dissertations written at North American universities have examined specialized topics in Ryukyuan performing arts. Both traditional Ryukyuan music and its contemporary hybrid forms in popular culture have attracted academic attention. James E. Roberson, for example, has written about Okinawan music in contemporary Japanese popular culture. John Potter has published *The Power of Okinawa*, a book-length study of Ryukyuan roots music. University of London ethnomusicologist David W. Hughes deals with Okinawan music as part

of a broader interest in folk music of the Japanese islands. Based in Britain, Robin Thompson is a performing musician and expert in Ryukyuan music. In addition to the usual academic activities, he has been involved in translation projects, recordings and performances as a member of several ensembles.

In political science, Gabriele Vogt has done extensive research on citizens' movements and international migration to Japan. With respect to Okinawa, she has published several articles in English and German and a book-length study in German on the Okinawan peace movement. [*Die Renaissance der Friedensbewegung in Okinawa. Innen- und außenpolitische Dimensionen 1995-2000* (The Renaissance of the Okinawan Peace Movement: Dimensions of Domestic and Foreign Politics 1995-2000)]. Although currently at the German Institute for Japan Studies, Dr. Vogt has worked at universities in the United States and Germany. Although not primarily political scientists, some of the work of Professors Angst and Taira overlaps thematically with the issues Dr. Vogt studies.

In the realm of foreign relations, the U.S. occupation of Okinawa between 1945 and 1972—or continuing to the present in some views—has generated much academic attention especially with respect to the impact of Okinawa on U.S.-Japanese relations. Among recent works, Nicholas Sarantakes's *Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations* [2000] is especially important owing to its thoroughness and rich conceptualizations. Professor Sarantakas argues, among other things, that occupied Okinawa was a de facto United States colony and that Japanese pressure finally forced a change in U.S. Policy leading to reversion. His analysis takes Cold War politics and the pivotal role of Okinawans themselves into account. Although based in Japan and thus, strictly speaking, outside the scope of this report, Robert D. Eldridge has written extensively in English about Okinawa's impact on U.S.-Japanese relations, including the decades following reversion in 1972.

The discipline of linguistics has perhaps the deepest roots in Okinawan studies because of the importance of Ryukyuan languages in shedding light on the broader linguistic history of the Japanese islands. Indeed, Basil Hall Chamberlain's 1895 *Essay in Aid of a Grammar and Dictionary of the Luchuan Language* was among the earliest academic books on Okinawa in a Western language. Center for Okinawan Studies director Leon Serafim is a specialist in the prehistory of Ryukyuan languages. Recently, he and lexicographer Stewart Curry co-edited Mitsugu Sakihara's Okinawan lexicon and assisted in its posthumous publication in 2006 as *Okinawan-English Wordbook: A Short Lexicon of the Okinawan Language with English Definitions and Japanese Cognates*. Rumiko Shinzato, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, has collaborated with Professor Serafim in research on prehistoric Japanese and Okinawan. Currently they are working on a study of connecting and emphatic particles known as *kakari-musubi*. Professor Shinzato has also written on contemporary language issues, such as her 2003 essay “Wars, politics, and language: a case study of the Okinawan language.”

Another linguist working on contemporary language issues in Okinawa is Patrick Heinrich of the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany. Professor Heinrich is an expert on language

endangerment, language attitudes and uses of hybrid language forms in different regions of the Ryukyu Islands. His recent book *Look Who's Talking: Language Choices in the Ryukyu Islands* [2007] provides a description of the contemporary linguistic situation in the Ryukyu Islands to serve as a basis for planned attempts to revitalize the local languages.

Studies of modern Okinawan literature have flourished in recent decades. Steve Rabson of Brown University made a major contribution in 1989 by publishing a translation of Tatsuhiro Ōshiro's *The Cocktail Party*, and Mineo Higashi's *Child of Okinawa*, two Akutagawa Prize winning novellas. Rabson, an expert on the Okinawan poet Yamanokuchi Baku, has more recently worked with Michael Molasky to produce an anthology of Okinawan literature in translation, *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*. Professor Molasky, of the University of Minnesota, has published extensively in English and Japanese on the general topic of Okinawa as a site of literary production and political critique. His 1999 book *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory* has been followed by book-length studies of Arakawa Akira and Medoruma Shun. Kyle Keoni Ikeda, of the University of Vermont, is a specialist in war narratives and war memory concerning the Battle of Okinawa. He is working on a book-length study of Medoruma's fiction dealing with war memory.

Another specialist on Medoruma Shun is Davinder Bhowmik of the University of Washington. Her recently-published book *Writing Okinawa: Narrative Acts of Identity and Resistance* is the first comprehensive English-language study of Okinawan fiction from its emergence in the early twentieth century through its most recent permutations. She argues that by consciously exploiting—to good effect—the overlap between regional and minority literature, Okinawa's writers have produced a rich body of work, much of which challenges the notion of a unified nation arising from a single language and culture.

Among emerging scholars, Annmaria Shimabuku, currently Acting Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages at the University of California Riverside, has published sociological studies on Amerasians in Japanese, and is currently writing on the history and literature of miscegenation in postwar Okinawa in English. Among other theoretical approaches, she is interested in studying Okinawa from a postcolonial feminist perspective.

Just as much of the research on Okinawan literature deals in some way with the effect of the U.S. Military bases that occupy approximately one-fifth of the physical surface of the island of Okinawa, the study of Okinawan history has focused overwhelmingly on the late twentieth century and the U.S. Military presence. Of course, there is also a large body of writing on the Battle of Okinawa, much of it of a journalistic nature. Among the more rigorous studies of the battle, George Feifer's 1992 book *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* is especially well known. In addition to discussing the broader significance of the battle Feifer's account highlights the voices of the many civilians caught between the opposing armies. Many other studies that deal in whole or in part with the Battle of Okinawa address the issue war memories and their significance in the postwar decades. Linda Angst's recent book, *In a*

Dark Time: Memory, Community, and Gendered Nationalism in Postwar Okinawa, for example, deals extensively with the continuing significance of wartime memories. Norma Field's section on the activities of Chibana Shōichi in *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* is another example of scholarship on the politics of wartime remembrance and commemoration. Similarly, the contested nature of war and peace memorials in Okinawa has attracted scholarly attention. Gerald Figal's essay "Waging Peace on Okinawa" in Laura Hein, and Mark Selden's edited volume *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power* is a good example.

Several edited volumes have appeared in the past decade which bring together scholars from a variety of disciplines to analyze contemporary Okinawa or recent Okinawan history. In addition to the volume by Hein and Selden mentioned previously, Glenn D. Hook and Richard Siddle, both of the University of Sheffield, brought out *Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity* in 2003, and Chalmers Johnson produced *Okinawa: Cold War Island* in 1999.

In the realm of premodern history, in other words the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the quantity of work by scholars based in North America and Europe drops off considerably. Rosa Caroli of Ca' Foscari University in Venice is perhaps the foremost scholar of Okinawan history in Europe. She has written a comprehensive history of Okinawa and Ryukyu: *Il Mito Dell'omogeneita Giapponese: Storia di Okinawa* (The myth of Japanese homogeneity: The history of Okinawa). She has published numerous articles in English and Italian on Ryukyuan and Okinawan history and is currently working on a book-length biography of Ryukyu's last king, Shō Tai. In recent years, Professor Caroli has worked mightily to promote Okinawan studies. For example, in September 2006 she organized an international conference that brought together in Venice an unprecedentedly large and diverse group of scholars of Okinawa and Ryukyu.

As the title of Professor Caroli's book suggests, it is common for scholars to deploy the case of Okinawa to counter the widespread postwar notion that Japan is a culturally homogeneous nation-state. The 1997 edited volume *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity* and the edited volume *Multicultural Japan: Paeleolithic to Postmodern* both contain chapters on Okinawa. I should point out that the tendency of academics to highlight Okinawan differences vis-a-vis the rest of Japan is a not without potential problems. One obvious issue is the cultural diversity within the Ryukyu Islands and within the Japanese mainland. Another important scholar of modern Japanese identity is historian Alan Christy of the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has taught a course on Okinawan history and his 1997 essay "Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa" has been highly influential.

Although nearly all writers on Okinawan topics resort to Ryukyuan history to make or enhance various points, scholarship on the Ryukyu Kingdom among researchers in North American and Europe is comparatively rare. Thomas Nelson's 2006 essay "Japan in the Life of Early Ryukyu" examines Ryukyuan-Japanese relations prior to 1609. My work includes the study of royal authority in Ryukyu prior to 1609, changes to the basis of royal authority after 1609, the use of Confucianism by certain Ryukyuan elites after 1609 to authorize political agendas,

money in the Ryukyu kingdom, and other topics in early and early-modern Ryukyu. I have also written on the *Ryūkyū shobun* (the process of Japan's annexation of Ryukyu in the 1870s and 80s) and the process of what I call “making Japanese” in Okinawa prefecture between 1879 and 1940. Recently, I have examined the history of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism and its uses in contemporary Okinawan politics.

Several historians have integrated a substantial discussion of Ryukyu into their work on broader topics. Ronald Toby's seminal 1984 study of Tokugawa-era foreign relations, for example, situated Ryukyu in the midst of a network of East Asian foreign relations whose major nodes were Beijing, Fuzhou, Naha, Kogoshima, Edo, and Busan. Among emerging scholars, Kirstin Ziomek, a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is writing a dissertation on the history of Japanese colonialism that examines the experiences of people living in Japan's empire. In her view, Hokkaido and Okinawa are part of this colonial empire, and Ms. Ziomek intends to devote a chapter to a revisionist analysis of the 1903 Human Pavilion (Jinruikan) controversy at the Fifth Domestic Industrial Fair in Osaka. Although scholars based in North America and Europe typically rely heavily on the work of Japanese researchers, they are often willing raise issues that are rarely found in Japanese-language scholarship. The willingness to analyze modern Okinawan history in the context of colonial studies is one example.

The three keynote addresses for this conference discuss Okinawan studies in Okinawa, the rest of Japan, and North America and Europe. If we include Hawai'i in North America, there is still a major part of the world missing in our coverage: Australia and New Zealand. Scholars based in these two countries have contributed greatly to Okinawan studies, and so at a minimum I would like to acknowledge some of their contributions. Historians Julia Yonetani & Julia Humphry have written on the career of former governor Ōta Yoshinobu. Historians Gavan McCormack and Tessa Morris-Suzuki and written extensively about Okinawan and Ryukyuan topics. Hugh Clarke has also made major contributions to Okinawan studies, as has Matthew Allan, who published the book *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa* in 2002. Archaeologists Atholl Anderson and Glenn Summerhayes are interested in Austronesian connections with Yaeyama.

What exactly is the status of Okinawan studies in North America and Europe? This question is difficult to answer because so much depends on one's perspective. Certainly there is a large body of published literature and a sizable group of scholars ranging from graduate students to senior professors in a wide range of disciplines. On the other hand, there is plenty of room for more work in many aspects of Ryukyuan and Okinawan studies. In any case, whatever the state of Okinawan studies may be right now, we would surely like to see it advance further. So I will conclude with a few recommendations on this point.

There are several organizations around the world that promote Okinawan studies, and it would be ideal if they would coordinate resources, conferences, and possibly organizational talent. Especially important are the web sites of these organizations. With the exception of www.uchinanchu.org (which houses Koji Taira's valuable newsletter *The Ryukyuanist*) most

web sites of the various Okinawa-related organizations outside of Japan lack tools and resources that might be helpful for scholars of Okinawa or for those who might become scholars of Okinawa. For example, one of the major web sites should create and constantly update a comprehensive bibliography of Okinawa- and Ryukyu- related publications in Western languages. I have started such a bibliography and would be happy to pass it on to the COS or any other organization that would be willing to develop it further.

Although nearly all scholars of Okinawa make reference to Ryukyuan history, there is no academically sound and up-to-date general history of Ryukyu or Okinawa in English. George Kerr's history of Ryukyu was written in the late 1950s, and did not even reflect the full range of scholarship of that period because Kerr had to depend on what his assistants could translate. To give but one example, the *hiki* system, which was the core of the Ryukyuan military, is not even mentioned in Kerr. I plan to begin writing a general history of Ryukyu in the near future and have have started outlining the details of its content. If I can succeed in getting this project completed reasonably soon, I will consider a second volume covering Okinawa Prefecture between the 1870s and 1940s. And if someone else were to take on this task, I would be delighted.

As professor Kreiner and others have urged, it is important to geographic expand the scope of Okinawan studies beyond the island of Okinawa. Yaeyama and Miyako have received some attention from scholars in North America and Europe, but Amami-Ōshima has been little studied outside of the realms of historical linguistics and religious customs. Moreover, there is the wider world of the Okinawan or Ryukyuan diaspora. One way to bring together different academic disciplines and to encourage broadening the geographical scope of Okinawan studies would be to create a refereed academic journal. Perhaps the COS would be best positioned to take the lead in establishing such a journal. Given sufficient resources, it would be ideal for several of the best articles published in this journal to be translated into Japanese. The flow of communication in Okinawan studies is still highly unbalanced, with scholars outside of Japan reading the relevant Japanese-language literature, but with very few scholars of Okinawa in Japan reading the growing body of literature in Western languages.

Looking a little farther into the future, I would like to see academically-rigorous surveys of Okinawa in western languages in disciplines other than history--for example a contemporary version of William Lebra's classic study of Okinawan religion. The availability of such books would facilitate the teaching of more college-level courses on Okinawa and would encourage greater inclusion of Okinawa or Ryukyu in courses on Japan, East Asia, or places with significant Okinawan diasporic presence. Ideally the web site of the COS or other major organizations will develop an archive of materials to assist in expanding the presence of Okinawa in the university curriculum and possibly the high school level as well.