

Okinawa is a Japanese Colony

When CERD considered the Japanese government report during its 17th session in 2010, Okinawa was one of the issues most frequently focused on during the discussions. In its concluding observations, the Committee indicated its concern over the situation of Okinawa and included several recommendations to the government to address problems faced by Okinawan people. In this issue, we bring you an interesting essay about Okinawa by Dr. Yasukatsu Matsushima, Professor of Ryukoku University and the representative of civil group “Yuimarle Ryukyu no Jichi (autonomy of Ryukyu).”

We are not treated as equals

My love for Okinawa is boundless. Okinawa is my *mabui* (spirit) and my body. I was born on the island of Ishigaki and grew up on the islands of South Daitô, Yonaguni and Okinawa, among the peoples, cultures and the seas of these islands.

It has become customary to use the name of the main island of the group, Okinawa, interchangeably and as representative of the whole Ryûkyû chain. In historical contexts, it stands for the independent Kingdom of Ryûkyû. We Ryûkyûans call ourselves *Uchinanchû* (we, us, ourselves) and the Japanese *Yamatunchû* (those from Yamato/Japan). Even when I moved to Tôkyô to enter University and lived in a dormitory, I could not forget Okinawa. The contrary, my love grew even deeper. When the Yamatunchû asked, “Where do you come from? What is your nationality?” and I replied, “I am from Okinawa”, they gazed at my face with puzzled curiosity. I repeatedly faced this kind of encounter, I had never before experienced in Okinawa.

Throughout my primary, middle and high school years, I had a Japanese education and spoke Japanese, although I am Okinawan. In 1972, when the USA “returned” Okinawa to Japanese administration, I was a third grader. At the time, I had an unforgettable experience. A teacher identified one of the students who had said something in our language by placing a “dialect label” around his neck and punishing him, because the school authorities were enforcing the rule that all speak Japanese. This was also customary in pre-war, (Second World War) contexts. I experienced with my body what it meant to be under Japanese rule.

Although we are Japanese citizens, have a Japanese education and speak Japanese, the Japanese never acknowledge us as equals and treat us as foreigners. Among the Okinawans in the dormitory, some friends were so shocked by this treatment that they left school. It was the Japanese who made me conscious of my complexion, facial features and language. I read and discussed with my friends the books written by the fathers of Ryûkyûan studies Iha Fuyû, Higashiona Kanjun and Yanagita Kunio, who espoused a thesis, alleging the cultural and historical identity of Japan and Ryûkyû - the so-called “same ancestor theory”. If we were one people and one culture, how do we explain the historical fact that Japan did unspeakable things to us?

An irresistible quest from the core of my being to solve questions, asking things such as, "What is the Okinawa issue?" and "Why Okinawa?", made me decide to enter the path of scholarship. My primary subjects were comparative studies of the Ryūkyū archipelago and other Pacific islands and island economies. I confirmed my view that all islands are equal in their mutual relationships and learn from each other. I am Okinawa! When Okinawa or Okinawans are appreciated, I am happy, and when they are discriminated against and insulted, I feel sad and angry.

This is not a sign of a shallow local patriotism, but an expression of our determination to prevent yet another period of colonization. Ever since the US military occupied Okinawa 56 years ago and turned administrative power over to Japan 38 years ago, the Japanese government and the Japanese people have turned a blind eye to threats to the lives and livelihoods of the Okinawan people and ignore the stabilization of this dire colonial situation. It can be said the Okinawa issue is a discrimination issue and I want to find a way to liberate us.

From Serfdom To illegal Annexation

Okinawa became a subject of discrimination from the very moment it was incorporated into Japan, as its southernmost part. In 1609, Shōgun Tokugawa Iyeyasu permitted the feudal fief of Satsuma to attack the Ryūkyūs. After the rout, King Shō Nei of Ryūkyū was taken prisoner and forced to face Iyeyasu at Sumpu castle on his way to surrender in Edo. The Ryūkyū government was exhorted to send tributary missions to Edo and fulfill its tributary obligations to Japan. The mission was humiliated by being paraded in front of the population of Edo as foreigners in outlandish garb, accompanied by garish music. This kind of reception was also customarily meted out to envoys from Korea.

For the kingdom, modern times started in 1609. The Satsuma fief separated and administered the Amami Ōshima islands directly, enforced a monoculture of sugar cane, introduced serfdom and taxed relentlessly. Satsuma officials were stationed at Shuri castle to ensure total control of the kingdom, collect taxes and siphon off the kingdom's proceeds from trade with China. At the time, the Western Imperial powers were expanding their colonies in the Asia-Pacific region.

At the same time, Japan strengthened its relations with the West and staked out its own territory. To augment it, Japan unilaterally claimed the Ryūkyūs. In 1879, Japan subdued the Kingdom by military force, and demoted the kingdom to the Ryūkyū fief and the king to chief of the fiefdom, exiling him to Tōkyō. The Japanese government called this the "disposal of the Ryūkyūs", and continues to use this discriminatory terminology in schoolbooks to this day. It is not justified to treat the conversion of the Japanese fiefs into prefectures on the same level as the independent kingdom of Ryūkyū, which had treaties not only with China, but also with Western powers and was internationally recognized as an independent state. The Ryūkyū government and people have never agreed to be part of Japan. No treaty transferring sovereignty to Japan is in existence. The annexation of the kingdom cannot be justified either on moral grounds or under international law. IT IS

INVALID. Japan has divested the kingdom of its diplomatic, commercial and autonomous rights. Ryūkyū is entitled to demand their restoration.

The Kingdom of Hawaii was in a similar position. It was an independent kingdom unified by King Kamehameha I., who promulgated a code of laws and signed treaties with Western countries. Westerners in control of the economy of Hawaii, with the support of the American navy, instigated a coup d'état against the kingdom's last ruler, Queen Liliuokalani, who claimed autonomy. They proclaimed the Republic of Hawaii, took leadership and steered US Congress to recognize Hawaii. In 1992, Hawaiians objected to their delegates in congress that Hawaiian voices had not been taken into consideration at that time. The 103rd Congress of the USA admitted the illegality of the procedure and issued a formal apology. During the same year, President Clinton visited Hawaii and delivered and signed a personal apology to the Hawaiians.

Japan never apologized, or offered compensation for the “disposal of the Ryūkyūs”. In consequence, Ryūkyūan officials were forced to seek exile in China, where they appealed for help, even by means of suicide, and continued the movement for “independence for the Ryūkyūs” until after the Sino–Japanese war. In connection with mediation efforts by US President Grant, Japan offered China the Miyako and Yaeyama islands of the Ryūkyūs in return for trading rights in China equal to those of the Western Powers. China refused to sign such a treaty. The Japanese government was de facto dividing the island chain and abandoning the islands for monetary profit.

After the takeover by Japan, the Ryūkyūans were subjected to forced assimilation, discrimination and exploitation. In education, the Japanese language was severely enforced. Japanese enterprises and Japanese businessmen ruled the island's economy. In the 1920s, starvation - the so-called “Sago Palm Hell” - forced the population to migrate to other parts of Japan or abroad. Enduring discrimination was typified by an incident at Ōsaka Tenōji in the year 1903, when Okinawans were displayed to visitors of the 5th Industrial Exposition in cages, together with the original inhabitants of Taiwan (classified as “savages”), Ainu, Koreans, Chinese, Javanese, and Indians etc. This incident engraved discrimination deeply into the hearts and memories of Okinawans.

At the time of the battle of Okinawa at the end of the Second World War, Okinawans of all ages were recruited for Japan's “holy war”. Okinawans were killed by the Japanese military and driven into mass suicide. The Japanese government seeks to deny the forced mass suicides to this day. This is not a past that can be forgotten simply as “the past.” Instead of protecting the civilian population of Okinawa, the Japanese military often used them as human shields. The Japanese military only operated to protect Japan.

The 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty divided Okinawa once more from Japan. In return, Japan gained independence. Okinawa belonged to no one and nobody protected her human rights. She was placed under the military dictatorship of the US Military High Commissioner. In order to build military bases, Okinawan lands were requisitioned. This meant destroying and wiping out the landowners' harvests, livelihoods, cultures and pasts. For the Okinawans, their land is where they live, where they celebrate their ritual feasts,

it is part of their souls and their bodies. This land has now been taken away for a span of 65 years. There are instances of American soldiers who have killed or harmed Okinawans escaping punishment by simply being returned to America. The responsibility for this colonial status of Okinawa lies not only with America, but also with Japan, which put up Okinawa for sale in return for its own independence.

Okinawa, which is situated at the most remote end of Japan, can be sacrificed like the cut-off tail of a lizard. Whenever Japan faces an inconvenient situation, it makes use of Okinawa, historically as negotiator with China, or as a commodity to sell, as a place to fight her battles or to establish military bases. For Okinawans to become a part of Japan means being put in the position of a perpetual victim.

Post- Reversion Economic Aggression and Stabilization of Military Bases

After the administrative reversion to Japan, the Japanese government promulgated ambitious economic development plans for Okinawa for which it reserved great sums of money. First, the legal system of Okinawa was assimilated to that of Japan, the infrastructure consolidated and subordinated, and large enterprises were encouraged to take affirmative action to diminish discrimination. In consequence, the appropriation of land by Japanese corporations, buy-outs of local companies, and streamlining, were facilitated, and indiscriminate development increased. Many local companies folded under the pressures of competitive markets. The numbers of those out of work increased. The tourist industry and its profits multiplied, but the great majority of profits were siphoned off by the head offices in Japan. The same holds true for construction, communication and other branches of industry.

During the time I lived in Naha (from third grade to the time I entered university), the city's Kokusai Avenue was a place where local merchants sold daily necessities and Okinawans strolled about, met their friends, and had a good time. But now this is a street of Japanese tourist offices and Japanese tourists, a street from where the island lifestyle of Okinawa has disappeared. The same is true for other areas, where tourism and the quest for profit are dominant. Japanese tourists enjoy themselves to their heart's desire, but the living space of Okinawans has become even more restricted.

Japanese enterprises economically dominate the construction, media and communication industries, among others. The proliferation of call-centers is remarkable. About 90% of employees are female. They lead an insecure, underpaid and overworked existence under upper echelon bosses from Japan. The tourist industry is similarly structured. Many Okinawans work as seasonal workers in factories in Japan. The Okinawan labor market is known for low wages and jobs where people are easily dismissed.

The stimulation and development plan of the government was intended to narrow the economic gap between Japanese and Okinawans, but since Japanese enterprises claimed leadership rights in terms of conception and execution, the gap has widened all the more. The government's stimulation and development plan was also linked to the consolidation of American military bases in Okinawa. The Okinawans, who had been made dependent

on the stimulation and development plan, were threatened with a decrease in aid money (the “stick” in the “stick and carrot” approach), if they expressed opposition to the military bases, or were led to expect increases in aid, (the “Carrot”) if they agreed to land reclamation or extension of the stimulation and development plan. In this way, the authorities destroyed the harmony of local communities and labor unions and undermined resistance to the government. The colonial tactic of “divide and rule” is alive and well in 21st century Okinawa!

The development plan was designed under Japanese guidance and directly applied Japanese methods and regulations to Okinawa. However, Okinawa is an insular society with hilly landscapes. Since the administration employed the soil improvement technique used in Japan, red loam was washed into the sea and destroyed many coral reefs. In the Ryûkyûs, the history, culture, subsistence, social structure, size of population and life style differ from island to island. The region is wonderfully diverse. Nevertheless, the stimulation and development plan - designed and implemented by Japanese for Japanese - was forced onto the region. The Okinawan legal system and infrastructure were aligned from the perspective and with the procedures used in Japan and, in fact, were designed to facilitate Japanese rule. The administration of Okinawa, political parties, enterprises, and labor unions were all placed under the umbrella of large Japanese labor unions, swayed by the politics of Japan and forced to assimilate. A failure to recognize and appreciate the nature of the “Other”, leads to discrimination and forced assimilation.

The Okinawa Boom and Coexistence of Discrimination of Okinawa

Discrimination occurs when the “Other” is not only seen as different, but inferior to oneself. However, in this age of democracy and heightened consciousness of human rights, discrimination cannot be practiced openly. To pretend to understand Okinawans and to sympathize with them has become a general trend of this “masked” discrimination. Okinawa is a favorite tourist destination. Okinawan performers and athletes have made names for themselves. Okinawa is also known as the “Islands of relaxed healing” and a “longed-for land”. Japanese who play Shamisen, sing Okinawan songs and know more Okinawan news than Okinawans have multiplied.

This kind of Japanese person frequently bolsters up Okinawans and makes the statement, “I understand Okinawa, and I sympathize with you”. Will discrimination of Okinawa end if the numbers of such people multiply? The power structure of those who understand and those who are made to understand has been reproduced unchanged since the days when we were forced to “humbly make a pilgrimage up to Edo”. Knowledge and understanding of Okinawa have continued to be abused as a means for dominating the islands. Those who stress their knowledge and understanding are those who enforce subjugation. Those who inflict the military bases on Okinawa never forget to stress how well they understand the islands. Those who claim an understanding also promote the notion of “Okinawan orientalism” and consolidate Japanese rule.

Japanese who think they understand and love Okinawa, who have been “healed by Okinawa”, force military bases on Okinawa without batting an eyelid. They concentrate

all bases on Okinawa in order to protect Japan, irrespective of whether the island may become a battleground. For Japan, this is a means to protect its security and prosperity at little cost to itself. If these bases were situated in areas like Kyûshû or the Inland sea area, which are nearest to the Korean peninsula and China, the geopolitical strategy of needing Okinawa to “protect Japan” would lose credibility. However, if this formulation is meant to mean, “protecting Japan with the exception of Okinawa”, it is merely a modern form of the structural, historical discrimination of Okinawa. Until the Japanese public accepts American military bases on Japanese soil and fully understands that the lives and livelihoods of Okinawans have the same value as their own, discrimination of Okinawans will not end.

The Japanese government persistently ignores voices pointing out that it gives special privileges to American military personnel who even boast of crimes against Okinawans. This means that the contractual status of both nations is unequal. The Japanese government values Japanese-American relations and the improvement of its deterrent ability higher than the lives and livelihoods of Okinawans. It abrogates the basic responsibility of a state to protect its citizens. Even if a political power swept into office that officially approved the withdrawal and removal of the military bases to a location outside of the prefecture, it may be expecting too much from present-day Japanese that they accept the bases in Japan, unless the structure of Japanese discrimination against Okinawa is dismantled and Japan itself changes radically.

Centralization of Bases on Okinawa is the Japanese Intention

As long as Okinawa is part of Japan, the American military bases will not disappear. It was Japan’s intention to use Okinawa as an island base. A document known as the “Imperial Message” is in existence. In September of 1947, the official in charge of official business of the Imperial Household Agency, Terasaki Hidenari, transmitted this message to Siebold, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Japan. It contained Emperor Hirohito ‘s (Showa Tennô) view on Okinawa.

The former US-Japan Security Treaty, valid from 1952-60, records in section 1 that Japan grants the United States of America the right to deploy army, air and naval forces in Japan and her environment, a grant accepted by the United States. The term “environment” indicates Okinawa, and this means that Japan approved of American military bases on Okinawa. The message also stated that leaving Okinawa under American administration for another 50 to 100 years would not only profit the USA, but also be useful for the defense of Japan. In the 1950s, when the “Anti-bases movement” in Okinawa became violent in the context of the Sunagawa insurrection or Uchinada insurrection, many Marines were moved to and stationed on Okinawa.

The issue of military bases is a domestic issue. It is well known in Japan that Okinawans incur damages caused by the military bases on a daily basis, be it persistent intolerable levels of noise pollution, crashes of military planes or helicopters, misfiring of missiles, property damages or rapes by American soldiers etc. The Japanese, therefore, refuse to station them in Japan. When the Okinawans object to the military bases, the Japanese

mass media keep screaming that the US-Japanese Security Treaty is being violated and Japanese security and wellbeing are threatened. Even if they or their loved ones are killed or raped by American soldiers, or are subjected to noise pollution, crashes of military planes, or missile discharges, Japan expects the Okinawans to endure this and accept the bases silently, because it is for the benefit of Japan. The Japanese government has bought the lives and livelihoods of Okinawans for the price of stimulation and development. There are also Okinawans who will sell themselves, their families, or Okinawa for money. If this situation lasts for another 50 or 100 years, will there be any people of integrity left in Okinawa?

Multiple Violations of the Constitution and Treaties

The present political system of Okinawa Prefecture violates the constitution of Japan. Article 95 of the constitution contains the following restriction: If a law is drawn up that is applicable to one single location only, the parliament cannot vote it into law unless one half of the population of the location in question approves of it. After the return of Okinawa to Japan, this restriction was ignored when the laws for stimulation and development and the financing plan that only applied to Okinawa were introduced. They were only sanctioned by the then Okinawan administration. The demand of the Okinawans for “a return under conditions current in Japan and without military bases” was shelved and abandoned. The Japanese government once again ignored the voice of the Okinawans. The legal change of law in 1996 that stipulated the continued stationing and coerced land use for military bases also occurred without consultations with the Okinawan people. The stationing of American troops in Okinawa violates article 9 of the constitution - respect for the sovereignty of the people - and fundamental human rights of Okinawans as citizens, as guaranteed by the Japanese constitution, were not protected for 38 years. Peace was not realized. Does it make sense for Okinawa to continue being a part of Japan? The Okinawans should rather create their own code of laws, stand on their own feet and use their own strength to defend themselves.

The subjugation of the Ryūkyūs by military might, coerced incorporation into Japan, and the convention for return to Japan are all ILLEGAL. The last for the reason that it was not effected with the approval of its inhabitants. The so-called “disposal of the Ryūkyūs” is ILLEGAL. The treaty stipulating the return of Okinawa to Japan (1972) is also ILLEGAL for the following reason; according to international law, the treaty is limited to Okinawa prefecture as a political entity. Article 4(3) decrees that the United States voluntarily pay compensation for damages to the land and for the restoration of its original condition before the return. However, according to a secret diplomatic agreement and the testimony of the then diplomat Yoshino Bunroku, Japan and the USA signed a secret treaty according to which Japan paid \$4,000,000 USD and at the same date assumed all administrative powers and legal responsibilities for these islands and their inhabitants. The treaty mentions the power of the state, but actually the power of the Japanese state does not extend to inside the American bases. That is to say the Japanese-American status treaty supersedes the return treaty so that the power of the Japanese state cannot be exercised over American troops stationed on Okinawa. Since the terms of this treaty contain falsehoods, it must be deemed invalid and ILLEGAL.

The Decolonization of Okinawa to be Approved by the United Nations

If we cannot pin our hopes on Japan, there is no other way left for us but independence. Legal means for independence from Japan are in existence. The United Nations was formed in 1945 by 51 nations, but by June 2006, the number of member nations had grown to 192. After the convention for independence of former colonies signed by the United Nations in 1960, the number of independent nations increased exponentially. Rule of citizens by a foreign power, subjugation and exploitation violate human rights and the conventions of the United Nations and undermine the foundations of world peace and solidarity. All citizens have the right of self-determination. Based on this right, all citizens can freely determine and develop their political, economic and social status. It will not do to use perceived lack of economic, social and educational preparedness as pretext for delaying independence. The foreign country mentioned in the convention is, in this case, the USA. If the disposal of the Ryûkyûs and the reversion treaty are invalid, the term “citizens” does not refer to Japanese, but Okinawans.

In order to avoid rule by a great power and discrimination, protect one’s language and history and live a life with self-respect, peoples have attained independence, even when their populations amount only to a few thousand. Even if the opinion that “Okinawa cannot be independent” is perceived as common sense in Japan, it makes no sense globally. Tuvalu and Nauru, with populations of 10,000, Palau of 20,000, the Micronesian confederation 11,000, Malta, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Iceland, Brunei, Singapore, Trinidad Tobago, and East Timor are among the many countries that have gained independence. The population of Okinawa is 1,390,000. Being aware that small countries have attained independence; one wonders why Okinawa has maintained the status quo as a colony.

In order to earn a new political status, a non-autonomous area has to execute the following international procedure. It must explain its situation to the Special Commission for decolonization of the United Nations, find support in the international community, choose between full independence, free alliance with a country or integration into a large country, hold an election and let the people decide. However, at the time of the return (to Japan) international rules were ignored. The Ryûkyûans must declare to the world that the “disposal of the Ryûkyûs”, as well as the treaty for the return to Japan, are illegal, and that both the government of Japan and the United States are guilty of multiple violations of international law. The Okinawans must make use of their right to autonomy and are entitled by international law and the Human Rights convention to open negotiations with the Japanese government in view of their new international status. It is the duty of the United Nations to support Okinawans setting themselves free from colonialism.

Neither Possessed by Japan or China

To begin with, does Okinawa belong to Japan? The kingdom of Ryûkyû was constituted when after the Three Kingdoms period, the three kingdoms were united by Shô Hashi in 1429 and existed until 1879, they are not Japanese territory. According to mythology,

Japan was created by Amaterasu Omikami, and the Ryûkyû islands were created by Amamichû, Shirumichû – they thus differ from their mythical beginnings. If we look at relations with Japan from an Okinawan perspective - domination, disposal, discrimination, a battleground, the sacrificed stone (in the Japanese game of “go”), being cut loose, the imposition of military bases; What a succession of unfortunate history. The Okinawan culture does not exist to give variety to Japanese culture; it has value by itself for the world’s cultural heritage. From a long view of history, the time Okinawa was a part of Japan is short, and Okinawa’s current subordinate status is abnormal.

Chinese scholars who advocate Okinawa’s return to China have recently multiplied, but because the kingdom of Ryûkyû had tributary relations with China in the past, it does not follow that it needs to revert to China. In consideration of the Tibetans, Uighurs and other minorities in China, reversion to China is nothing but a nightmare for Okinawans. Okinawan independence does not mean a revival of the Ryûkyû Kingdom. Ryûkyû does not belong to either China or Japan. Okinawa has learned from the post-war history and liberation struggles of former colonies to stand on its own feet, take back its language and teach its children in their own language as legitimate subjects in school Okinawan culture, history, language, economy, environment, property rights, peace, and human rights as Okinawans.

However, becoming independent does not mean that all problems will automatically be solved. This depends on the premise of every single Okinawan autonomously putting the truth into practice and strengthen the underpinnings of independence through daily grassroots-like efforts.

The Okinawa issue is an issue of discrimination. The complete eradication of discrimination cannot be made dependent on the Japanese Government or another political entity that may eventually seize power in Japan, but must be deliberated and put into practice by Okinawans themselves. They are challenged to determine whether they want to live on their own soil as discriminated serfs, or as free and equal human beings.

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