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Nakasone/Okinawan Diaspora

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Preface

The first Okinawan immigrants left Okinawa on 5 December 1899 and arrived in Honolulu on 8 January 1900. Of the twenty-seven Okinawans aboard the S.S. China, one was refused permission to disembark—for health reasons—and sent home. The remaining twenty-six proceeded to Ewa Plantation on the island of O‘ahu as contract laborers. The essays in this volume commemorate that event and the subsequent experiences of Okinawan immigrants and their descendants.

After that initial experiment, other Okinawans migrated to live and work in Hawai‘i, the continental United States, Canada, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Cuba, Paraguay, New Caledonia, and the many islands of Micronesia. World War II transformed the political landscape, and many of these original immigrants and their children returned to Okinawa. For many of the contributors to this volume, the trials and triumphs of these immigrants are family lore. This project documents the experiences of their ancestors.

In retrospect, by agreeing to participate in this project, the contributors to this volume embarked on an adventure, one not unlike that their ancestors undertook on leaving their homeland for parts unknown. They become part of this project on trust. They did not know who I was, what form the project would take, or who would be publishing the final result. Work on the project proceeded in the cooperative spirit of “yuimaaruu” (mutual help) that emerged during the early stages of diasporic Okinawan society and helped sustain the first immigrant communities. I extend my appreciation to the contributors, not only for lending their expertise in crafting their essays, but also for enduring constant editorial critique.
Wesley Ueunten was especially helpful in identifying and introducing me to potential contributors. Raymond Aka’s private archives of documents and other source material on the theft and recovery of the Omoro-sōshi and the still-missing royal crown revealed a fascinating adventure, one marked by international intrigue. Together with additional documents supplied by Kishaba Shizuo of the Ryukyu American Historical Research Society, I was able to reconstruct the disappearance and recovery of the Omoro-sōshi. After fifty-six years, however, the trail of the royal crown has grown cold; it has yet to be recovered—and may in fact never be. I must thank Irene, who selflessly read and reread each draft, critiquing and encouraging our efforts. Appreciation is also extended to Randy Shiroma, who rendered the cover illustration. But my greatest appreciation is extended to the many Okinawans whose stories inspired this book. Without their experiences, there would be no book.

This volume is an effort to introduce the Okinawan diasporic experience to the world. The essays in it cannot cover all facets of that experience. Much more work needs to be done, especially on the lesser-known Okinawan diasporic experience in South and Central America and the Ryūkyū trade missions to Southeast Asia. The growing scholarly interest in Okinawan studies ensures that more research will be forthcoming.