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Rabson/The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan

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Introduction

PEOPLE ENCOUNTER INTERNAL borders across the years and around the world. A company advertises job openings, but a man looking for work is greeted by a sign announcing that those from his birthplace need not apply. A family from the same birthplace looking for a home encounters a similar sign in front of an apartment building with vacancies. A factory pays a woman from there lower wages than it pays other employees, puts her in a more crowded dormitory room, and serves her leftover food in the company cafeteria. Parents of a young woman making wedding arrangements suddenly tell the couple they are now irrevocably opposed to the marriage, having discovered the birthplace of the groom-to-be. A successful businessman changes his name and his permanent residence to conceal that same birthplace from his employees and customers. While first-generation Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants faced such discrimination in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America,¹ Japanese citizens from Okinawa Prefecture have encountered it more recently on Japan's mainland. (For convenience, I will hereafter follow the Okinawan convention of referring to the main islands of Japan as "mainland" [*hondo*].)

When the Japanese government abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom, absorbing it into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, most Okinawans on the mainland were merchants of locally grown and manufactured goods. Large-scale migration began around 1900 with the development of Japan's modern textile industry, centered in Greater Osaka. Thousands came from the nation's most impoverished prefecture, mostly young women and teenage girls from farming villages, to work under contract in factories. Most stayed temporarily, typically for three years, often working and living in oppressive conditions, and sending a portion of their wages back to help support their families. A sudden demand for labor throughout Japan during World War I brought more Okinawans to the mainland. While many worked in factories or on construction sites, others came to study, then stayed to launch

careers as teachers, physicians, attorneys, government employees, or entrepreneurs. By 1925, approximately 20,000 lived there, about half in Greater Osaka. The largest migration occurred during another labor shortage after Japan's military incursions in China escalated to full-scale war in 1937. By 1940, a recorded 88,319 Okinawans—about 15 percent of the total population of Okinawa Prefecture itself—lived on the mainland.² Responding to discrimination and a need for networks of mutual support, they had begun forming residential communities in the industrial sections of Osaka and other manufacturing cities.

After Japan's defeat in 1945, restrictions imposed during the U.S. military occupation of Okinawa from 1945 to 1972 made travel to and from the mainland difficult, especially in the early postwar years. American military rule in Okinawa, which dragged on twenty years longer than the Allied occupation of the mainland (1945–1952), required residents to obtain travel permits that were issued or denied after sometimes lengthy investigations. Nevertheless, many traveled to the mainland for work or attended colleges there, some on scholarships from the U.S. or Japanese government. When the mainland's "miracle" economy took off in the late 1950s, employment agents recruited Okinawans, mostly recent high school graduates, in "group hirings" to fill a growing labor shortage in factories and small businesses. It was a time when Okinawa's underdeveloped economy, still heavily dependent on American military projects and purchases, offered few good jobs. However, those who traveled to the mainland for work were often exploited by unscrupulous recruiters and employers, and many encountered prejudice.

After travel restrictions ended with Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972, more people went to the mainland for work and study. Some settled there, but most returned to Okinawa even though it offered fewer employment opportunities. Although precise figures are unavailable, a survey conducted in 2000 estimated that 70,000 migrants and their descendants resided in Osaka Prefecture, mostly in Osaka City; 12,000 in Hyōgo Prefecture, mostly in Kobe and Amagasaki Cities; and 45,000 in Kanagawa Prefecture, mostly in Yokohama and Kawasaki Cities, for a combined figure of 127,000 in those three prefectures. While there is considerable movement back and forth, the total number of Okinawans currently residing on the mainland has been estimated at 300,000, between 20 and 25 percent of Okinawa Prefecture's 1.3 million population.³ Although fewer now live in what have been called "ethnic communities," many maintain close connections with other Okinawans on the mainland.⁴

Like minorities elsewhere, Okinawans experienced prejudice and discrimination in Japan because differences—real and imagined—have caused

them to be viewed as outsiders of inferior status. A history and culture distinct in many ways from the rest of the country has forced them to cope with a society in which such differences are often considered “strange” or “wrong,” and with a central government that has long imposed a monocultural standard in education, publicly priding itself on the nation’s mythical “homogeneity.” In addition to complicating the lives of Okinawans on the mainland, that mind-set facilitated political oppression of the residents of Okinawa itself, where the government imposes a disproportionate burden of 75 percent of the total U.S. military presence in Japan. Some 30,000 troops and an approximately equal number of their dependents are stationed in this small island prefecture, occupying 0.6 percent of the nation’s land area and representing less than 1 percent of its population. The government has perpetuated that inequity through economic blackmail, by threatening to withhold public works projects and development funds for the nation’s poorest prefecture if voters elected candidates for local offices, such as mayors and governors, who opposed the bases.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Okinawans living on the mainland felt pressures from popular attitudes, government policies, and many of their own community leaders to avoid prejudice and discrimination by adopting mainland Japanese culture, and discarding or concealing their own. While some ignored or resisted those pressures, others sought to conform in varying degrees, minimizing their Okinawan identity in public. Many changed their distinctive Okinawan names to avoid attracting unwanted attention. Some sought to “pass” as mainlanders. Although incidents of blatant discrimination in employment and housing diminished after World War II, cases have been reported, even after Okinawa’s reversion to Japanese administration in 1972. Okinawans on the mainland continue to encounter insults and stereotyping in the twenty-first century.

Yet a recently emerging pride in “roots” among minorities in Japan and elsewhere has inspired a growing number of Okinawan migrants and their descendants to embrace their culture and to speak out against inequities. Their experiences, like those of minorities in other countries, have opened them to an acute and illuminating perspective. They are now giving it voice with powerful resonance in oral and written testimony, essays, and literature, translated examples of which appear in the chapters that follow.

The attention their work has drawn on the mainland is partly the result of a recent fascination there with Okinawa. An “Okinawa boom” was sparked initially by nationwide media coverage of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan in 1972, which made travel there much easier, and by the International Ocean Exposition held in Okinawa three years later. Since then, it has been fueled

by the wide popularity of Okinawan music, the international success of local athletes, and nationwide broadcasts of television dramas and documentaries set in Okinawa. Furthermore, the mainland media focuses periodically on the American bases in Okinawa, especially when U.S. forces there cause fatal accidents or commit major crimes. The rape of a twelve-year-old elementary school girl by two U.S. Marines and a sailor in 1995 ignited nationwide protests. Since reversion, thousands from the mainland have joined demonstrations in Okinawa against the disproportionate U.S. military presence.

That combination of curiosity and sympathy has boosted travel to Okinawa, where tourism is a major source of income. It has also drawn mainland visitors to Okinawan neighborhoods on the mainland, still home to many migrants and their mainland-born descendants. Wanting to taste a “different” culture, visitors eat Okinawan food and listen to Okinawan music. But the Okinawa boom also has its downside, reinforcing old stereotypes and creating new ones. Many young mainlanders think being Okinawan is “cool,” but their assumptions and expectations are too often misguided and unwelcome.

The Study: Methods and Terms

While much has been written recently on Okinawan emigration abroad,⁵ this is the first book in English on the Okinawan diaspora in Japan. It is based on my two-year study in residence, 1999–2001, with follow-up research in 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008. Organized chronologically, it draws on interview responses and published first-person accounts of Okinawans living on the mainland. For the purposes of the study, I defined Okinawans living on the mainland as anyone with at least one grandparent or two great-grandparents from Okinawa. The majority of respondents were either first-generation migrants or the children of two migrant parents. I conducted 116 interviews, administered a survey questionnaire to 313 respondents, and collected writings by and about Okinawans on the mainland. For those first two years, I lived in Taishō Ward of Osaka City, where approximately 20,000 of the 75,043 residents—including my neighbors at the time—are Okinawan migrants or their descendants. I attended functions of their local social and cultural organizations, performances of Okinawan music and dance, political action meetings, and informal gatherings in homes and Okinawan restaurants. The book includes comparisons of their experiences with those of other minorities in Japan, and of migrants and minorities elsewhere, recognizing wide variations in circumstances and among individuals.

I asked migrants why they’d come to the mainland and how they’d adjusted to life there. Migrants and their descendants told of prejudice and discrimination they or their family members had encountered. Many spoke

of feeling both pressures to conform and a desire to maintain Okinawan culture in their lives. They described their social, cultural, and political connections with Okinawa, and how they viewed the relationship with their ancestral homeland. The questionnaire asked if they traveled there regularly, ate Okinawan food at home, spoke with family members in an Okinawan dialect, practiced Okinawan religious observances, joined local Okinawa prefectural associations or friendship societies, took an interest in Okinawa's performing or design arts, or participated in political activism. The results of the survey, listed in the appendix, include statistics on respondents' motivations for migration, reactions to assimilation pressures, current connections with Okinawa, and intermarriage with mainlanders.

The study was inspired by a 1997 visit to Osaka's Taishō Ward, where I saw Okinawan names on the doors of people's homes, as well as on the fronts of local shops and offices. Restaurants served Okinawan cuisine, and stores sold the foodstuffs for preparing it at home. All of these things reminded me of ethnic neighborhoods I had visited in the United States. Local residents referred me to the Okinawa Bunko culture center in Taishō Ward and the offices of Okinawa prefectural associations in Osaka and the neighboring city of Amagasaki in Hyōgo Prefecture. These organizations offer reading materials about Okinawa, including its current newspapers and magazines, as well as publications on the Okinawan community in Greater Osaka. They also present regular lectures and musical performances. The Osaka Human Rights Museum, located in neighboring Naniwa Ward, maintains a permanent Okinawa exhibit with a section on Okinawans in Osaka and an extensive library collection. Speaking with the staff at those places and with people in Taishō Ward who kindly answered my questions about the community, I was quickly convinced of the feasibility of the project. Two years later, I applied successfully for funding from the Fulbright Commission and the Japan Foundation to support the initial two-year study, supplemented by sabbatical pay from Brown University.

Community residents who became my neighbors, staff at the abovementioned institutions, and scholars at local universities could not have been more welcoming and helpful. They advised me on formulating interview questions and composing the questionnaire, which residents also helped to distribute. People who gave interviews and completed the questionnaire introduced me to others willing to do the same. I also found interviewees at restaurants and coffee shops, in the shopping arcade one block from my apartment, and among teachers, parents, and students at local public schools. I was concerned, of course, about how my being a white American male academic might be affecting responses. I told respondents my name and university affiliation and briefly explained the study, placing it in the context of

my previous research on Okinawa. For those who wanted to know more, I added that the study had a personal side because my immigrant grandparents had lived in a Jewish enclave on New York's Lower East Side, and my uncles had "Americanized" our name in the 1930s. Still, I wondered what the corresponding effect on their responses would have been if I were Okinawan or mainland Japanese. After two years, I could not come to any firm conclusions, but had the sense that, because of who I am, people might have been more willing to tell me some things and more reluctant to tell me others.

Many spoke of the connections with Okinawa they maintained in their lives, but also of difficulties they had experienced adjusting to life on the mainland, and of prejudice they had encountered. Some second-generation migrants, born on the mainland of migrant parents, said they had little interest in Okinawa, stressing, "I'm from Osaka." Activists in the community described anti-base protests they had helped organize and invited me to forums in Osaka and to demonstrations in Osaka and Kyoto. I also met residents who were receiving large monthly payments from the Japanese government for land in Okinawa the U.S. military had seized from their families in the 1950s. Perhaps the most important lesson learned from the interviews and survey of residents' connections with Okinawa was that, while there are quantifiable differences in interests and lifestyles between migrants and their descendant generations, individual differences abound within each generation.

This book also includes interviews published by other researchers and portrayals of Okinawan experiences on the mainland in fiction and poetry. For *Okinawa jokō aishi* (The tragic history of Okinawa's women factory workers, 1985), Okinawan Fukuchi Hiroaki interviewed women from Okinawa who worked in mainland spinning factories during the first half of the twentieth century. Sociologist Shingaki Masami, a second-generation Okinawan living on the mainland, interviewed first-, second-, and third-generation Okinawans in Hyōgo Prefecture for her 1999 article "Kansai zaijū Okinawa shusshin-sha no seikatsu to aidentiti" (Residents of Okinawan communities in Greater Osaka: Their daily lives and ethnic identities). Nagamine Nana from Osaka Prefecture collected and edited interviews of Okinawans in Greater Osaka on their wartime experiences in *Shima o deta tami no sensō taiken-shū* (Collected war experiences of people who left the islands, 1995). Among the works of literature discussed are Kushi Fusako's 1932 short story "Horobiyuku Ryūkyū onna no shuki" (Memories of a declining Ryukyuan woman), in which the main character residing in Tokyo conceals his Okinawan identity, and Higashi Mineo's 1980 novella *Chura kaagi* (Good-lookin'), in which the protagonist encounters a host of misconceptions and stereotypes after he moves to the mainland and becomes part of the Okinawan diaspora in the mid-1960s.

For the purposes of this study, I am applying Robert K. Arakaki's definition of diaspora from his 2002 essay "Theorizing on the Okinawan Diaspora."

I will be defining diaspora broadly, as the dispersal of significant numbers of people that results in the formation of a minority culture in a different social context. My understanding of diasporas [also includes] a group's merging or assimilating into a host society [and] a group assuming a creolized or hybrid identity.⁶

For this book, the term "borders" refers to political divisions that were first abolished by the Japanese government in 1879 when it absorbed Ryukyu into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture. From the 1880s until 1945, Okinawans traveled as citizens of Japan to the mainland for work or study, but they had to cross linguistic and cultural borders, as they still do to a lesser extent today. After World War II, the United States erected political borders again when it separated Okinawa from Japan and held it under American military occupation from 1945 to 1972. During this period, Okinawans needed U.S.-issued "passports" to cross the border. The term also refers here more generally to borders within minds that separate, categorize, and stereotype people, resulting in discrimination and exclusion. Finally, it refers to borders that can crop up in the minds of individuals encountering such discrimination and exclusion. Describing their responses, George DeVos writes of a "need to escape what is perceived to be a negative social identity" that engenders "an internal duality involving a partially pejorative self-image."⁷

In defining minorities, J. Milton Yinger emphasizes the inequities imposed by a "dominant majority."

The anthropologists Wagley and Harris [list] defining characteristics of minorities: They are subordinate segments of complex state societies; they have special physical or cultural traits that are held in low esteem by the dominant segments of the society; they are self-conscious units, bound together by the special traits that their members share and by the special disabilities which these bring. Membership in a minority is transmitted by a rule of descent. . . . In a well-known definition, Louis Wirth gives the experience of discrimination an even sharper focus: "We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment. . . . The existence of a minority in a society implies the existence of a corresponding dominant group with higher social status and greater privileges."⁸

It must be emphasized here that Okinawans live as the "dominant segment," or the "majority," in Okinawa Prefecture itself, where the population is approximately 1.3 million. So, strictly speaking, they become a minority only when they travel to or reside on the mainland, where migrants and

their descendants comprise a diaspora estimated at 300,000. Even living in Okinawa, however, they fit the Wagley and Harris definition of minorities as “subordinate segments of a complex state society.”⁹ Governments in Japan have implemented discriminatory and exploitative policies there, starting even before absorption of the Ryukyu Kingdom as Okinawa Prefecture in the 1870s, and continuing to this day with disproportionate imposition of the U.S. military presence.

What Okinawans in mainland Japan have in common with minorities elsewhere is prejudice and discrimination against them that derives from a construction of differentness as inferiority.¹⁰ Arnold Dashefsky writes,

It is the emergence of a system of social stratification, with its associated distinctions between dominant and minority groups, that give rise to prejudice and discrimination. . . . [P]rejudice consists of a set of negative beliefs, feelings, and predispositions to act shared by one group of people directed against another group, where discrimination refers to the actual categorically different treatment that a group of people experiences, which results in certain inequalities in rewards the group receives.¹¹

According to that definition, examples of discrimination against Okinawans on the Japanese mainland are employment and housing exclusions, lower wages, and inferior working conditions. Such discrimination was far more common and blatant before 1945. However, many Okinawans coming to the mainland on “group hirings” in the 1970s worked for less and in worse conditions than their mainland coworkers. As late as the 1980s, signs announced in some places that Okinawans could not rent apartments or enter restaurants. An example of prejudice would be a mainlander’s dislike of coworkers simply because they are from Okinawa. Although such attitudes are less evident today than in the past, negative stereotypes about Okinawans persist among mainlanders.

Borrowing a phrase from Milton M. Gordon, Dashefsky and Shapiro define “ethnicity” as follows:

An *ethnic group* may be defined as a group of individuals “with a shared sense of peoplehood” based on presumed shared sociocultural experiences and/or similar physical characteristics. Such groups may be viewed by their members and/or outsiders as religious, racial, national, linguistic, and/or geographical. Thus, what ethnic group members have in common is their *ethnicity*, or sense of peoplehood, which represents a part of their collective experience.¹²

Proportional differences in the sources of migration to the Ryukyu Islands have produced a population in Okinawa with, on average, shorter stature, somewhat darker skin, fuller chests, more body hair, and rounder eyes

than in mainland Japan. Yet no strict duality exists between mainlanders and Okinawans. There is such a wide individual variation in both groups that many Okinawans have none of the features listed above, while some mainlanders are said to “look Okinawan.” Moreover, proportional physiological differences have been cited among the populations of different regions on the mainland.¹³ Thus, mainland Japanese can rarely identify Okinawans from their physical appearance alone, without knowing their distinctive family names or hearing characteristic regional accents.

For Okinawans on the mainland, the term “collective experience” includes their experiences vis-à-vis mainlanders. But it also refers to a shared sense of history as a people descended from subjects of the independent Ryukyu Kingdom that was invaded by Japan’s southernmost province of Satsuma in 1609, and then abolished in 1879 by Japan’s modern government, which subsequently oppressed and exploited the people of Okinawa Prefecture. That their ancestors were citizens of the once-independent and culturally distinct Ryukyu Kingdom has been a source both of pride among Okinawans and of prejudice against them on the mainland as not quite fully Japanese, that is, as somehow “foreign” and thus inferior to people in other prefectures.

The geographical component of Dashefsky and Shapiro’s definition of ethnicity applies to Okinawans on the mainland inasmuch as even those who did not migrate from Japan’s southernmost prefecture descended from those who did. As for a “shared religion,” many Okinawans on the mainland still observe the holidays and rituals of Okinawan religion, based on ancestor worship, which is not practiced by mainlanders. However, religious practice is not mutually exclusive. Okinawans and mainlanders hold funeral and death anniversary ceremonies at the same Buddhist temples and maintain membership in the same Buddhist sects.

In addition to religious practice, shared “sociocultural” activities among Okinawans include a diet that differs in many respects from mainland Japanese cuisine, as well as a distinct tradition in the performing and design arts. As for the linguistic component of Okinawan ethnicity, older migrants speak mainland Japanese in public, very likely with an “Okinawa accent.” Among themselves, however, they might speak an Okinawa dialect or a mixture of an Okinawa dialect and mainland Japanese. Their descendants use fluent mainland Japanese primarily, although they might be able to speak some Okinawa dialect learned from their relatives.

“Assimilation” and the Myth of Homogeneity

The use of mainland language and membership in mainland-based religious sects might be described as aspects of “assimilation,” a term Yinger regards as highly problematic:

Ambiguity and controversy surround the term in part because some fear that emphasis on assimilation is factually wrong, and others that it reinforces oppressive systems. . . . No one can doubt that coercive policies against distinctive cultural groups are commonplace around the world. At the same time, paradoxically, peaceful processes . . . are also readily seen. [In] discussing particular situations one is likely to lament or applaud assimilation. Such evaluations, however, are not part of the definition. . . . Assimilation, then, is a process of boundary reduction that can occur when members of two societies, ethnic groups, or smaller social groups meet. It is a variable, not an attribute.¹⁴

The recent increase in marriages between Okinawans and mainlanders would seem to be an example of “peaceful processes” for “boundary reduction.” By contrast, Japan’s government initiated what Yinger would call “coercive policies” in the 1880s to assimilate (using the transitive form of the verb) Okinawa Prefecture (as the verb’s object) politically, ideologically, and culturally into the Japanese state. Assimilation policy (*dōka seisaku*) banned certain indigenous customs and mandated the practice of rituals in Japan’s state religion, Shinto. The official rationale was that Okinawans needed to abandon aspects of their culture that kept them in a “backward” (i.e., inferior) status and to embrace the “modern” (i.e., superior) culture of mainland Japan.

Though they resisted this policy at first, many Okinawans came to advocate assimilation in varying forms and degrees. Terrence Cook writes that “[a]ll known societies have been stratified, and as long as systematic inequalities remain, one can expect some recourse to assimilation.”¹⁵ One motivation among Okinawans was to avoid prejudice and discrimination based on “being seen as different,” especially because some Okinawan customs have been viewed by mainlanders as “foreign” or “barbarian” (*yaban*).¹⁶ An Okinawan newspaper editorial insisted in 1903 that “our prefecture is making rapid progress [in] conforming with other prefectures in all matters.”¹⁷ Many there had already begun adopting mainland dress and hairstyles, and some had changed their names. Of course, there were practical or “survival” assimilation strategies for Okinawans residing on the mainland, such as becoming proficient in “standard” Japanese and acclimating to food available there. Many have chosen what Cook describes as a selective approach, “aiming at the best of two cultural worlds, that is, assimilating to the stronger culture in part for its riches and in part for chances of career progress, and yet preserving much of their own cultural tradition.”¹⁸

The notion that Okinawans are (or should be) “conforming [in] all matters with people in other prefectures” presupposes that homogeneity exists among Japanese, ignoring individual and regional differences on the mainland. Japan is hardly the only country where “homogeneity,” or at least

cultural conformity with the majority, has been idealized. With increased immigration to Britain from South Asia starting in the 1960s and 1970s, a notorious claim was “We are fish and chips, not curry and rice.” Recent anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States has focused on the issue of language, with some politicians supporting legislation to make English the official “national language.” Controversy has erupted in France over a law banning face-covering veils of the kind worn by Muslim women.

By the 1970s, government officials had joined in actively promoting the myth of Japan’s “unique homogeneity,” widely disseminated in the popular press by countless books and magazine articles “on the Japanese” (*Nihonjinron*). In 1979, the United Nations ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 27 of which addresses the rights of minorities. The Japanese delegation initially reported to the UN Human Rights Committee that “minorities of the kind mentioned in the Covenant do not exist in Japan.” In 1986, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro declared that there are no minority groups in Japan.¹⁹ The myth was never more clearly articulated than in a speech by Foreign Minister Asō Tarō on October 15, 2005, to commemorate the opening of a national museum in Kyushu. “Japan is one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one race, the like of which there is no other.”

Andrew Gordon has written that “the concept of Japan as a homogeneous and cohesive middle class society was a powerful ideological force in postwar history.”²⁰ Millie Creighton points out that “this powerful ideological force has been capable of denying realities of those on the margins, Japan’s minorities, including Burakumin, Okinawans, resident Koreans, [and] indigenous Ainu. . . . Japan’s assertion of an imagined homogeneous self, maintains its minorities in a living contradiction. While denying these people exist as minorities, since they have supposedly been incorporated into Japan’s harmonious and all-encompassing ‘middle class,’ they are not granted social equality.”²¹

“Becoming a Japanese”: A Pernicious Fallacy

Writing on Okinawans and modern Japanese society, Tomiyama Ichirō goes further, questioning not only the concept of a homogeneous nation but the concept of nation itself. He cites Benedict Anderson’s characterization of a nation as an “imagined community” and of “nation-ness” as a “cultural artifact.” Tomiyama asks,

Just what sort of business is it, to become “a Japanese”? Given that “the Japanese” exist as an outcome of imagining, it is necessary to examine how they are concretely enacted as an “imagined community.” Without such an examination, we cannot critique the “myth of the mono-ethnic nation.”²²

In his landmark study of Okinawans in Osaka, *Kindai Nihon shakai to "Okinawa-jin": Nihonjin ni naru to iu koto* (Modern Japanese society and "Okinawans": On becoming Japanese), Tomiyama explains how the "imagined community" of a Japanese nation has the effect of excluding Okinawans: the context described by Jean-Paul Sartre for the construction of "Jews" in France and by Frantz Fanon for the construction of "Malagasy" in South Africa also obtains in modern Japanese society. "Okinawans are not represented according to their individual characteristics. Instead, they are placed in a category called 'Okinawans,' which is not based on any objective criteria and always connotes a separate group."²³

That Okinawans have been viewed as a group separate from the Japanese nation is illustrated by a 1988 conversation in a Tokyo restaurant reported by historian Gregory Smits. "A man seated at the next table ask[ed] another how long he had been living in Japan (*Nihon*). It turned out that the sojourner had left [Okinawa] four years earlier and had been living in 'Japan' ever since."²⁴

Tomiyama explains that this separate categorization has been manifested not only in popular attitudes that stereotype and exoticize (or "otherize") Okinawans, but also in oppressive government policies and exploitative business practices. His book analyzes the economic effects of discrimination, presenting numerous charts and graphs that compare circumstances in different prefectures—their differing population outflows and their migrant destinations. He focuses particularly on factory conditions and job assignments for Okinawans and mainlanders in various industries, and employment (and unemployment) statistics inside and outside Okinawan communities on the mainland. He cites company documents showing that discrimination was a conscious business strategy to maximize profits. In a subsequent article, he explains how, for Okinawans on the mainland, efforts to "become Japanese" required abandoning much of their culture.

Lifestyle reform meshed with becoming "a Japanese," with the result that people were mobilized into violent invasion of Others. . . . Let us consider a framework in which to think about lifestyle reform. Firstly, just what did lifestyle reform target for improvement? . . . The categories for reform in the case of Okinawans who had come to live in Osaka . . . touched on all parts of their lives, including the Okinawan language, Ryukyuan clothing, Ryukyuan dance, songs accompanied by the *sanshin*, living in enclaves of Okinawans, festivals, child-rearing methods, diet, the drinking of *awamori* liquor, and so on.²⁵

Such exclusionary requirements for "becoming Japanese" compare with constructions of nationhood that exclude Muslim head scarves in France and

curry and rice in England, confirming Benedict Anderson's characterization of "nation" as an "imagined community" and "nation-ness" as a "cultural artifact." Besides the constructed duality of being or not being Japanese, Okinawans also encounter the notion that their distinct culture and history makes them somehow lesser Japanese. The wartime and postwar actions of the Japanese government suggest that, although officially insisting that Okinawans were Japanese, it "imagined" them to be expendable from the "community" of nation. Imperial Headquarters sacrificed Okinawa in 1945 as a "throwaway pawn" to U.S. forces in the hope that American invasion of mainland Japan could be delayed and better terms negotiated for ending the war. In 1951, the Japanese government agreed to continued U.S. military occupation of Okinawa so that the mainland could regain its sovereignty. The American command strictly limited information about Okinawa on the mainland and required residents to carry "passports" when traveling there. Thus, despite pronouncements by the U.S. State Department that Japan retained "residual sovereignty" in Okinawa, Japanese on the mainland often referred to it as a "foreign country," as some still do today.

Yet if the Japanese nation is an "imagined community," there are also those who "imagine" Okinawa, its culture and history, to be included. John Lie explains that, for them, "manifest differences [are] regarded as merely regional differences."

Even Iha Fuyū (Ifa Fuiū), the father of Okinawan studies who traced his ancestry to China, believed in the common origin of rice culture (1942). The folklorist Yanagita Kunio famously regarded Okinawa as the source of Japanese culture, especially the origin of rice culture (1978). In this vein, Okamoto Tarō called for the Japanese to return to Okinawa as a repository of an authentic Japanese culture (1972).²⁶

The question of how much these writings have influenced popular perceptions on the mainland is, of course, open to debate. For Okinawans living there, who have suffered discrimination for being culturally "different" and felt pressures to conceal their origins, such theories probably seem academic. Mainland residents' experiences of daily life are the focus of this book.

How I Came to Study Okinawa

My connection with Okinawa began as a U.S. Army draftee stationed there for eight months in 1967–1968 during the American military occupation. In a sense, I was one of the "occupiers," although my job in the maintenance platoon at an ammunition depot had nothing to do with running the occupation. Arriving in July 1967 at Kadena Air Base, I rode north for some thirty

miles in the back of an army “deuce-and-a-half” truck to the base in Henoko Village where I was assigned. My first impressions were of a lush, semitropical landscape surrounded by an ocean sparkling in cobalt blues and emerald greens. Wispy clouds hanging low over hillsides covered with banyan trees and terraced rice fields reminded me of Chinese landscape paintings. Arriving in Henoko on the Pacific coast, I saw people living in a Third World economy heavily dependent on the projects and purchases of the U.S. military. On the base, local residents worked as janitors in the barracks, dishwashers in the mess hall, and clerks in the PX. In the section of Henoko the military called an “amusement area,” others worked in restaurants, bars, and “hotels” (mostly thinly disguised brothels) patronized by soldiers from the ordnance depot and marines from neighboring Camp Schwab.

Just beyond that base-town enclave was rural northern Okinawa. Farmers worked in fields raising pigs, rice, pineapples, and sugarcane. Fishermen drove along dirt roads in small vans carrying their catches to market. And children wearing crisp uniforms walked together in groups to and from school. Some of us, eager to escape the military posts and their adjacent base town, spent much of our time off-duty in the villages outside Henoko and in the town of Nago just across the island on the East China Sea coast. In these places I developed the interests that would set the course of my life after my two years as an army draftee ended in June 1968. I took long walks in the countryside, ate in local restaurants, listened to Okinawan music, and read what English-language materials I could find on local culture and history. Volunteering at the Ryukyu-American Friendship Center in Nago to help high school students and adults practice English conversation, I was able to meet people who could answer my questions and discuss what I was seeing. The U.S. Army funded the centers, staffed by Okinawans, and insisted on referring officially to what had been Okinawa Prefecture as “The Ryukyu Islands.” The purpose was to promote the idea of a revived Ryukyu, separate from Japan, because the military feared that reversion to Japanese sovereignty would reduce their freedom of operations. As if to undermine this strategy, the staff placed weekly issues in center libraries of a mimeographed bilingual newsletter, published by the Okinawa Reversion Council (*Fukki-Kyō*), that advocated reversion and removal of the military bases.

Even in rural Okinawa outside the U.S. military enclaves, all was not peace and tranquility. Americans caused traffic accidents, many the result of drunk driving, and committed crimes that killed and injured local residents. Victims and their families who sought justice and compensation faced blatantly discriminatory treatment from arrogant U.S. officials enforcing oxymoronic “occupation law.” People I met in Nago also expressed resentment that

American military personnel and their dependents lived in relative opulence on lands seized from Okinawan farmers who, as a result, were now dependent for their livelihoods on menial jobs for the U.S. military or base-town businesses. The effects of a “military-service economy” were evident even in Nago, where girls from poorer families, some as young as fifteen, traveled across the island by bus to work at bars in Henoko’s “amusement area.” Then as now, the din of aircraft noise disturbed life at home and interrupted classes at school. Twice each day formations of mammoth B-52s thundered overhead on their way to and from bombing raids in Southeast Asia. College students I met told me they felt friendly toward Americans personally, but resented “the Pentagon running this island.” Some voiced outrage that troops and weapons transported from Okinawa were killing other Asians. Survivors of the Battle of Okinawa two decades earlier expressed the fear that, if the Vietnam War escalated into a regional conflict, Okinawa, as America’s most important support base in Asia-Pacific, would be devastated again in a conflagration that might now involve nuclear weapons.

What I observed in response to these conditions were almost daily protests, including marches, picketings, and sit-ins reminiscent of civil rights demonstrations in the United States. The military warned us to stay away from demonstrations, which, they said, were organized by “communists,” but some protestors gathered just outside the base entrance gates. They held up bilingual signs and passed out fliers opposing war (in Vietnam), military occupation (*gun-senryō*), and alien rule (*i-minzoku shihai*). Their main appeal was for Okinawa’s “immediate reversion to Japan” (*sokuji no Nihon fukki*), a country described as a democracy governed under a “peace constitution” (*heiwa kempō*). This characterization seems oversimplified in retrospect, considering the presence of U.S. bases on the mainland, the Japanese government’s support of U.S. intervention in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the constitutional issues raised by Japan’s Self-Defense Forces. But it was easy to understand then why status as a prefecture in a country where civilians governed and the standard of living was steadily rising seemed preferable to military rule and a Third World economy heavily dependent on U.S. military expenditures, where prostitution was a major component of GI purchases in the “service sector.”

By the time of Okinawa’s reversion in 1972, I was a student in Tokyo, having just completed two years of intensive Japanese-language study. For a course in modern Japanese literature at Sophia University, I chose, as a translation project, a story set in Okinawa under military occupation. “Child of Okinawa” (Okinawa no shōnen, 1971) by Higashi Mineo had just won Japan’s most prestigious literary award, the Akutagawa Prize.²⁷ The narrator

is a young adolescent boy growing up in a GI bar/brothel his parents run at home in the town of Koza, adjacent to the two largest American bases on the island. He describes his confused sexual awakening in Koza's "amusement area," where many farmers moved after losing their lands and livelihoods to base construction. With youthful idealism, he expresses outrage at his parents for running "this lousy business" in which "women are bought and sold like slaves." His mother tells him, "It's how we eat, you know."²⁸ Higashi's story seemed important to translate, especially for American readers, not only because it depicts conditions in occupied and militarized Okinawa from an acute perspective, but also because it describes aspects of Okinawan culture, especially religion, in the context of the characters' daily lives. What I learned in working on that project inspired subsequent research on Okinawa—its literature, history, and culture—which I continue to this day.