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## The U.S. and Okinawa : A Complex Bilateral Relationship

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## The U.S. and Okinawa: A Complex Bilateral Relationship

Masaaki GABE

University of the Ryukyus

### Abstract

As a general tendency, the Japanese do not regard Okinawa as being a part of Japan. Rather, Okinawa is classified within a framework dictated by their conception of Asia. From the beginning, Japan conceived of its own existence as divorced from the rest of Asia, and remained indifferent to this distortion. One critique of Orientalism points towards the images of Asians held by Westerners, and their own self-identification. Assimilated and developed as a part of Japan's Orientalism, the discussion of Okinawa's own fight against criticism is complicated.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, U.S.-Japan relations, and U.S.-Ryukyu relations.

### I. The Eye of Orientalism

When we paint a picture of relations between these two countries and regions, there is a large gap between the image that is created and reality. We are apt to create an image of both as partaking in a nearly equal relationship and exerting the same influences over each other. However, in reality, there are few truly equal relationships, and many biased relationships in which one side is dependent or subordinate to the other.

The relationship between the Japanese including Okinawans and Americans would be an imminent example. It may be easy to understand if we compare the strength of interests in mass culture-music, movies, and the like. Between the two sides, Japan continues to be predominately subjected to American influences. Not only are there few Americans who have an interest in Japan, but they brought the image of Japan into the sphere of Western culture, that is imprinted in a so-called "magnetic field" where are constructed by a sense of superiority in one's own culture and lack of self-consciousness,

This view is comprised of those people living

amidst Western culture. At the heart of this viewpoint is the so-called concept of "cultural relativism"-all cultures have the same value, and therefore are equal. However, the culture belonging to those who comprise this viewpoint is unable to seize upon cultural relativism.

A related discussion has already been occurring throughout the world for the past 20 years. The representative catch-phrase is Orientalism. Orientalism deals with Westerners images of Asians, and how, when residing in confined areas with Asians, Westerners begin to project their image of Asians onto themselves. Westerners depict Asians based on a series of assumptions, and through a distorted comparison of Asians with themselves, Westerners formulate their own self-image. As the preeminent feature of Orientalism, in order to depict Asians through a Westerner's self-image, the power held by the West serves as the background for Western supremacy and domination.

This arbitrary, power-based idea of Asia-imaged-by-the West is penetrating the East. It is pointed out that many Japanese also, when they speak of Okinawa, perpetuate Orientalism unknowingly. When comparing expressions like Okinawa is a microcosm of Japan and

One can see Japan well from Okinawa, Japanese Orientalism towards Okinawa highlights the fact that few Japanese and Okinawans realized the idea of Okinawa-image-by-the Japanese. The analysis of Japan's own arbitrary, powerful expressions and viewpoints towards its Asian neighbors has only begun.

## II. A Distorted Bilateral Relationship

As a general tendency, the Japanese do not regard Okinawa as being a part of Japan. Rather, Okinawa is classified within a framework dictated by their conception of Asia. From the beginning, Japan conceived of its own existence as divorced from the rest of Asia, and remained indifferent to this distortion. One critique of Orientalism points towards the images of Asians held by Westerners, and their own self-identification. Assimilated and developed as a part of Japan's Orientalism, the discussion of Okinawa's own fight against criticism is complicated.

This viewpoint, or alternatively, this distorted image figures similarly in the relationship between Okinawa and the U.S., termed "U.S.-Ryukyu relations." When comparing Okinawa and the U.S., perhaps the two have a similar makeup? It is impossible to juxtapose Okinawa, its population of 1,300,000 people a part of Japan, with the U.S., a sovereign state with a population exceeding 200 million people. Not limited to national sovereignty, twentieth century America's presence and particular position in our global society is great.

The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed not solely the beginning of the spread of mass culture and the labeling of the world as dominated by a single "superpower." In things like language, science, the Internet, markets, measures, regulations (also termed "global standards"), realms which traverse established national borders, America's looming existence is undeniable. The term "U.S.-Ryukyu relations" completely disregards the aforementioned asymmetry.

Thus, the American influence endured by Okinawa's people has not necessarily been extirpated. The U.S. lives on not only as a part of our memories, but rather, "in the flesh," in our own backyard. It begins with steak houses (an unavoidable stereotype), rock, Coke, the U.S. military bases, American products, and Americans residents of Okinawa, many being U.S. troops and their families. Moreover, there are also the offspring of immigrants to the U.S., and Americans with blood ties to Okinawans, such as the children born to American soldiers stationed in Okinawa and Okinawan women.

## III. A Complex Bilateral Relationship

Commodore Perry's arrival in Okinawa certainly figures prominently in U.S.-Ryukyu relations. Commanding the U.S.-East India Fleet, Perry left the U.S. in November 1852, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, crossed the Indian Ocean, and arrived in Naha in May of the following year. The purpose of this expedition was to conclude a treaty with Japan aimed at protecting shipwrecked American crew members, secure Japan as a place to restock the fleet's supply of coal, and if possible, open Japan's ports to the outside world.

Prior to proceeding to Tokyo Bay (Uragacurrent-day Kagawa Prefecture) in July of that same year, Perry's party not only surveyed Okinawa's coastal areas and land, but also paid tributary (forced) visits to Sheri Castle. Through negotiations and overtures to the Tokugawa shogunate during that year and the following (1854), the opening of Japan to the world was achieved. In the course of those "negotiations," warships carrying modern weapons advanced upon Edo, and under the threat of force, a Japan-U.S. treaty affirming peace and friendship was concluded. On their homeward journey, the party called at Naha, and in July 1854 concluded the U.S.-Ryukyu Friendship Treaty.

Perry's expedition to Japan can be best described

with a phrase coined at the height of nineteenth century American history. Continual westward expansion was America's mission, or "Manifest Destiny." With the discovery of the gold mines and the ensuing gold rush, then farming and the growth of a fishing industry centered on whaling, the U.S. pressed westward to the Pacific coast. Not stopping there, the U.S. additionally sought to expand into Asia. In particular, the U.S. policy towards Japan back then focused on securing ports in Japan for the development of overseas trade, and safe harbors where whaling ships could replenish their supplies.

In reality, Perry's visit was not the first time that the U.S.-East India Fleet called at Uruga, near Tokyo Bay. In 1846, Perry's predecessor, fleet Commander, entered into negotiations with the Tokugawa shogunate. However, these overtures were refused by the Japanese side, and the mission was postponed. Perry's appointment as fleet commander meant accomplishment of a duty of the expedition to Japan. Perry's expedition holds great significance in Japan. This is because after Perry's arrival, the shogun and ruling clans system that had endured for 250 years collapsed. As a symbol of the changes wrought in Japan by outside powers, the expression "black ships" entered into usage in the Japanese language.

For Japan, the United States wields a vast presence. However, until the middle of the twentieth century, U.S. interests in East Asia were concentrated towards China. Japan was drawn towards the U.S. during the course of the war with Japan. However, with Japan's surrender, American interests in Asia once again focused on China. Post-war U.S. policy towards Asia backtracks on its former one-sided "obsession" with an as-yet immature China, but then again, U.S. military bases were set up with an eye towards China. Okinawa has become the place of projecting of that American "power."