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## The Birth of a University : The Background and Some Problems Concerning the Establishment of the University of the Ryukyus

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## **The Birth of a University: The Background and Some Problems Concerning the Establishment of the University of the Ryukyus**

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the establishment of the University of the Ryukyus in 1950 by the American Military Government in Okinawa. The founding of the first university in Okinawan history involves political and cultural elements that so far remain unanalyzed. This paper especially studies political and cultural backgrounds and problems concerning the establishment of the university and ultimately aims at rewriting the history of the birth of the first university in Okinawa.

**Keywords:** University of the Ryukyus, cross-cultural contact zone, transculturation, identity

### **The Birth of a University**

In 1950, the American Military Government in Okinawa established the University of the Ryukyus, the first university in Okinawan history. The ceremonies to celebrate the establishment of the university were held on February 12, 1951, on Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Douglas MacArthur, the then Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, sent a congratulatory message from Tokyo and wrote: "Conceived in the aftermath of war and intended to flourish in the way of peace, the University is born as the champions of freedom rally once more to defend their heritage against those forces that would enslave the mind of man." <sup>1</sup> The discourse emerging out of the Cold War and mirroring the aftermath of a devastating war celebrated the birth of a university in Okinawa. The founding of the University of the Ryukyus in 1950 had a great impact on Okinawan society, to say the least, and education and research at the university have helped vitalize or revitalize the society and culture of the Ryukyus.

The official history of the University of the Ryukyus records a process of building the university, focusing in particular on the role that the Military

Government played, and does not divert from the basic facts briefly outlined above. The political and cultural situation concerning the establishment of the University of the Ryukyus, however, is rather more complicated than the official history describes. For example, the Hawaiian community of Okinawan diaspora, led by Seiei Wakukawa, who for many years served as the editor in chief of the newspaper *Hawaii Hochi*, had started a movement for founding of a university in Okinawa in the late 1940s. Wakukawa and his friends had formed an organization called Okinawa Kosei Kai (Okinawa Relief and Rehabilitation Foundation, Inc.) and insisted that what postwar Okinawan society needed was an institution of higher education. The reconstruction of Okinawa is not possible, Wakukawa wrote in the *Hawaii Times* on August 11, 1947, without educating young people at the college level (5). This was the earliest public appeal for establishing a university in Okinawa. Wakukawa and his friends had made a detailed plan for a university to be constructed in Okinawa, and their appeal required one full page in the *Hawaii Times*. Kosei Kai's movement was widespread, involving Okinawan communities located in both North and South America. Wakukawa traveled

widely in North America and the Hawaiian islands asking people to assist and donate to the Kosei Kai's movement.

Three years after Wakukawa's appeal in the newspaper, the University of the Ryukyus was established at the site of Shuri Castle, which had become a heap of rubble after fierce bombing by American military forces during the Battle of Okinawa. The university resembled what Wakukawa and his friends envisioned.<sup>2</sup>

I started my research on this topic after I attended a lecture given by Wakukawa at the University of the Ryukyus on December 8, 1989. At the end of his lecture, Wakukawa said loudly that he hoped the University of the Ryukyus would not degenerate into a colonial university controlled by Japan's Ministry of Education, which, according to Wakukawa, was a hotbed of feudalism, emperor worship, and militarism. The University of the Ryukyus became a Japanese national university on May 15, 1972. The statement by Wakukawa impacted on those attending his lecture. It was embarrassing for the president of the University of the Ryukyus who had invited him to give the lecture, and there were those who openly laughed at his statement as an "anachronism." A colleague stated that it was a statement only an old leftist would make. Still, to me, it was an intriguing statement, and I started looking into the process of the establishment of the university as constituting a part of American Studies to be conducted in Okinawa.

To summarize briefly what Wakukawa intended in proposing a university founded by Okinawans and independent of the American Military Government: he feared that Okinawans would be subjugated forever by a colonial education, and postwar Okinawan society and culture could only be reconstructed by educating young people at an institution of higher education. He was thinking of what had happened to Samoa, Puerto

Rico, and Native Hawaiians.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Cross-Cultural Contact Zone**

The questions to be answered concerning the establishment of the University of the Ryukyus are numerous. For instance, what were the Americans thinking as they prepared for a university in Okinawa? Why did they even think of establishing a university in Okinawa? For the United States, Okinawa was and still is a military outpost in the Pacific, and for Tokyo it had been for a long time a poverty-stricken, distant periphery. Thus, the Japanese government had repeatedly ignored pleas from Okinawa for an institution of higher education ever since the abolishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the annexation of the Ryukyus, even though Tokyo had coerced the Japanization of the Ryukyus, through such measures as the use of standard Japanese and the adoption of Japanese customs.

Whether Okinawa should be seen as an American colony after 1945 is controversial. Okinawa was under American administration for 27 years, from 1945 to May 1972, and it is an open question how to understand the American policies and presence in Okinawa during this period. I would like to propose that we look at Okinawa as "a cross-cultural contact zone," a condition that has defined this society ever since the arrival of Americans in the Ryukyus. The term is inspired by Mary Louise Pratt's term, "contact zone," which she defines as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Admittedly, the conditions defined by Pratt's term basically parallel those of the US-Okinawan relationship after 1945. Classic images and patterns of colonialism, however, cannot always be applied to the postwar Okinawan situation. Okinawa was and still is "a cross-cultural space,"

comprising contact and conflict, confluence and influence, fusion and confusion. It is also true that a cross-cultural space often involves conditions of coercion and inequalities. The establishment of the University of the Ryukyus took place in this space.

Two years after Wakukawa's plans were printed in the *Hawaii Times, the Stars and Stripes* reported that Brig. Gen. John Weckerling, chief of GHQ's Ryukyu Military Government Section, disclosed that a university would "rise on the 25-acre site of old Shuri Castle. . . . The institution, to be known as the University of the Ryukyus, will be composed of a general college and an agricultural and technical college under one chancellor" (6 April 1949). Wakukawa wanted to name the university he and his friends were planning "Okinawa University," but the Military Government decided to use for the university an ancient name for Okinawa. The decision can be interpreted in two ways: (1) for the Okinawan people, the term "Ryukyus" is an old name, harking back to the Ryukyu Kingdom, thus psychologically distancing the Okinawan people from the Japanese islands in the north; and (2) the term "Ryukyus" delicately differs from the term "Ryukyu." It foregrounds its locality, the geographical features of the archipelago. People on Miyako Island or Ishigaki Island down in the south often refer to Okinawa Island as "Okinawa," implying their own cultural, psychological distance from the main island in the archipelago. But the term "Ryukyus" is ultimately inclusive, and since the American Military Government modeled the University of the Ryukyus on American land-grant colleges and universities which serve the regions in which they are located, the naming suggests what sort of role the American founders expected the university to play.

The decision to hold "the dedication and inauguration ceremonies" on February 12, 1951, on Lincoln's birthday, was apparently endorsed by General MacArthur's office at GHQ (General Headquarters:

Office of the Supreme Commander) in Tokyo. The first paragraph of MacArthur's letter sent to the ceremonies reads:

Establishment of the University of the Ryukyus is an event of outstanding importance in the cultural and intellectual history of these islands. It is, moreover, particularly appropriate that the University, founded upon the ancient site of the throne of Ryukyuan kings, should be dedicated on the birthday of one who though personally humble was himself kingly among the great of the world—Abraham Lincoln. As in youth he made such purposeful use of his meagre yet fine resources—chiefly the Bible, Shakespeare, and Euclid—so too the eventual greatness of this institution will depend not on the multiplicity but equality of its resources and its wisdom in using them.

A letter of invitation signed by John H. Hinds and sent out by the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands explains why Lincoln's birthday was selected for the ceremonies:

The day chosen for the ceremonies seems to me to be highly proper. Lincoln's birthday will be celebrated on these islands for the sixth time since the close of World War II. In the Ryukyus, Lincoln's name is remembered with great affection as a symbol of devotion to the battlement of men and women who have known subjugation. The Ryukyuans have raised a monument to this ideal in the very building of the University of their own hands, standing as it does on a war-devastated eminence once dominated by a 14<sup>th</sup> century feudal castle.

The dedication ceremonies began at 10 a.m. on February 12, 1951. During the ceremonies, Robert S. Beightler, a major general and deputy governor of the United States Military Government, gave a speech and referred to Lincoln again, stating that Lincoln's birthday was chosen because he was a champion of

freedom (*Ryukyu Shiryo* 322). (The university opened on May 22, 1950, but the ceremonies were held almost a year later). The ideals of the University of the Ryukyus are "freedom, equality, peace, and tolerance," democratic values all based on Lincoln's speeches, especially on the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address.<sup>4</sup>

Another document attempts to characterize the University of the Ryukyus at its birth. An ordinance issued by the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (CA Ordinance number 30, 10 January 1951) defines the "objects" of the University of the Ryukyus:

The principal object of the University is to provide post-high school education in the arts, science, and professions to students of both sexes. The university shall also disseminate matters of general information and education to the adult population of the Ryukyus furthering, *as far as is consistent with the military occupation*, the liberties of democratic countries, including freedom of speech, assembly, petition, religion, and the press [emphasis mine].

The Okinawan people, as seen in the movements created in the diasporic communities overseas, desired an institution of higher education. Not only the leaders of the overseas communities yearned for such an institution; the leaders of Okinawan society had also negotiated with the US Military Government for a university in Okinawa. Atsuo Yamashiro states that some Okinawan leaders had started a negotiation for an institution of higher education with the American Military Government earlier than the leaders in Hawaii (Yamashiro 24). Although the negotiation was never made public, an anonymous writer in a document issued by GHQ entitled "Report for Japan and Ryukyus" states in "Section II: Present Conditions in Political and Economic Fields in the Ryukyus" that "Further immediate need are funds [sic] for the

establishment of one institution of higher learning" (22). The report was written in October 1947, and GHQ did not make the plan to establish a university in Okinawa public until 1949. But the document suggests that a confluence of strong desires for an institution of higher education was shaping itself in the late 1940s and that the leaders in Okinawa and overseas almost simultaneously appealed for a university in Okinawa.

What complicated the matter was the difference in motivation in establishing a university in Okinawa. For Okinawans, it would be a symbol of culture, a social and cultural means of advancement. The enthusiastic reactions reflected in letters sent from Okinawa to the Kosei Kai in Hawaii after its announcement of the plan to establish a university attest to the significance of a university in the Ryukyus. The American Military Government, however, seems to have had a far-reaching purpose beyond simplistic educational goals, which even now impacts not only Okinawan society but also Japan as a whole. Undoubtedly, the Military Government envisioned improvement and reconstruction through higher education of every walk of Okinawan life in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A letter addressed to John Hannah, President of Michigan State College and written by Arthur Adams, then working for the American Council of Education, however, points to the existence of another dimension in designing the University. According to Adams, the University of the Ryukyus was established in the pattern of the land-grant colleges of the United States: "A major goal of the Military Government in creating the University was to train teachers in school administration and teaching according to American patterns, looking toward making more effective the Army's efforts to change the character of the entire school system from the pre-war Japanese patterns to a democratic one."

A university, in many ways, functions as a social technology; it helps a society become

economically and culturally independent to a certain extent through higher education and training of young people. This is what the University of the Ryukyus has done since its foundation. A university, however, is a powerful means of de-education as well, and education is intended to spread myths and ideology. Harvard College was founded in 1636, shortly after the Great Migration, to preserve and spread Puritanism. The University of Hawaii was established by "those who had sided against the Hawaiian monarchy" (Kamins and Potter 3). In the case of the University of the Ryukyus, it was the ideology of American democracy that its founders hoped to spread through higher education. The establishment of a university in the Ryukyus was thus part of the American postwar policy of dismantling the Japanese prewar hierarchic structure and demythifying the prewar imperial education that supported this structure. Accordingly, one of the university's major goals was to train teachers who were expected to teach and spread democracy in the secondary education classroom. The gospel of American democracy, however, turned out to be a source of confusion, despite the confluence of strong desires converging in the creation of a university.

A fusion of educational systems took place in 1950 when the University of the Ryukyus was established. The American ideal of the land-grant university — created by the Morrill Act of 1862 and signed by Lincoln a year before his assassination — and an Okinawan/Japanese faculty combined to establish Okinawa's first university.<sup>5</sup> A hybrid university thus was born in 1950 in Okinawa with ideals reflecting American democracy and the land-grant universities. But confusion was inevitable when the purpose of the university defined in the ordinance was severely limited; it apparently became a source of embarrassment to those who wrote it because the USCAR revised the ordinance shortly after it was printed in the first university catalogue.

The ideals of the American land-grant university emanated a new light of promise when applied to the Ryukyus. The student's catalogue of 1950, the first catalogue of the University of the Ryukyus, included a four-paragraph essay entitled "Welcome to Ryukyu University," and it declared: "We wish to make this university intensely practical in all of its departments so that it will become a cultural dynamo from which will flow a new force and a new light into every village in the Ryukyus" (1). The American "civilizing" mission, however, faltered when the youngest university in the world it helped to create was allowed to enjoy the democratic rights and liberties only "as far as is consistent with the military occupation." Needless to say, conditions of coercion and unacceptable inequality arose due to the insertion of these words into the documents defining the purpose of the university. Cultural contact bred conflict, and the ordinance written in English and printed in the catalogue foreshadowed future confusion on campus.

### **Transculturation**

Pratt in her book introduces the term "transculturation" to describe "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (6). Subjugated peoples cannot always control what flows into their cultural sphere from the dominant culture, and yet, as Pratt points out, they do determine and select what they absorb into their own, and how they use it (6). This phenomenon is what I am attempting to describe in this study, focusing especially on higher education in Okinawa after 1945.

In the context of this study, I want to ask a set of questions. How are the American modes of representation or ideals received and appropriated in Okinawa in the cross-cultural space? Is transculturation a reversible phenomenon? What are the criteria for selection, absorption, fusion, or rejection?

When the University of the Ryukyus was established, the American administrators in the United States Civil Administration (USCAR) insisted that classes at the University be taught in English. According to Tatsundo Nakamura, a former professor of Japanese, the American administrators stated that the students had had enough education in Japanese by the time they graduated from high school (Yamashiro 62-63).<sup>6</sup> The professors at the University of the Ryukyus resisted such a proposal, and standard Japanese, which has been the official language since the annexation of the Ryukyus by Japan toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually was selected as the language of instruction in the classroom.

Language has been one of the first targets for control by a dominant power when it comes into contact with another culture to be subjugated, a historical fact with numerous examples still having an impact on the world today, Okinawa being one of the salient examples. Linguistic conquest by English did not take place in postwar Okinawa, and it is, rather, standard Japanese that seems to be successfully completing its mission of over one hundred years of consigning the Ryukyuan language/dialect into oblivion in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Construction of the Postwar Okinawan Identity**

One of the conspicuous phenomena in a cross-cultural space is the construction of the identity of the local inhabitants as they come into contact with the "Other." In Okinawa, during the American administration, conditions of coercion and inequality were omnipresent. Postwar Okinawan literature reflects direct experiences with these conditions. For example, one of the most famous postwar literary works is Tatsuhiko Oshiro's "The Cocktail Party," a prophetic story of rape, which in 1967 won the Akutagawa Prize, the most coveted literary award in Japan. In this story, the protagonist's daughter is raped by a

Caucasian soldier, and the American military legal system is an overwhelmingly powerful barrier for the protagonist, who nevertheless indicts the rapist. A Chinese friend living in Okinawa then confides to him that his wife was raped and killed by a Japanese soldier during World War II. The protagonist, who was in China during the war, cannot avoid the intense gaze from his Chinese friend and suddenly realizes that he too was part of Japan's oppressive imperial power in China. Thus, an Okinawan victim sees himself transformed into a victimizer when exposed to the gaze of the Other, a Chinese friend marginalized in Okinawan society. "The Cocktail Party" thus depicts a sudden transformation and construction of the self in a cross-cultural contact space.

At the level of higher education, the severely limiting, undemocratic words in the ordinance were deleted in 1953, two years after it was printed in the student's catalogue, a fact that implies a possible reciprocal influence. In "CA Ordinance Number 66, Change No. 2," issued on April 7, 1953, entitled "Code of Education for the Ryukyus," "CA Ordinance Number 30 of 10 January 1951" was rescinded, and Article 1 redefined the University of the Ryukyus:

The University of the Ryukyus hereinafter referred to as the University with principal place of operation at Shuri, Okinawa, shall make available post-secondary education programs in the Arts, Sciences and the Professions, to men and women of the Ryukyus. It shall make available general and specific information and educational services to the people of the Ryukyus; furthering their economic and cultural development, the understandings, practices, and liberties of democratic peoples; including freedom of speech, the right of assembly, the right of petition, freedom of religion, and freedom of the responsible press.

The qualifying phrase — "as far as is consistent with the military occupation" — that so flagrantly deconstructed

the democratic ideals of the 1951 ordinance was silently deleted from the revised version. Those administrators who wrote the ordinance to govern an Okinawan institution of higher education found themselves undemocratic figures driven by a political desire.

For many Americans who came to Okinawa after 1945, the educational level in Okinawa was not high. As a report stated, "The level of the economy in the Ryukyus was such that there is no immediate prospect of adequate native support for the University, private or public." The University of the Ryukyus was thus 100 % supported by the Military Government (Adams, "Memorandum"). Representations of Okinawans in the late 1940s and mid 1950s, seen in such literary works as *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, a novel written by Vern Sneider, later scripted by John Patrick, and first presented in London in 1954, does not reflect the Ryukyuan intellectual tradition. The Okinawan characters, although they are sympathetically depicted and function as foils to satirize the American characters (and this is the main theme of this famous American novel and play depicting postwar Okinawa), tend to be stereotypes. Sakini's language in Patrick's play, for example, is broken, chaotic, and lacking in structure, although he is full of wisdom—a typical representation of the Other caught in the gaze of the dominant culture.

Such was the "reality" and its representation of Okinawa in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The University of the Ryukyus, "the youngest university in the world," according to the Americans who established it, needed help from an American university. From the American perspective, it needed an American university that would "adopt" it (Adams, "Memorandum"). The then Michigan State College was chosen to "adopt" and guide the newly born institution of higher education, and its efforts lasted for 17 years, from 1951 to 1968.

The United States Administration of the Ryukyu

Islands encouraged and promoted traditional Okinawan culture, which was suppressed by the Japanese government before 1945 (Miyagi 20-21). Use of Ryukyuan, or the Okinawan dialect, for example, was prohibited at school; children who spoke their own language were penalized with a "dialect tag" hanging from their necks. The coercion to use standard Japanese, sometimes called the "common language," did not stop in 1945. This movement continued at both the educational and psychological levels inside Okinawan society beyond 1945. Finally, I would say, in the generation that grew up in the 1970s and the 1980s, the ability to speak Ryukyuan fluently was lost. A Japanese cultural policy first implemented toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century even today stigmatizes Okinawans who do not speak "properly" the "common language" of the northern islands.

Okinawans gradually gained confidence in their culture after 1945, due partly to the American promotion of the traditional Okinawan culture, and this shift in attitude toward their own culture resulted in constructing a new Okinawan identity in the postwar era. Once again, though, American promotion of Okinawan culture cannot be taken at face value. For example, a message from General MacArthur, reportedly transmitted by a colonel on August 9, 1947, indicates that the General was not happy to see Okinawans coming to mainland Japan to study. He is said to have suggested that Okinawans should be educated at an Okinawan university (*Ryukyu Shiryo* 317). We do not have an English document to endorse this conversation, and I am quoting from a record of a conversation translated into Japanese. As I indicated above, however, a document in English, "Report for Japan and Ryukyus," does indicate that MacArthur in the late 1940s had actually started planning a university in Okinawa. The United States wanted to separate the Ryukyus from Japan so that military bases in the Ryukyus may be used with relative stability. As we



see later, the "separation" policy faced an ironic turn as the University of the Ryukyus grew into one of the strongholds for the anti-military movement and the Reversion Movement in Okinawa. It was an unexpected, ironic turn for the Americans who helped found the university. Conflict and confusion ensued for nearly two decades when Okinawan teachers imbued with the spirit of democracy led the Reversion Movement, which was also a movement seeking basic human rights in a cross-cultural contact zone where they witnessed daily "conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."

### Notes

This paper is based on a presentation given at "The University of the Ryukyus-University of California, Davis, Joint Symposium: Cross-Cultural Contact between the USA and Okinawa" held at the University of California, Davis, November 7-8, 2003.

<sup>1</sup> The original copy of this message is now housed at the University of the Ryukyus Library. There is no date typed on the paper nor is there an envelop with a date stamped on it. The date of the writing of this message therefore cannot be identified.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of the movement of the Kosei Kai in Honolulu, see Katsunori Yamazato, "Daigaku no tanjo: wakukawa seiei to hawaii ni okeru daigaku setsuritsu undo" [The Birth of a University: Seiei Wakukawa and the Movement for an Okinawan University] (2000). *Seiei Wakukawa: Building Bridges of Understanding Between America and Japan*. Ed. Wakukawa seiei iko tsuito bunshu kanko iinkai. Naha, Okinawa: Niraisha. 258-74.

<sup>3</sup> "Hawaii to okinawa no kakehashi — wakukawa seiei/hokama shuzen taidan" [A Bridge between Hawaii and Okinawa: A Dialogue between Seiei Wakukawa and Shuzen Hokama]. *Okinawa Bunka*. November, 1985. 103.

<sup>4</sup> The official history of the University of the Ryukyus does not indicate the source of these ideals, but Keishin Sunagawa, a former president of the University of the Ryukyus stated to the author that these ideals are based on Lincoln's speeches (12 August 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The University of Puerto Rico became, in 1909, a U.S. land-grant college when the US Congress extended to Puerto Rico the benefits of Morrill-Nelson Act. This probably is another case of fusion and confluence to be compared and contrasted with the University of the Ryukyus.

<sup>6</sup> On December 15, 1950, the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands, commonly called USCAR, replaced the American Military Government, and USCAR took over the governance of the university.

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