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Islands of History: Hawai'i and Okinawa

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“Islands of History: Hawai`i and Okinawa”

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Abstract:

“Islands of History” offers a brief comparison of Hawai`i and Okinawa as Pacific island communities premised upon a strategic inversion of islands and continents. It urges the constitution of a forum between those island groups to consider their solidarities and differences as indigenous peoples of Oceania.

Keywords:

Argentina, colonization, continents, decolonization, Hawai`i, indigenous, islands, migration, Okinawa.

During my first visit to the University of the Ryukyus in 1998, Professor Kakinohana Hojun of the law faculty hosted me. Professor Kakinohana was particularly kind to my son, Sean Sachio, and me, by offering to find and take us to the birthplace of my maternal grandparents, Chinen and Kakazu, in Ozato and Gushikami.

In gratitude, upon returning to the United States, I thanked Professor Kakinohana in a letter. “Because I write and conceptualize history visually,” I explained, “going to my grandparents’ homes bore special meaning for me. I can now see with my mind’s eye the spaces within which my forebears’ dreams and plans were instigated. And meeting family members, for me the first time, was deeply moving. I shall always remember your kindness. Thanks very much.” And, I added: “Our travel from Okinawa to Kobe retraced my grandmother’s steps nearly 100 years earlier, and our travel across the Pacific was much faster and more comfortable than her crossing on the ocean’s surface.”

I feel a personal sense of connection with these islands because I have family ties with Okinawa. About three years ago, my mother, Alice Shizue, and my nuclear family visited with our

Chinen relatives in their spacious home near Ozato-mura, and my mother’s cousin’s wife, Haruko, cooked champuro for our breakfast, and my sons, Sean Sachio and Colin Isamu, and I prepared spaghetti for their dinner. They took us to some of Okinawa’s lovely beaches, and I ran the hills on which my grandparents worked and played about a century earlier. Sitting in my grandmother’s house in Okinawa set amidst fields of sugar cane, I imagined her loneliness and longings for home when first she entered my grandfather’s house amidst fields of sugar cane in Hawai`i. She traveled far from Okinawa to Hawai`i, but it seems she didn’t travel so far after all. Cane fields, familiar and symbolic of a life of labor and survival, surrounded both her homes.

The familiar can be both hospitable and estranging. When I first landed at Naha airport in 1998, I was shocked with the familiarity of my arrival. My first impression was the cool and moist air conditioning, which signaled for me the hot, humid air outside. Lining the hallway to the baggage claim were lovely orchids in full bloom, and driving through the streets I saw a profusion of tropical plants I recognized from having grown up in

Hawai`i, including hibiscus and koa and papaya trees. My grandparents and other Okinawan migrants to Hawai`i, I thought, surely must have felt right at home in the “paradise of the Pacific.”

And yet, mocking the familiar must have been the unfamiliar—the harsh life of labor and the alienations of language, culture, and work. Although Hawai`i’s landscape might have resembled their birthplace, Okinawans almost certainly felt distance from white and naichi racism directed against them and plantation oppression and exploitation. In addition, my grandmother told me that she resented the privileges men exercised over women under patriarchy, worsened by a plantation workforce of many more men than women. As a young “picture bride,” she feared for her safety, she confided, and cried often at night during her first months of marriage as her husband, who was a stranger, slept. She missed her mother, she said.

Thinking about those surface resemblances and their deeper deceptions, I would like to reflect upon Okinawa, the islands of my ancestry, and Hawai`i, the islands of my birth. I have just completed a book manuscript on Hawai`i and the U.S. titled “Island World: A History of Hawai`i and the United States.” Hawai`i, like Okinawa, was an independent kingdom before it was invaded, conquered, occupied, and absorbed by the U.S. (and Japan). Both island groups were and are colonized by larger landmasses called “the mainland,” America and Japan. In my forthcoming book, “Island World,” I invert the relationships between island and continent, insisting that the islands are the “main land” and that the continent is the “periphery.” After all, the island looms large from the perspective of its shore, and the continent, distant, small, and often irrelevant to the daily lives of ordinary, island peoples.

In “Island World,” I center the islands of Oceania, widely held to be “tiny spaces” absent significance or moment, and place on the margin the continent, which sustains the U.S. Represented as feminine, islands remain passive, acted upon, stirred only by outside, manly manipulations. Myths

abound in the ideas of islands and continents. An origin myth is the standard, gendered definition of islands as small bodies of land surrounded by water and of continents, as large, unbroken landmasses. Yet, geologically, islands and continents are both anchored onto plates, albeit of different densities beneath and above the oceans, which form the earth’s mantle. Standing on the earth’s surface, the distinction between islands and continents disappear, and island chains are revealed as immense and high mountain ranges. Humans who act at different times upon political agendas, including the power to name and exert mastery over subject lands and peoples, are the ones responsible for the demarcations between islands and continents.

Geographical taxonomy at its most basic, a geographer and historian show, is the core problem. Whether segmenting the world into seven continents or directions, East, West, North, and South, or political alignments, First, Second, and Third worlds, they explain, “like areas are inevitably divided from like, while disparate places are jumbled together.” (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 1) They make the obvious though often overlooked point that geographies, like the myths that surround continents and islands, are human inscriptions upon the earth and as such mirror ideologies specific to peoples, times, and places. Instead, at least since the nineteenth century, those social constructions have carried the imprimatur of science, which claims to explain an objective reality transcendent of time and place, and, in that rendering, continents form the basic building blocks of landmass, biotic communities, and human groupings, all of which are conceived of as constituting a class apart because of alleged shared characteristics that differentiate it from other groups. Thus, from that viewpoint, the European continent’s flora, fauna, and peoples (the race) are rendered as categories distinguishable from the African continent’s wildlife and peoples (the other race).

Continental divides were not always the rule even within the European mind. The ancient Greeks conceived of their world as a “world island,” consisting of the intersection of Europe, Asia, and

Africa, lands circled by water. After its "discovery" by Europeans, America shattered that world island idea, and lent credence to the notion of separate landmasses that eventuated into solitary, continental communities estranged from one another by oceans or drawn borders. Still, as late as the nineteenth century, prominent geographers favored dividing the world into just two parts, old (Europe, Asia, Africa) and new (America), and they saw them as islands or land surrounded by water. An exception that soon became the rule, however, was Carl Ritter, the most influential human geographer of his time, who viewed continents as the major organizing principle of metageography. "Each continent," he was positive, "is like itself alone...each one was so planned and formed as to have its own special function in the progress of human culture." (as quoted in Lewis and Wigen 1997: 30) Inevitably, bound to that notion of social evolution and design was Ritter's view that at the apex was Europe, the homeland of white people, followed by Asia, the homeland of yellow people, Africa, of black people, and America, of red. Continents, accordingly, suggested a metageography and hierarchy of distinctive civilizations and racialized peoples.

By the twentieth century, continents were not only assumed to demarcate earth's surface but also to be a "natural" and sometimes divinely ordained state. In the U.S. about mid-century, America was divided into North and South, Antarctica gained continental status, and Australia and New Zealand stood in for Oceania. The resulting seven continents scheme gained rapid and widespread recognition, despite its glaring defects in the light of zoogeography's demonstration that life forms move relatively freely across continental boundaries, and the geology of tectonic plates that reveal India to be a part of Australia and not Eurasia, and North America's seamless connection to Eurasia under the Bering Sea. Continents not only prove inadequate as a schema of physical geography but of human geography as well insofar as they purport to map cultural and racial differences and ranks. Still, because they conform to "the basic patterns of land

and sea that spring to the eye from a world map," the continental system appears natural and true. (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 35)

Likewise visually, islands, with few exceptions, emerge as tiny specks of land especially when seen from the perspective of the Pacific's immensity. "Views of the Pacific from the level of macroeconomics and macropolitics often differ markedly from those from the level of ordinary people," explained Epeli Hau'ofa of his "sea of islands." (Hau'ofa 1994: 148) In truth, most versions of world history envision "the Pacific" as its Rim and its washes against economic and political giants, continental Asia and America. And while seas might serve as fecund breeding grounds for exchanges of goods, peoples, and ideas, they are not ordinarily conceived of as places of generation and production, but as mere watery routes, unlike landed roots, or even barren deserts, a land metaphor, to traverse and endure.

Oceania's smallness is a state of mind, "mental reservations," imposed upon its peoples by European colonizers, Hau'ofa came to understand while driving from Kona to Hilo on the island of Hawai'i. "I saw such scenes of grandeur as I had not seen before: the eerie blackness of regions covered by recent volcanic eruptions; the remote majesty of Maunaloa, long and smooth, the world's largest volcano; the awesome craters of Kīlauea threatening to erupt at any moment; and the lava flow on the coast not far away. Under the aegis of Pele, and before my very eyes, the Big Island was growing, rising from the depths of a mighty sea. The world of Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger every day," he concluded. (Hau'ofa 1994: 151, 152)

"Continental men," Hau'ofa explained, specifically Europeans and Americans, "drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces for the first time." On the contrary, to Oceania's peoples, "their universe comprised not only of land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-

shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny." (Hau'ofa 1994: 152, 153)

Besides its physical expanse, added Albert Wendt, Oceania "nourishes my spirit, helps to define me, and feeds my imagination." In truth, Oceania is more than "mundane fact," he confessed, "my commitment won't allow me to confine myself to so narrow a vision. So vast, so fabulously varied a scatter of islands, nations, cultures, mythologies and myths, so dazzling a creature, Oceania deserves more...." Like the diminution taught by colonialism and dependency, Wendt contended, cultural purity and visions of paradise contain half-truths and lies, and calls for a return to tradition and authenticity oftentimes result in stagnation, intolerance, and containment. Rather, he noted, Oceania's peoples traveled widely, interacted often, and changed frequently. Diversity abounds, and "there are no *true interpreters* or *sacred guardians* of any culture." And "there was no Fall, no sun-tanned Noble Savages existing in South Seas paradises, no Golden Age, except in Hollywood films, in the insanelly romantic literature and art by outsiders about the Pacific.... We, in Oceania, did not/and do not have a monopoly on God and the ideal life." (Wendt 1983: 71, 76, 77)

By positioning Hawai'i as the core and the U.S., its periphery, accordingly, I tried to untangle some of the myths of islands and continents by inverting their usual locations. More than a Pacific "crossroads" that receives the world, Hawai'i, in this version of the islands' past, scrapes up against the continent by sending its peoples and their achievements abroad to its frontiers, causing convulsive change. Those agencies, I held, have influenced some of the most basic aspects of American society and culture. From that perspective, the island acts upon and moves the continent. Moreover, from that viewpoint of island history, we come to understand that the mental separation of islands from continents is an invention, like the

fictions that embellish them, and that actual trespassing routinely infringe upon the fences erected and patrolled by human imagination and wills.

Consider, then, some of those transgressions posed by this inversion of islands and continents. We see Hawai'i and Okinawa, not the U.S. and Japan, as the mainland, the center of our focus and attention. As such, the islands and their peoples live and labor in large worlds, and they make history, they instigate change and innovation and they chart their own destinies. They also act upon the "continent," the U.S. and Japan, influencing and altering them and in the process giving them shape and meaning and thereby rendering them historical.

Further, Hawai'i's true orientation is south, toward Polynesia from whence they came, and not east, the U.S. from whence the colonizers came. Similarly, Okinawa's compass might point south, not north to Japan, toward other island groups scattered throughout the Pacific and its "sea of islands." I point to a particular connection between Okinawa and Hawai'i as oceanic communities revealed in the fact that much of the sea life that populate Hawaiian waters originate from the teeming Pacific triangle formed by Okinawa, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Corals and reef fishes float on Pacific currents that carry their microscopic larvae thousands of miles across the ocean, which facilitates rather than impedes travel. Upon reaching the Hawaiian chain, those larvae anchor themselves, adapt, and become indigenous to that place. Okinawan corals and fishes, in that way, become native to Hawaiian waters. Humans, from roughly the same area, sailed eastward toward island groups named by Europeans Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, as far east as Easter Island off the coast of South America, and as far north as Hawai'i. About a thousand years after Polynesians became Hawaiians, Okinawans sailed from their islands to Hawai'i, and like their corals and fishes, adapted and became native to those islands. I am a son of that oceanic migration.

Over the course of centuries, Polynesians from Tahiti and the Marquesas islands sailed

northward toward Hawai'i. Successive waves of them introduced new food and cultural items, and they founded new religious and political orders. Hawai'i belongs to the huge Polynesian triangle, extending from Samoa at one corner, Easter Island, at another, and Hawai'i, at its apex. Likewise and contrary to the nationalist idea coined by the novelist Shimao Toshio in 1961, "Japonesia," which proposed an isolated, uniquely Japanese string of islands from Okinawa to Hokkaido, Okinawa was for centuries in extensive contact with the Asian continent, especially China, and the numerous islands of Southeast Asia in commercial and cultural exchanges. Those influences suggest a cosmopolitan Okinawa that turned south as well as north.

Needless to say, Okinawans, like Hawaiians, moved all over this earth, and through their ingenuity and effort helped to transform those societies of contact and interaction. I will limit my discussion to just one example of that engagement. The first Japanese migrant to Argentina arrived in 1886, and over the course of the early twentieth century, Okinawans from Brazil and Peru re-migrated to Argentina. Uchinanchu, by the 1930s, outnumbered the naichi. The migrants' motives for leaving their Pacific islands for America's continent were as varied as the Argentine landscape. Higa Yoshi dreamed of wealth and a better life in Argentina, and left Okinawa as a "picture bride." After all, she observed, Okinawans who returned home from America had nice houses and their children were well educated. Despite her plan to return to Okinawa "clad in brocade," Higa soon realized that America's streets were not paved in gold, and that she had to work with her husband on their vegetable plot from dawn to dusk. Hira Magojiro was a schoolteacher in Naha when he fell in love with a gangster's mistress, and had to flee the country after the boss put a contract on his head. In Buenos Aires, Hira became a businessman, opened a dance studio to satisfy passion for dance, especially the tango, served an Okinawan organization as its president, married a blond, Spanish woman in 1932 but died two years later at the age of forty-eight.

Admittedly, agency alone fails to tell the entire story. Thousands of Okinawan migrants to Argentina were not only encouraged to leave their island home after World War II by the U.S. and Japanese governments but were targeted by them to relieve the postwar and devastated country from its need to care for its peoples, especially those they believed to be inferior. The U.S. Occupation regime and after 1952 a newly sovereign Japan assisted Okinawan migrants with loans for passage and resettlement and facilitated the process of emigration in concert with the Argentine government. They thereby sought to rid themselves of "undesirable" peoples. Some of Argentina's white children taunted Okinawan children in school, calling them "chino" and throwing stones at them, and whites generally and the Argentine government were both welcoming and ostracizing of uchinanchu. Despite racism's sting, Okinawans have made significant contributions to Argentina's agriculture, especially truck farming, and urban small businesses, and they have made the nation their home by expanding the definition of its citizens. During the 1982 Malvinas War, some 7,000 Nikkei, most of whom were uchinanchu, marched to demonstrate their patriotism. One of the signs they carried was the phrase, "Con la cara japonesa pero con el corazón Argentina" (with a Japanese face but with an Argentine heart).

In 1998, during my first visit to the University of the Ryukyus, I represented the U.S. American Studies Association, along with its then president, Professor Mary Helen Washington. Together, we sat amazed to hear the difference in American studies as conceived in Japan and in Okinawa. The interest in American studies, the university's faculty and students informed us, was in its emphasis on minorities in the U.S., oppressed and colonized peoples, largely peoples of color, namely African and Asian Americans, Latina/os, and Native Americans. Professor Washington, who is African American and an African American literary scholar, and I, whose specialization is Asian American and comparative ethnic studies, were drawn by our common scholarly interests. We immediately saw

similarities between *uchinanchu* and *naichi* relations in Japan and majority and minority relations in the U.S. I linked U.S. control of Hawai'i with Japan's assumption of sovereignty over Okinawa, and I thought of the related struggle for decolonization of island and Pacific peoples here in Okinawa against Japanese and U.S. military occupation and hegemony and in Hawai'i against U.S. colonialism.

Part of that decolonization involves sovereignty and self-determination, of course, the creation of a nation, but it also includes a reclaiming of culture, language, identity, and history, nothing less than the constitution of a people, as Okinawans, as Hawaiians. A step in that reclamation project is the freeing of ourselves from the bondage of "mental reservations," in the words of Epeli Hau'ofa, or systems of thought that circumscribe and confine us. Reversing the positions of islands and continents, islanders and mainlanders as central figures in our narratives and imaginations offers a starting point. The margins, thereby, become the center, which then colors our perspective on everything else. We come to see anew, in different light and from another vantage point, the once familiar. Both Okinawans and Hawaiians are indigenous, Pacific peoples, and as such deserve a forum to consider their solidarities and differences and their relations with kindred biotic communities within Oceania. Our "islands of history," Okinawa and Hawai'i, moving in the vast and fecund waters of the Pacific, have in the past and

will in the future, I am confident, help to reconfigure the destiny of our "island world."

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Acknowledgments:

I must thank my colleague, friend, and fellow islander, Stephen H. Sumida, who wrote and delivered a stimulating paper on this very subject, though I regret to admit that I've since lost the work somewhere in my files and can't for the life of me remember the details of its content. Steve, nonetheless, was the first to point me to the possibilities of this comparison.