

[Translation]

Excerpts from *Kotoba no umareru basho*
[*The Place Where Words Are Born*]
by Tami Sakiyama¹

Translated by Ikue Kina*

Why Do You Write?²

As a college student, I visited the Yaeyama Islands from 1974 through 1977. I was busy hopping from one island to another and did not care about school. My visit was in the aftermath of the 1972 reversion. I am at a loss for words whenever I attempt to write about that period because I am overwhelmed by so many related scenes arising in my mind. I feel the experience that I had more than twenty years ago thriving in me today, like roots extensively growing underground.

I have already written about the islands in my novel, though it was a small piece. Therefore, I am afraid that I might end up being bound to that world if I write about it again. I hear whispering, “You had better think about how to free yourself from that kind of suffocating world; you have been obsessed with it for too long.” I am indeed impelled to get away from all the restraints, to feel more comfortable both in body and soul, as I live teaching at a cram school, where instructors like me are only forced to work as slaves.

However, it is also true that I accept my gradual realization that the experience of island visits twenty years ago does not set me free. The experience affects not only my writing but also affects my life, in which my search for “island” or “islandness” is the reason for my action. On my day off, I tell myself that I have plenty of time to finish a book that I have only skimmed through. However, the moment I learn that a performance by my favorite Ryukyuan dancer is scheduled on the same day, I find myself leaving home quickly. I cannot help heading to the live performance of the island folk singer I am interested in, no matter how late the event occurs. I cannot afford the luxury of seeing a live performance at any time in my life, however. All I can say is that what I tried to look at beyond my action is, after all, an “island.” If someone asks me, “What does an ‘island’ mean to you?” I am not ready even today to verbalize an answer persuasively. To begin with, I cannot explain to myself why I never learn to stop an obsession for something from which I desperately want to be free.

Perhaps, I speculate, that is why I write. This is why I continue a secret attempt to write a novel, which hardly gives me financial security, and thus I would have no trouble

* Professor, University of the Ryukyus

abandoning it once I make up my mind to do so.

Here, I dare to confess to my readers only. Embarrassing to say, I seriously wanted to become a dancer or a *utasa* (a singer) of Ryukyuan folk dances or songs. I even had some training for that. However, I am no longer able to make my dream come true or to do the island hopping that nurtured the dream. The moment I sensed that, what was left for me was the act of writing. I know some may consider this is an impudent attitude.

Water and Darkness of the Southern Islands³

If I could write something like “Thoughts on Southern Islands,” the piece would be nothing more than writing about my personal experience. It would be far from an academic or philosophical thought because I, the author, am a mere islander who is nobody, having no significant status in society.

The following words from the second half of Norio Akasaka’s criticism⁴ in “The Ryukyu Archipelago’s Power of Evoking Imagination and the Thoughts on Southern Islands” (*Bungei*)⁵, however, encouraged me to submit this requested piece. His essay was a report on a symposium that took place in Okinawa late in the previous year and of Takaaki Yoshimoto’s keynote lecture⁶: “I believe any theory or understanding should engrave its first step in the place where it stands. Digging deeply in that particular place will lead one to the universal sphere of the horizon: the best way for those thoughts to exist.”⁷

I do not know the definition of “Southern Islands” when it indicates an academic or a philosophical concept. I simply understand it as a term to represent an entire island region, including Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama Islands. Furthermore, the idea of “the southern island” for me is particularly limited to one area of Iriomote Island, an island in the island region of Yaeyama. I have no reason to pay attention to that small area on the southern island except that it was my birthplace.

One cannot choose the place they are born. It is coincidental. However, one cannot exist isolating themselves from the world surrounding them as if their emergence is mutagenic. In any case, I assume, one cannot be free from their environment and “genetic constraints” as they live.

For example, as we try to recognize something in our life today, we find that existing institutions and cultures have already surrounded us. They become the base of our recognition process regardless of our acceptance of those institutions and cultures as the base. This way of living may be generally true of any ethnic groups or individuals. However, if one realizes they have no base, such as culture, and have nothing but a sense of life in poverty spreading in front of them like an extensive wilderness, what kind of prompt would they seek to start their process of recognition?

I recollect that my circumstance was exactly like an empty wilderness. Of course, it may be an oversimplification to say that it was “empty,” with no cultural element, because I eventually received formal education beginning six years after I was born. (There were

no nursery schools or kindergartens in those days, by the way.) I also developed the ability to comprehend both the dialect that my parents used on the island and standard Japanese to some extent. Then, ten-odd years later, I even witnessed a new culture hued with Japanese, American, and European colors coming like big waves and pervading everywhere. My real feeling was that I had nothing that I could believe was my culture, and the feeling continued to be there for close to twenty years. At that time, I was not sensible enough to understand that my parents' language or dialect was the only culture I was endowed with. Still, however, as I have opportunities to look at academic findings on regional dialects (or vernacular languages) and folklore (or ethnography), which are positively reevaluated today, I put myself in the situation where I gradually envision what is under my feet or where I stand.

Nevertheless, academic and philosophical findings do not always relate to the inner life of each individual. In reality, there are always many gaps or chasms in person-to-person or person-to-society relationships. It is impossible to make sense of them in various well-theorized cases and phenomena. We can actually do nothing but stand in the gaps that spread their roots wide, but we are trapped in the web of institutions and laws intervening in the chasms and forced to head toward death with our bodies immobilized. Doesn't this situation gradually become the reality of our spiritual life for the people living in urban areas and those living on the southern islands?

It is strange, but the moment I was trapped within the chasm in everyday life, I daydreamed of my birthplace, a space filled with nothing but poverty. I had no clue about what made me daydream. It is as if I suddenly found something rich that had casually existed in the space where I was made to believe that there was only emptiness. Water and darkness stagnating at the bottom of islands definitely change during the flow of a day, and yet I thought they would stay the same forever because what looked like change only repeats itself and never develops. I, however, am gradually able to discern them continually moving and spreading. The bright and robust sunlight on the southern islands' front side comes down from the sky and governs the islands like merciless politicians. The other side's darkness begins from the spot where one stands on their feet, pervades and covers the entire islands. The darkness enables any phenomenon to come close to its original image. While these things go on, the islands stay floating on the water. It is a daydream of water and darkness arising from the bottom of poverty. A desire to gain energy for the act of expressing the southern-islandness in me by keeping a fixed gaze at the world confined in the daydream eventually connects me with the southern islands.

Now, I remember a fact about the secret ritual *akamata-kuromata*,⁸ which takes place in such communities as Komi, Arashiro, and Kohama. In the ritual, the villagers who are not qualified to participate directly in the divine service are allowed to join the ceremony to welcome the god only between sunset and dawn. The gods bringing the world from the other side of the horizon are passionately welcomed by the villagers in the darkness and urged to leave them by the first cockcrow. On an island floating on the water in the dark, gods and humans exchange and fraternize with each other.

Translator's Notes

1. These two excerpts are from Tami Sakiyama's collection of essays *Kotobano umareru basho* [The Place Where Words Are Born] (Tokyo: Sunagoya Shobo, 2004). I obtained Sakiyama's permission to translate and publish these two essays anthologized in the collection. I particularly chose these two believing that they signal Sakiyama's long-held concerns with "islands." Born on Iriomote Island, Sakiyama stayed on the islands of Ishigaki and Miyako before moving to the Koza area in Okinawa Island. The multiple vernacular languages she picked up while moving from one island to another shaped her sensitivity for language and eventually became her obsession with searching for the right words in her writings. The life she experienced in the island environment also constitutes her particular sense of place, represented with such key images in her writings as water in the ocean, the darkness in the subtropical woods, and declining communities.

Tami Sakiyama was born on Iriomote Island in 1954. Her 1988 novella "Suijou Oukan" [Round-Trip over the Ocean], anthologized in *Living Spirit: Literature and Resurgence in Okinawa*, trans. Takuma Sminkey (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), won the 19th Kyushu Art Festival Literary Award [Kyushu geijutsu sai bungaku sho] in 1988 and was selected as a finalist for the Akutagawa Literary Prize in 1989. She was nominated as a finalist for the Akutagawa Literary Prize again in 1989 for another story, "Shima gomoru" [Confined within the Island], first published in the literary magazine *Bungakukai* (1990) and later anthologized in Tami Sakiyama, *Kurikaeshi Gaeshi* [Repeat Over and Over Again] (Tokyo: Sunagoya Shobo, 1994) 179–250. Sakiyama's detailed profile before 2015 will be found in: Tami Sakiyama, Kyoko Selden, and Alisa Freedman, "Excerpt from 'Swaying, Swinging.'" *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 27 (2015): 160–67. Sakiyama won the 4th Tekken Heterotopia Literary Prize in 2017 for her 2016 novel *Unju ga nasaki* [Your Mercy] (Hanashoin, 2016) and published *Kuja genshi ko* [An Illusory Travel to Kuja] (Hanashoin, 2017). Her novel *Chichi ya aran* [Not a Moon], first published in 2012 by Nanyo Bunko, was reprinted by Impact Shuppankai in 2020 with a new afterword.

2. "Why Do You Write?" originally appeared as an article in the *Nishi-Nihon Shinbun* [Western Japan Gazette], July 8, 1985.

3. "Water and Darkness of the Southern Islands" was first published as an essay in *Shin Okinawa Bungaku* [New Okinawan Literature] 79, a literary journal published by the Okinawa Times Newspaper Company in 1989.

4. Norio Akasaka, born in Tokyo in 1953, is a Japanese folklorist and Japanese language and culture professor at Gakushuin University. Known as an expert on the regional culture of Tohoku (the northeastern region of Japan), Akasaka conducts his research on cultural diversity within Japanese islands.

5. There was no citation in Sakiyama's essay originally, but it is confirmed that she quotes from Norio Akasaka's, "Nanto-ron, aratanaru taidou" [Thoughts on Southern Islands: A Quickening for New Life], *Bungei* [The Bungei Quarterly] 28, no. 1 (1989): 260–65.

6. Takaaki Yoshimoto (1924–2012) was a Japanese poet and a critic. As a celebrated structuralist Marxist thinker on nationalism and the Japanese emperor system, Yoshimoto was invited to make a keynote speech at the symposium "The Ryukyu Archipelago's Power of Evoking Imagination and the Thoughts on Southern Islands," which took place in Naha in December 1988. The symposium emphasized the potential of Okinawa and other southern islands to become a transnational site to support an anti-imperial ideology and to deconstruct the idea of the nation-state from a larger geohistorical perspective. The symposium was recognized as an epochal public event in Okinawa in the 1980s because Japanese scholars, such as Yoshimoto and Akasaka, and indigenous Okinawan intellectuals such as the poet Ben Takara took part in the discussion and exchange of ideas. The symposium contents were put together and published as the book Yoshimoto, Takaaki, Norio Akasaka, Nario Uehara, Masao Higa, Masahide Takemoto, Akira Tonaki, and Ben Takara, *Ryukyu-ko no kanki-ryoku to nantou-ron* [The Ryukyu Archipelago's Power of Evoking Imagination and the Thoughts on Southern Islands] (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1989).

7. Sakiyama's quotation from Akasaka's essay does not indicate a page number, but it is confirmed that the quotation comes from p. 265 of the essay.

8. *Akamata-kuromata* is a masked god who appears in a good-harvest festival in the Yaeyama

Archipelago. The ritual first took place in Komi Village on Iriomote Island and spread to other parts of the archipelago. “*Akamata*” means a red person and “*kuromata*” a black person. A young male villager plays the masked god, covered by plants and weeds all over his body, and appears in the ritual to celebrate a good harvest. See the Website entitled “Japan Knowledge” at <https://japanknowledge.com/introduction/keyword.html?i=1286>, Accessed December 20, 2020.