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#### **Assimilation Policy in Okinawa: Promotion, Resistance, and “Reconstruction”**

by Steve Rabson

The Japanese phrase *doka seisaku* is defined in dictionaries as a policy in which a nation endeavors to make the lifestyles and ideologies of the people in its colonies the same as its own. Among the Japanese, and those who study Japan, *doka seisaku* is often associated with Japan’s colonial rule of Korea between 1910 and 1945. At its most repressive, this policy was one of forced assimilation (*kyoseiteki doka*). During the last ten years of this period, it included elimination of Korean language study in the schools, compulsory use of Japanese, shutting down of all civilian Korean language newspapers, forced attendance at Shinto ceremonies, and the notorious 1939 “Name Order” requiring that all Koreans change their family and given names to Japanese readings. Some Koreans cooperated with the Japanese colonial administration, working usually in the lower echelons as police and local officials who enforced these edicts. On the other hand, there was also resistance in the form of protest against specific policies and criticism aimed particularly at those Koreans who were helping to carry them out.

The term *dokaseisaku* has also been applied to Okinawa during the Meiji period; and coercion, cooperation, and resistance characterized Japan’s assimilation policy and its effects there. But while Okinawa during the Meiji era is sometimes called “the first victim of Japanese imperialism”--suggesting that it was acquired and governed more like a colony than a prefecture--the circumstances were really quite different from those in Korea.

#### **Chinese Contacts**

To understand how these circumstances developed, some background is helpful. As with much in prehistory, a certain amount of conjecture remains over the precise sources of early migrations that populated the Ryukyu Islands, the largest of which is now called Okinawa. But people are known to have come at various times from South China, Southeast Asia, Polynesia, and what is now mainland Japan. The physical features of many Okinawans differ even today from those of mainland Japanese; yet others are indistinguishable in appearance from people in mainland Japan, where there is also significant variation. The geographical sources of Okinawa’s population have been surmised from early methods of rice cultivation, kilning, and navigation. Early cultural sources are said to be perceptible today in traditional music, dance, village festivals, religious observances, and diet. But, as with imported skills and artifacts everywhere, adaptations have occurred that makes it difficult to locate origins precisely.

The most often-cited origin for various aspects of Okinawan culture is China, to the extent that a popular notion in mainland Japan has persisted to this day that Okinawans are somehow more Chinese than Japanese. To be sure, there are Chinese influences in the diet, architecture, and burial customs of Okinawa that have not been seen in Japan at least in recent times. But since China has also been the largest source of imported Japanese culture, some things often identified as quintessentially Japanese actually came from China via Okinawa. These include certain words, place-names, pottery styles, and religious rituals.

Chinese influence in Okinawa was also political. Early political organization in Okinawa centered around regional lords, called *aji* or *anji*. After years of rivalries, wars, and consolidations, three separate kingdoms emerged in the twelfth century--*Nanzan*, *Chuzan*, and *Hokuzan*--South, Central, and North. In 1372, emissaries arrived from the Ming Court and mildly pressured King Satto of Chuzan to establish a tributary relationship with China as other countries in East Asia had done. In 1429, when a single *Ryukyuan* Kingdom was unified under *Chuzan*, the continuing tributary relationship with China turned out to be non-threatening as well as enriching, culturally and economically. The Kingdom of Ryukyu, called *Liu-ch'iu* in Chinese, was required to send envoys to the Ming Court, but China did not interfere in its politics and trade, as Japan did with increasing frequency starting in the early seventeenth century.

The relationship between China and Ryukyu had profound and lasting effects. Starting in the fourteenth century, students were sent annually to Peking as *ryugakusei* (students studying abroad). The kingdom's leaders also learned China's language, literature, arts, and philosophy from teachers who resided along with Chinese artisans and traders in a special section of Naha called Kume, which remains as a tourist attraction today. The architecture of public and private buildings came to be based on Chinese models, as were court ranks and rituals, a trend also observable in Nara-era Japan. And, as in Japan, Confucianism became powerfully influential in Ryukyu, where indigenous ancestor worship made it particularly adaptable. Chinese laws, such as those banning firearms and regulating land ownership, were adopted, as were Chinese dietary customs, particularly the use of chopsticks and the raising of livestock. The raising of pigs and eating of pork continues today to be much more common than in the rest of Japan and has been a source for mainland perceptions of Okinawa as "Chinese" or "foreign."

The period between 1400 and 1550 is often called the Golden Age of the Ryukyu Kingdom. A highly developed merchant marine maintained a flourishing international trade with China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia. Some of its most profitable exports were textiles, dyes, lacquer ware, fans, colored silks, paper, porcelains, gold, copper, grains, fruits, and vegetables. Ryukyuan vessels and crews also trans-shipped cargoes between countries, like Panamanian and Greek freighters of today. Problems during the "Golden Age" included Chinese customs officials who extorted bribes from Ryukyuan traders, and occasional misbehavior by Ryukyuan visitors to China. But Ryukyu-Chinese relations were, on the whole, mutually beneficial.

Meanwhile, relations between Japan and China worsened during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Japanese pirate fleets (*wako*) conducted devastating raids against China, and in 1415 the Ashikaga shogunate, ironically following Chinese custom, declared the Ryukyu Kingdom to be a tributary of Japan. Matters came to a crisis in 1590 when Toyotomi Hideyoshi ordered King Sho Nei to provide troops and supplies for Hideyoshi's planned invasion of China through Korea. After initially hesitating, the king reluctantly shipped food supplies to the Japanese troops, which foundered in Korea and withdrew after Hideyoshi's death in 1598.

Although avoiding entanglement in a war between its neighbors, the Ryukyu Kingdom now became an object in the conflict over Hideyoshi's succession. Shortly after Tokugawa Ieyasu prevailed in the decisive battle at Sekigahara in 1600, he placed Okinawa under the domain of Shimazu Iehisa, the daimyo of Satsuma province in southernmost Kyushu. Shimazu was given the title "Lord of the Southern Islands," and in 1609, he sent an army of samurai to assert his control over Okinawa. For 250 years, Satsuma imposed severe restrictions and high taxes but allowed the Ryukyu Kingdom to maintain at least an appearance of independence as well as its tributary relationship with China so that the Shimazu daimyo could profit from the still-flourishing trade. This was a way for Satsuma to get around the closed-country (*sakoku*) policy imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate after the 1630s. Despite Satsuma's repressive and exploitative policies, contacts between Okinawans and Japanese culturally enriched both. The popular entertainments of Edo and Osaka became fashionable in the Ryukyu Kingdom, where the traditional *kumi-odori* theater borrowed aspects of no and kabuki, and the world of Japanese theater welcomed Okinawan costumes, dances, and folk songs.

### **The Meiji Period**

In contrast to the Shimazu daimyo, who had tried to maintain the appearance of Ryukyuan independence, the Meiji government pursued a campaign to consolidate and extend its authority. From the early 1870s Japan tried to eliminate all political vestiges of the kingdom, real and symbolic. The government turned Okinawa into a prefecture partly out of concern that the kingdom posed a security problem. As an unassimilated territory on Japan's southern frontier, it could be used as a stop-over point for outside forces threatening Japan, as Commodore Perry had already demonstrated when his fleet of "black ships" made an uninvited call at Naha in 1853 on their way to Edo Bay.

Tokyo's assimilationist policy drew protests not only from the people of the former Ryukyu Kingdom, but also from China, which still claimed it as a tributary state. Fearing Japanese annexation, Okinawan aristocrats asked the Ch'ing government to intercede on the kingdom's behalf, and also asked former U.S. president Ulysses S. Grant to mediate the dispute during his visit to East Asia in 1879. The Meiji government had already used a massacre of Ryukyuan sailors by Taiwanese aborigines in 1871 as a diplomatic pretext to claim that Ryukyuan were "subjects of Japan" in need of protection, and it organized a punitive "expedition" to Formosa in 1873. (This Formosa expedition was largely comprised of Kyushu samurai led by Saigo Takamori's brother Tsugumichi and was partly

designed to distract them from attacking the Meiji government itself, as in fact they did four years later in the Satsuma Rebellion .)

In 1872, Tokyo announced publicly that it was abolishing the Ryukyu Kingdom. This unilateral act, coming exactly five hundred years after King Satto's 1372 treaty of suzerainty with China, was euphemistically called the Ryukyu Disposition (*Ryukyu shobun*). Protracted negotiations of the issue between Japan and China, also involving Britain and the United States, dragged on for more than twenty years, until rivalry between the two countries in Korea finally led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95.

Meanwhile, the last Okinawan king, Sho Tai, was forcibly exiled to Tokyo in May of 1879, and Okinawa was made a Japanese prefecture. Despite initial efforts in Tokyo to send highly educated and able officials to the new prefecture, Okinawans deeply resented the placing of outsiders in positions of leadership, especially when these "replacements" were carried out in some cases by physical coercion, including imprisonment of Okinawan officials. As time went on, the quality of Tokyo's appointees declined, especially in the lower echelons, where a high percentage of the police force and low-level bureaucrats were men from Kagoshima who had failed to find employment after the abortive Satsuma Rebellion of 1877. To make matters worse, the men appointed as governors of Okinawa prefecture in the Meiji era were often resentful of being assigned to a "remote" post, and sometimes took out their frustrations on the very people whose welfare had been entrusted to them.

It was during this period that prejudices developed which became widespread and enduring in Japan. As George Kerr notes in *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*: "Japanese who visited Okinawa on business or in fulfillment of official duties tended to carry back to other prefectures stories of . . . bizarre and unfamiliar things. . . . The government asserted that Okinawa prefecture was an integral part of the Japanese empire, but to unsophisticated Japanese eyes the . . . ways and speech of the Okinawans set them apart as rustic, second-class cousins within the Japanese nation-family" (pp. 398-99). Yet, even in the face of such Japanese attitudes and policies, opinions among the people of the former Ryukyu Kingdom about their future political status grew increasingly divided as Tokyo's dispute with Peking over sovereignty in the Ryukyus dragged on. The local intelligentsia were split between the pro-Chinese "stubborn faction" (*ganko-to*) and the pro-Japanese "enlightenment faction" (*kaika-to*). Though clearly favoring the *kaika-to*, the Meiji government was initially reluctant to antagonize the *ganko-to*, which still held considerable economic and political influence and had a strong vested interest in the status quo.

One negative consequence of this reluctance was that land and tax reforms undertaken in other prefectures as critical elements in the so-called modernization program were delayed in Okinawa. As linguistic historian Rumiko Shinzato has pointed out, this had the effect of widening the political and economic gap between Okinawa and the mainland. Taxes in Okinawa were proportionately much higher than elsewhere in Japan; yet the Okinawans could not send representatives to the national diet, established under the Meiji Constitution of 1890, until twenty-two years later, in 1912. The situation in Meiji-era Okinawa is often

contrasted with that in Hokkaido, where the government poured money and energy into developing a vast territory sparsely inhabited by a more easily manipulated population of *Ainu* hunters and fishermen. By contrast, Okinawa had limited natural resources and a population whose loyalty to the Meiji state was seen as problematic.

### **Assimilation, Top-Down**

While the Meiji government withheld economic reforms and political representation for Okinawa, one realm in which assimilation was promoted early and vigorously was education, particularly in the realm of language. Linguists Shinzato and Hokama Shuzen have divided the implementation of this policy into two phases: a top-down period that lasted from 1879 to 1895, and a bottom-up consolidation period lasting from 1895 to 1937--twenty-five years beyond Meiji.<sup>1</sup> The dividing year of 1895 marks Japan's unexpected victory in the Sino-Japanese War, which led to rapid decline of the pro-Chinese faction in Okinawa. At that point, more Okinawans came to see Japan as a nation on the rise, offering them the best hope for the future.

Before 1895, the policy of assimilation was imposed almost entirely by mainland administrators and educators, as the term "top-down" suggests. It included efforts to discourage tattoos, suppress *yuta* spiritual healers, reduce the influence of local *nuru priestesses*, consign local deities into the hierarchical pantheon of mainland state Shinto, and censor *kumi-odori* dance dramas thought to contain material "dangerous to the national polity" or "injurious to public morals." But language was the crucial issue. The dialects of mainland Japan and the Ryukyus are closely related structurally but became mutually unintelligible after they split from a single "mother dialect" sometime around 700 A.D. The Meiji government considered language "standardization" (*genko doitsu*) an important policy that it later applied to the whole country. But the situation was seen as urgent in Okinawa because the population was almost entirely monolingual in a Ryukyuan dialect.

The early language "standardization" program in the Okinawan public schools was not a rousing success partly because sending children to school at all placed a heavy burden on farmers dependent on family labor in the fields. Second, Okinawans initially viewed Japanese as the language of outsiders, of a ruling class of government officials hostile to them and their culture. Children were frightened of mainland teachers who often seemed alien, harsh, and condescending. Also, at this time the Okinawan aristocracy and gentry, who had been raised on Chinese classics, saw no value in learning Japanese. The early "standardization" program sparked student strikes and angry newspaper editorials because it was seen as focusing too narrowly on language--learning and indoctrination in imperial ideology, ignoring other subjects thought to be important, including English. Mainland administrators consistently rejected these complaints, insisting that mastery of "standard" Japanese was essential for successful assimilation and to insure the loyalty of Okinawans as "imperial subjects."

That the promotion of assimilation in education, starting with language, had wider political and ideological goals is affirmed by Ichiki Kitokuro, an official of the Home Ministry:

“We have no other recourse but education in breaking the stubborn thought of Okinawans and assimilating them to the civilization of the home islands [*naichi*].”[2]

Portraits of the Meiji Emperor and Empress (*goshin'ei*) were introduced into the schools of Okinawa in 1887, earlier than in any other prefecture. Japanese military leaders, who saw Okinawa as a vulnerable defense perimeter, also saw Okinawans as potential traitors because of the Ryukyu Kingdom's past association with China. Yamagata Aritomo and other high-ranking military officers came to inspect Okinawan schools to be sure that education was doing everything possible to turn Okinawans away from China and toward Japan. In this effort, as later, there was often confusion about what was Chinese and what was Okinawan, which contributed to the government's zeal for eradicating what were said to be “harmful local customs” through a heavy-handed campaign called *akushu haishi* (bad habit elimination). As for the dichotomy between China and Japan in the Meiji era, it was the Okinawans themselves who, on their own initiative, turned toward the latter.

### **Assimilation: Bottom-Up**

The Sino-Japanese War convinced many Okinawans that closer identification with the victorious nation, rising in wealth and status, was not such a bad idea after all. An early effect of the war was the decline of the pro-Chinese faction among Okinawan intellectuals. But among the population at large there was a broad, if not deep, effort to identify with Japan. Boys changed their hairstyles from the traditional topknot and pin to the crew cut popular on the mainland. Women began adding the -ko suffix to their given names, and men adopted kun pronunciations for their names which previously had readings that were closer to on. In Okinawa, unlike in Korea four decades later, such renaming was voluntary.

In the field of journalism, the newspaper *Ryukyu Shimpo*, founded in 1893 and still one of two major-circulation dailies in Okinawa today, advocated in its early editorials that Okinawa could advance materially and socially only by fully assimilating with Japan. One writer insisted that “We must even sneeze as the Japanese do.” The *Shimpo* also published articles on Okinawan history and culture in an effort to inform mainland readers, especially those residing in Okinawa, and to dispel prejudices and stereotypes. By this time Okinawans were enthusiastically taking up the cause of language “standardization” in the period linguists now call “bottom-up consolidation.” Basil Hall Chamberlain's influential 1895 *Grammar and Dictionary of the Luchuan Language*, showing a genealogical relationship between the Japanese and Okinawan languages, was embraced as evidence of shared ethnicity. A year later scholar Nakamoto Masaya published *Okinawa goten* (*Okinawan Language and Dictionary*) with the stated aim of helping Okinawans overcome the “interference” their first language imposed on their efforts to learn Japanese. Nakamoto wrote in his introduction that speaking a language intelligible throughout Japan was essential to building a powerful nation.

A resolution to promote Japanese language was passed at the All-Okinawa Teachers Convention of 1916 which recommended that teachers commit themselves not only to speaking correct Japanese, but also to punishing students who spoke Ryukyuan at school. Anticipating their teachers, students at Shuri Middle School had already volunteered six

years earlier, in 1910, to banish Ryukyuan from the school grounds. And, in the same year, students at Naha Middle School agreed to adopt the notorious punishment placard (*batsu fuda*), also called the dialect placard (*hogen fuda*), to be hung around the neck of students caught speaking Ryukyuan on the school premises. Wearing the wooden placard was considered a disgrace and resulted in a lowered grade. And, according to the rules, the only way a student could get rid of it was to catch another student using Ryukyuan to whom it could be passed on. This Okinawan version of “hot-potato” was later criticized for making children spy on each other, damaging their social development and self-esteem.

Despite these efforts, initiated in large part after 1895 from Okinawa itself, Okinawans continued to experience prejudice and discrimination in mainland Japan. The situation was exacerbated because Okinawans seeking education and employment were moving in large numbers to the mainland where their labor was often welcome, but their somewhat differing customs and tendency to use the Ryukyuan language among themselves was said to make them harder for supervisors to control. Also, when economic conditions worsened in other prefectures around the turn of the century, Okinawans were hard-pressed to find jobs anywhere in Japan. It was during this period that they first began emigrating abroad in large numbers to Hawaii and to South and North America. Nevertheless, a number of Okinawans were welcomed into mainland artistic and literary circles where their work was praised for its distinctive style and, in the case of literature, for its illuminating perspectives on late-Meiji Japan.

Another source of tension was the conscription of young Okinawan men into the Japanese military. They were exempted for some two decades from the Conscription Law of 1873 because of lingering doubts about their loyalty to the Meiji state. But as a result of Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War, some Okinawans began to pursue distinguished military careers, attaining high ranks. It was a source of considerable local pride when a warship commanded by Imperial Navy Captain Kanna Kenwa, a native of Okinawa, brought Crown Prince Hirohito to Naha for a celebrated one-day visit in 1921 on the first stop of the prince’s historic voyage to Europe. Unfortunately, there was also prejudice among the imperial forces, and Okinawans who spoke their language to each other were on occasion mistaken for the enemy during the Sino-Japanese War. Imperial soldiers accusing Okinawans as spies, in part because of their local language, also had tragic consequences fifty years later during the devastating battle of 1945.

### **Effects of Prewar Assimilation**

How was the assimilation policy of the Meiji period viewed in retrospect during the decades that followed? Perhaps the most frequently stated view among Okinawans in *Taisho* and early *Showa* was that it had succeeded, and that they should now be accepted as full-fledged members of the Japanese nation-family. Okinawans especially resented being continuously compared to the people in Japan’s colonies, such as Taiwan and Korea, and to other minorities in Japan who had been the object of assimilation policies. Their indignation sometimes led to a kind of *yatsuatari* (indiscriminate rage or scapegoating) in which those who are the object of prejudice seek to raise their status by aiming prejudice at others. As the Ryukyu Shimpo insisted in April 1903: “To line up

Okinawans with Taiwanese barbarians [*seiban*] and Hokkaido Ainu is to view Okinawans, who are truly Japanese, as one of these. No matter how insensitive Okinawans may be, we can never put up with this kind of humiliation.”

This angry editorial was sparked by a 1903 exhibition in Osaka that featured what was called a Human Museum (*jinruikan*). As widely advertised, this “museum” displayed “live specimens of exotic peoples” who were Taiwanese, Ainu, and Okinawan women wearing their traditional dress. Newspaper reports in Okinawa did not object to this dehumanizing exhibit in itself, but to its inclusion of Okinawans, whom the writers insisted were fully assimilated Japanese. Likewise, Okinawan intellectuals protested vigorously when news broke of a plan to include Okinawa under the jurisdiction of the Taiwan governor-generalship. Again, it was not colonialism in itself that they objected to, but the idea of being placed in the same category as those who were not “true Japanese.”

The effects of assimilation policy and ideology were also evident in ethnographic research on Okinawa, by both Okinawans and mainlanders. A central theme in the research of Iha Fuyu, the founder of Okinawan ethnography, and mainland anthropologists Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu, was that Okinawan culture, especially in its ancient forms, is of central importance to the culture of Japan. The remnants of ancient Japanese words and place names in modern Ryukyuan dialects, local religious practices thought to originate in Micronesia, and Okinawan pottery techniques were all identified as examples of “pure Japanese culture” that had survived in Okinawa, but had regrettably disappeared in the cultural mishmash of modern Japan. There was, of course, a downside to this worship of the archaic. Okinawa’s portrayal as a storehouse for relics of the Japanese past also implied a certain backwardness.

### **The Pacific War and After**

The cruelest of the many ironies of the Pacific War was that, after years of discrimination on the mainland where Okinawans were sometimes denied employment and lodging, they saw the Battle of Okinawa as an opportunity to prove, once and for all, their loyalty to Japan and their full assimilation as Japanese. Diaries written just before the battle by teenage Okinawan boys in the local defense corps (*boeitai*) express joy at the chance to demonstrate “the Yamato spirit” and to honor the emperor by repulsing the invasion of “savage” Americans. *The boeitaigakuto tai, gave their lives caring for battlefield wounded. But such sacrifices only swelled the numbers of victims in a tragically misguided cause. Japanese soldiers ordered mass suicides of Okinawan civilians to stretch dwindling food supplies and forced others out of overcrowded caves and tunnels into heavy enemy fire. In perhaps the most outrageous betrayal of the Okinawans’ determination to assimilate, Japanese soldiers shot thousands at point-blank range in their anger over defeat, accusing the Okinawans, sometimes on the basis of a few words uttered in dialect, of being spies. This worst battle of the Pacific War took the lives of more than two-hundred thousand local residents.*

*The end of that war did not, of course, end the controversy over assimilation. It only brought a new party into the discourse--the United States. The American military*



*prolonged its occupation rule of Okinawa until 1972, twenty years beyond the occupation of mainland Japan, and continues to “occupy” vast areas with its bases to this day in what is, unfortunately for Okinawa, a convenient staging area for weapons and troops to virtually all of Asia. To maintain unrestricted use of this bastion, Pentagon policymakers insisted for almost a quarter of a century that they must retain administrative control over most of the Ryukyu Islands which entailed forcible land seizures, denials of legal rights, and numerous inconveniences and indignities. Finally, local opposition, in the form of mostly peaceful but occasionally violent demonstrations, became so disruptive during the Vietnam War that even the U.S. military was forced to concede that American administration had become detrimental to their mission, risking utility of the bases it was supposed to ensure.*

*But while the Pentagon was still trying to prolong its occupation, military intelligence and propaganda agencies, such as the Army’s Counter-Intelligence Corps and Public Relations Section, embarked on a vigorous campaign to convince Okinawans that they were not Japanese. The American Government was thus endeavoring to undo the effects of doka seisaku, which had also initially been imposed “top-down” by the Meiji government. The difference was that no “bottom-up consolidation” response was forthcoming among Okinawans to this misguided undertaking, which expended millions of American taxpayer dollars.*

*The American campaign for “disassimilation” was pursued in large part out of fear that the movement for reversion to Japanese sovereignty, having gained considerable momentum by the early 1950s, would succeed, forcing the military to deal with more restrictive Japanese policies toward American bases, or even to withdraw altogether if the opposition parties came to power in Tokyo. American occupation authorities in Okinawa officially adopted the word “Ryukyuan,” widely mispronounced and misspelled as “Ree-yoo-kian,” “Ryoo-kyoo-ian,” or “Rye(as in bread)-yoo-kian” for all references to the “on. For ideological support of the disassimilation campaign, the United States Army funded the research and writing of officially approved histories emphasizing Satsuma’s invasion and exploitation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, as well as Japan’s later discriminatory policies and attitudes toward Okinawa after it became a prefecture. The campaign also entailed occasional censoring of the press and denunciations of opposition leaders, especially those advocating reversion, as “Communists” -- a label that carried more stigma among local Americans than it did among Okinawans.*

*Okinawans complained that they were often told by Americans how lucky they were to have been liberated from the oppression of Imperial Japan. But when they objected to occupation policies such as seizures of land and denials of legal rights, they were reminded that they were the people of a defeated country, and that the United States was, after all, protecting them and the rest of “free” Asia from Communism.[3] In psychology, this is known as putting someone in a double-bind.*

*There was, however, at least one nominally positive aspect to this American campaign--the funding of museums, libraries, and exhibitions of cultural artifacts from the Ryukyu Kingdom with American taxpayer dollars. The Pentagon even paid for a radio station that*

*was supposed to broadcast exclusively in a main-island Okinawan dialect and to avoid the use of “standard” Japanese. Unfortunately, announcers and copywriters were hard-pressed to find, in this now-disappearing language, modern theoretical and technological terms with which to report the daily news. As a practical necessity, they resorted occasionally to words from English or even--horror of horrors--Japanese.*

*During the period of American military rule, the local opposition, especially school teachers, resisted the “Ryukyu-ization” campaign, insisting, as school teachers had since Meiji, that Okinawans were Japanese. The hi no maru (white field, red sun) flag, banned from display under American occupation law except on certain holidays, became a poignant symbol of this resistance at countless rallies and protest demonstrations in support of reversion. In a double-edged irony, the hogen fuda, or punishment placards, were brought back into the schools to hang around the necks of children caught speaking local dialect. The majority of Okinawans supported, at some level, the long struggle for return to the motherland (bokoku fukki). And even those who did not actively join the movement insisted that they were Japanese, easily seeing through the “Ryukyu-ization” campaign as a propaganda ploy to prolong the American military occupation.*

### ***‘Reassimilated’ Once More***

*The movement finally bore fruit on May 15, 1972, when Okinawa was “re-assimilated” into the Japanese polity. Yet assimilation persists as an issue today. On the one hand, it is seen as insufficient to have boosted Okinawa to a level of material prosperity equal to the rest of Japan. Local economic conditions have improved markedly since reversion, but Okinawa’s per capita income is still only seventy percent of the mainland’s. Furthermore, the prefecture is still forced disproportionately to sacrifice its land and quality of life to the maintenance of vast American military bases. Three-quarters of the American military presence in all of Japan remains on the island thanks to the henkan kyotei, the 1969 “reversion agreement” that in Okinawa was sarcastically called henken kyotei--the “discriminatory agreement.”*

*Moreover, in what is sometimes called a “secondary occupation,” Japanese corporations have bought up choice ocean-front properties for luxury hotels and golf courses, where Okinawans are employed as service workers for mainland managers and customers, with the profits being removed to the mainland. With ubiquitous resort construction now threatening to destroy the coral-based ocean environment that attracts tourists, this economic marginalization is seen as a kind of cannibalism, rather than assimilation.*

*On the other hand, post-reversion assimilation is also criticized as being too thorough in demanding political, cultural, and ideological conformity with the mainland. The Ministry of Education’s efforts to promote patriotism in the schools by ordering display of the Japanese flag and singing of the national anthem have, like the occupation’s prohibition of flag displays before reversion, sparked angry protests from teachers and others who resent what they see as a renewal of Meiji assimilation policies designed to “make imperial subjects” (kominka) of Okinawans.[4] This resentment is exacerbated by the national government’s reluctance to acknowledge wartime atrocities, especially those committed in*

Okinawa. Teachers have also requested that Okinawa's history and culture be more fully taught in the curriculum, even as they are frustrated by an educational system geared relentlessly toward college entrance examinations on which there are very few, if any, questions about Okinawa.

More than two decades after reversion, local disillusionment with mainland policies and attitudes has radically transformed the image of *hi no maru*. Before 1972, the flag was a cherished symbol of liberation from American military rule and re-assimilation with Japanese compatriots. Today, for many Okinawans, it is a despised symbol of past aggression and continuing domination by Tokyo. Thus, assimilation--promotion, resistance, and "reconstruction" -- continues to spark debates in Okinawa that swirl around such familiar dichotomies as ethnic versus national, homogeneity versus diversity, and local versus central. And because these debates are played out in ways that are particularly concentrated and conspicuous, Okinawa is fruitful ground to study these issues.

## NOTES

1. Hokama Shuzen, "Okinawa ni okeru gengo kyoiku no rekishi," in Tanikawa Ken'ichi, ed., *Waga Okinawa hogen ronso* (Tokyo: Kijisha, 1970), pp. 186-216; and Rumiko Shinzato, "The Standardization Movement in Okinawa: A Sociolinguistic Perspective," paper presented at the symposium of the International Society for Ryukyuan Studies, Naha, August 1991, p. 13.
2. Quoted in Ota Masahide, *Okinawa no minshu ishiki* (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 1976), p. 346; trans. in Alan S. Christy, "The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa," *Positions* 1:3 (Duke University Press, 1993), p. 615.
3. Miyagi Etsujiro, *Senrosha no me (In the Eyes of the Occupiers)* (Naha: Naha Shuppansha, 1982), pp. 89-103.
4. For an analysis of an important Okinawan flag-burning incident, see Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), pp. 33-104.

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