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Dilemmas of Development on The Ogasawara Islands
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Throughout Japan plans for the construction of dams, express roads and rail lines, harbors and airports, and for the pouring of concrete on seacoast, riverbed and mountainside, proceed. Increasingly, however, they are being contested. A close study of any one of these contests can reveal a great deal about the process of changing values in late twentieth century Japan. Political, social, economic, and ecological issues are raised by each of these projects, and the relationships between state and community, humanity and its natural environment, are illuminated. It may be that these contests, which commonly occur on Japan's geographical periphery, offer the clearest evidence of a major paradigm shift in Japan's conception of what constitutes modernity.

One such location, second to none in Japan for its smallness, remoteness and apparent irrelevance to the main currents of national life, is the Ogasawara (or Bonin) Islands. These islands form part of the administrative district of Tokyo but they are so distant from the metropolitan center that it takes longer to get to them--a twenty-five- and-a-half hour journey on a weekly steamship--than virtually anywhere else in the world. They are located about 1,000 kilometers due south of Tokyo and a slightly greater distance due east of Okinawa.

These islands are not only distant but very different from the rest of Japan. They boast no airport or railway station, no large hotel, store or supermarket, no McDonald's or pachinko parlor, few vending machines and not a single golf course. The tallest buildings are the local school and local government offices. In place of the ubiquitous crows, sparrows and pigeons of other Japanese cities, Ogasawara's main settlement of Omura is home to the *uguisu* (nightingale) and the *iso-hiyodori* (coastal bulbul); subtropical flowers abound; the night sky is full of stars; and in the surrounding bays and inlets hundreds of whales, dolphins, tortoises and other marine species come to reproduce or to rear their young. These islands have sometimes been called the Galapagos of the East.

The resort boom of the 1980s fortunately passed these islands by. While administratively part of Tokyo, Ogasawara is in most respects its antithesis. Whether this distinctiveness will continue, or whether, like so many other towns and villages in Japan which in recent decades and especially since the 1987 'resort law' have become clones of Hakone, it will become merely an offshore resort, will depend on decisions now being faced. The greatest of them is whether or not to build an airport.

From 'Bonin' to 'Ogasawara'

Unlike Okinawa, which comprises a group of continental islands that lie on a similar latitude far to the West and more-or-less adjacent to the great continental landmass of China, Ogasawara's islands are either volcanic or coral in origin and lack any ancient history of human settlement or cultivation. They were probably still pristine when first visited by Japanese sailors in the late sixteenth century. They remained unsettled, although recorded on maps under names such as Peel Island, Stapleton's Island, and Buckland's Island, until a small group of Americans and Europeans went there in the third decade of the nineteenth century.

In the 1870s, Japan revived its interest and was able to persuade the Europeans and Americans of its superior right to sovereignty. In 1876 a Japanese flag was raised over the then motley group of inhabitants (43 of them when Commodore Perry stopped by in the 1850s, and 71 by 1875). A Japanese resident was appointed to govern them, and the islands reverted to their sixteenth-century Japanese names. The three main groups which comprise the archipelago became, from the north, the Groom Island Group (Mukojima retto), consisting of Bride and Groom (Yome and Muko), appropriately linked by the 'Go-Between' (Nakodo) Islands, plus a few outcrops of which the most remote northerly one is Kitanoshima (North Island); then the Father Island Group (Chichijima retto), consisting of Father (Chichi), surrounded by Elder and Younger Brother (Ani and Ototo), a tiny grandchild (Mago); and miscellaneous islets known only as East, West, and South (Higashi, Nishi, Minami) Islands, and farthest to the south, the Mother Island Group (Hahajima retto), consisting of Mother (Haha) with Elder and Younger Sister (Ane and Imoto), Niece (Mei) and a few other small and miscellaneous islands--'Flat' (Hei) and 'Over There' (Muko). In their prewar heyday there were 7,700 people, living on ten of the islands, but today only Chichi and Haha are inhabited, and the total island population in 1998 was just over 2,300. Even the largest island, Chichijima, is a mere 24 square kilometers, so small that it is possible to walk from north to south in a couple of hours, or from east to west in less than one. All the islands together comprise only 61 square kilometers, compared to the Ryukyu Islands' 2,266 square kilometers.

Because of the remoteness of the islands, only those species that were able to cross 1,000 kilometers of ocean could gain a foothold, and the flora and fauna, like those of the Galapagos, therefore developed many distinctive and unique characteristics over millions of years. The Ogasawara *okomori*, or flying-fox, is the only indigenous mammal, the Ogasawara *tokage* the only lizard, and unlike Okinawa the Ogasawaras harbor no poisonous snakes.

The tiny settlement that existed when the Japanese flag was raised subsisted by whaling or hunting of tortoises or albatross (2,000 to 3,000 birds were being slaughtered each year from the late 1870s, mostly for their feathers), and by supplying provisions for passing ships. As the Japanese settlement grew, however, the evergreen deciduous forests of oak and sandalwood, rosewood and mahogany, were soon cleared and farms and sugar plantations were established. These modifications of the environment caused many indigenous species of flora and fauna to disappear, some vanishing almost immediately after their existence was recorded.

The multi-racial human community seems to have lived together without notable friction, the descendants of the European and American ‘founding fathers’ intermarrying with later Japanese settlers until 1944. At that time, virtually the entire population, including those of American and European origin, was evacuated to Japan proper, leaving only a force of 825 volunteers, later joined by a garrison of 21,200 soldiers to face the oncoming Americans. Thousands fell victim to disease, starvation or bombardment. When the war ended, only those of non-Japanese ethnic origin (129 people) were allowed to return, and the islands (again known as the Bonin-Volcano Islands) remained under U.S. military occupation until 1968. Unlike Okinawa, however, which was returned to Japan in 1972 with its bases intact, the American withdrawal from Ogasawara was total. For a third time within less than a hundred years, the language and culture changed, reverting, as after 1876, from English to Japanese.

The pattern of development from 1968 followed very much the same path as that of Okinawa from 1972, or Amami from 1953, all island groups that were subject to development plans which placed central importance on infrastructure and public works funded by lavish subsidies from central government funds. Construction companies became the major employer and roads, harbors, bridges, and coastal and river works proliferated. Development funds to a total of ¥83.1 billion were poured into the Ogasawaras in the nearly three decades to 1995. As of 1994, agriculture and fisheries employed a mere 3.4 per cent of the work force, secondary industry 0.2 per cent, administration 23.5 per cent, services (guides, boat crews, etc. for whale-watching, fishing, and diving) 6.0 per cent, and construction a whopping 43.3 per cent. This pattern of gross imbalance is shared with Okinawa and Amami. Had such public works been occasioned by need and infrastructural backwardness, one would expect their role would indeed have been high in the early years after reversion but then would have peaked and begun to decline. The fact that this did not happen points to the inherently pathological nature of the process, best understood in light of the phenomenon known in Japan as the ‘*doken kokka*’ or ‘construction state.’ Public works-led development simply breeds more and more public works development.

The State of Nature

Despite the depredations of intrusive and exploitative development during the sixty-odd prewar years and the brief but devastating ravages of the war itself, the subsequent twenty-three-year spell as a U.S. Trust Territory gave the Ogasawaras some respite. Damage caused by introduced species such as pigs, goats, dogs and cats continued unabated. The islands’ only indigenous mammal, the Ogasawara flying fox (*Ogasawara okomori*) is extinct on Hahajima but hangs on precariously on Chichijima, where a tiny colony (confirmed seven) still exists. So far as birds are concerned, about 150 species have been recorded (fifteen of them indigenous), but today only twenty-six are known to be still nesting on the islands. The ‘short-tailed albatross’ (*ahodori* or *Diomedea albatrus*) disappeared long ago, although small colonies of the ‘laysan albatross’ (*koahodori* or *Diomedea immutabilis*) and the ‘black-footed albatross’ (*kuroashi-ahodori* or *Diomedea nigripes*) survive only in the remotest outcrops of

Kitanoshima in the Mukojima Island Group. The Ogasawara *mashiko*, *gabicho*, and *karasubato* (brambling, laughing thrush and wood-pigeon), although they are featured on stamps celebrating the islands' natural diversity, disappeared along with the forests that were their home. However, other species, such as the *mejiro* ('white-eye'), *hiyodori* (brown-eared bulbul), *isohiyodori* (coastal bulbul), *uguisu* (Ogasawara nightingale), *toratsugumi* (White's ground thrush) and the *meguro* ('black-eye') survive. Some seem to be flourishing, although the *meguro* is now to be found only on Hahajima. The Ogasawaras are also rich in butterflies, moths, and dragonflies, and, as was only recently realized, some rare and precious kinds of snails, no less than ten of which (including one known as the *Anijima katamaimai* that was first discovered in 1989) are known to exist only in Anijima.

So far as botanical species are concerned, Ogasawara's diversity is considerable, and about forty per cent of the four hundred plant species on the islands are indigenous (seventy per cent for the trees). By comparison with Okinawa, which has about twice as many plant species, this may not seem so impressive, but it still means a level of bio-diversity far above anywhere else in Japan. Taking into account the huge discrepancy in area between Okinawa and Ogasawara, both island groups have a biological significance far beyond their relative geographic insignificance.

Such a judgment must, however, face the fact that the past hundred years have seen huge changes in the Ogasawara environment, the most devastating being the loss of most of the original forests (and presumably many of their denizens). Many tree species, including the giant *momotamana* (*Terminalia catappa*), the *Ogasawara-kuwa* (a mulberry), the *udonoki*, local varieties of palm, including the 'cabbage-palm' (*kyabetsu-yashi*), and probably the trees referred to by early Western observers as 'rosewood, red and white box, sandalwood and white oak,' are extinct. Originally, they were cleared with the idea of creating plantations of commercial crops such as sugar, pineapple, or banana. But by the time of reversion in 1968 such plantations no longer made market sense and little effort was made to revive them. Other introduced species, such as the Ryukyuan pine, camphor-tree, Indian rubber tree and the '*mokumao* (or casuarina, an Australian native tree) gradually became established.

Although the original forests that used to clothe the hillsides have vanished, quite a few species lost elsewhere survive on the more inaccessible mountains and valleys or on the uninhabited islands. Stunted or 'ugly' trees, those with no apparent commercial value, or those too inconveniently located to merit chopping down to fire the sugar cane kilns, had a better chance of surviving, as did many smaller botanical species, including distinctive varieties of fern, edible fungi, chrysanthemum, orchid, peony, azalea and camellia. There are also a number of rare trees or dry land shrubs (such as the *shimaisunoki* and *kobanoakatetsu*), which are listed in the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature)'s *Red Data Book of Endangered Species*.

In recent decades the 'modernist' spirit, which could thus exploit the environment to the point of driving so many species to extinction, has been subtly evolving. Now, the question of how the human and natural orders should coexist weighs on the people of Ogasawara, as

indeed it does on those throughout Japan. Ecological and economic considerations have come to be seen as linked. The question posed by Ogasawara is how to find a formula for ‘development’ that will cause the islands to prosper and the residents to be employed in profitable and satisfying tasks without bringing about the destruction of the natural assets that made the islands unique in the first place.

Ogasawara Airport, Phase One--Anijima, 1988-1996

Ever since reversion, the local Ogasawara authorities have pressed the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to construct an airport. But the smallness of the population, and the fact that construction in such a remote location would cost ten times more than elsewhere in Japan (and those costs would have to be borne by the Japanese taxpayer in general, rather than by the islanders), meant that the idea was repeatedly postponed. With the ‘bubble economy’ of the late 1980s, however, tax revenues soared and the resort development boom seemed irrepressible. In June 1988, then Tokyo Governor Shunichi Suzuki announced that an airport would be built on Anijima (Elder Brother Island). In 1991 the Ogasawara Airport plan was incorporated into the Ministry of Transport’s National Airport Development Plan, following a high-level political intervention by Ichiro Ozawa. Ozawa was at the time Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party and kingpin of the party’s Takeshita faction. Only the considerable political clout of such a key figure in public works development could have tipped the balance against bureaucratic reservations over the project’s financial viability.

Still, incorporation into the national airport plan was also predicated on a number of conditions relating to environment. On the face of it, the construction of an airport with an 1,800-meter runway on a completely uninhabited island--to be linked to the population center on Chichijima by a 500-meter rope bridge that would sway across a windswept and occasionally typhoon battered ocean--to meet the demands of a population smaller than that of some Tokyo high schools with neither a fishing industry nor agriculture on a scale sufficient to provide commercial justification, seemed implausible. But if the economics of Ogasawara Airport were fraught with problems, the environmental dimension was even more so and, in the end, proved intractable.

Opposition to the Anijima Airport plan came from both domestic and international environmental protection groups, and from Ogasawara residents who insisted that the environmental costs were too high and that there were realistic and preferable alternatives. They urged that proper attention be paid not just to the cost and environmental disruption posed by a large, conventional airport but also to possible alternatives: a new generation (hydrofoil) high speed ferry (the so-called ‘Techno Super Liner’); a new type of air transport by a civilian adaptation of the VTOL (vertical take-off and landing) military aircraft that would not require a long runway; a conventional seaplane service, such as used by VIPs visiting Ogasawara; or a helicopter service, perhaps one providing regular service to the nearby island of Io (known to Americans as Iwojima) which already boasts a 4,000-meter military runway, and connecting from there with regular flights to Tokyo (and perhaps also to Guam and other international routes).

It was in the end the bizarre fact that the empty, virtually waterless, mostly flat and rather unprepossessing island of Anijima was home to some rare--even unique-- shrubbery, and even more important to a unique species of endangered snail, the *katamaimai*, that proved decisive. Up until the 1990s, it would have seemed absurd to suggest that a Japanese project for airport construction might be derailed by a snail, but that is what happened as the snail became the hero of the conservationist campaign and Anijima came to be described in the national media as a 'snail paradise.' In January 1996, the Minister for the Environment, Sumio Iwatare, called on the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to reconsider its decision, and to give due weight to 'preservation of the ecological cycle and biodiversity.' The fact that the Anijima plan was cancelled out of deference to the *katamaimai* is surely evidence that thinking about questions of nature and development is beginning to change in late twentieth century Japan.

Ogasawara Airport, Phase Two--Shigureyama (Chichijima), 1998-

In its next phase, the Ogasawara Airport plan was referred back to advisory committees of the Tokyo government, first for environmental and then for comprehensive evaluation. A list of nine potential sites, five on Chichijima, two on Hahajima, one each on Ototojima and Mukojima, was considered, and in April 1998 a decision was announced. The best solution was said to be a site described by the name Shigureyama, slightly to the south of the center of Chichijima Island. It would involve extensive work over the years 2001 to 2008 to level a 1,720-meter strip of land across the island at a height of 230 meters above sea-level. Straddling the island at a point where it is only about 3 kilometers across from east to west, the airport would require that the top 100 meters or so would have to come off Mt. Tsutsuji, the mountain in the center of the island. It would thus transform the island's topography--on the face of it, an odd decision. Would such an airport really be less environmentally damaging than the one that was cancelled rather than dislocate the Anijima snails?

Like Anijima with its snails, the Shigureyama site possesses singular environmental riches. There are rare, but not unique, botanical specimens such as the 'Bonin peony' (*Munin botan*), and nesting places for rare birds such as the 'Ogasawara buzzard' (*Ogasawara nosuri*). The greatest headache, however, is the 'Bonin azalea' (*Munin tsutsuji*), one of about 50 Japanese varieties, whose sole remaining specimen happens to grow just below the summit of Mt. Tsutsuji that the airport construction would level. For over a decade Japan's horticultural experts have been struggling to replicate this particular species, taking hundreds of cuttings from it, but they have found that these will only take root when transplanted back to the immediate vicinity of the 'mother' plant. Both the consulting company advising the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and the government itself recognized that this azalea presented the biggest problem.

Chichijima's resident botanist and former high school teacher, Takaya Yasui, conducted an independent survey of the proposed airport site and found that 88 of the 217 plant species on the site are distinctive local species, including 27 that are classified as 'endangered,' and another five as being 'at some risk.' About a further 26 species, there is insufficient information to make a judgment. Yasui concluded that the mountain site is not only a

unique and outstanding topography in its own right and home to many endangered species, but a critical location for influencing the climate of the entire southern half of the island. The delicate interplay of mists and rain caused as clouds from the south buffet the mountain ridge between Mt. Tsutsuji and Mt. Tsutate might be significantly altered if the peaks were levelled and the valleys filled in, possibly changing weather conditions. As for the Bonin azalea, he surmises that the topographical and climatic conditions of Mt. Tsutsuji--of soil, mist, warmth, ground water flow, etc.--simply cannot be reproduced elsewhere.

Clearly, this privately produced study of the biota of the projected site differs greatly in its conclusions from that prepared for and relied on by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. A close reading reveals, however, that it differs even more strikingly in its methodology: whereas Yasui, the 'amateur,' applied objective and scientific criteria without introducing any prior assumptions into his study, the official, 'professional' analysts proceeded from the assumption that an airport *had* to be built. They therefore drew a distinction between 'ecological core areas' (*'seitaikei no kakushin chiiki'*) and non-core areas, and strove to find a location where the ecological impact could be *relatively* contained. Given the smallness of the island, it is questionable whether its already fragile ecology can be properly analyzed in such terms. It is equally questionable whether Shigureyama should be described as a non-core area. In fact, the final advisory committee report noted that the level of environmental difficulty of the chosen site was 'extremely high' (*'ritchi no konnando ga kiwamete takai'*) and that there were questions concerning the site's safety for arriving aircraft (*'unkomen kara wa, chakuriku ni nan ga aru'*) because of the common pattern of mists in the area.

Despite these reservations, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government adopted the report. If the Ministry of Transport ultimately decides the environmental and economic issues, plus the additional doubts about safety, make the site too problematic, the second choice of Mukojima is even more so. Mukojima is the most northerly of the whole Ogasawara group. It is uninhabited, more-or-less flat, with an area of only two and a half square kilometers, located about three hours by sea (70 kilometers) from the population center on Chichijima. It also contains the sole remaining breeding site for the 'black-footed' albatross. Whether on ecological or economic grounds, therefore, this too would seem a most unlikely site.

Future Prospects

At stake on these scattered and tiny islands is the common problem of late twentieth century Japan: how to evolve beyond the 'develop at all costs,' debt-financed, environmentally-careless imposition of monolithic metropolitan standards and patterns throughout the archipelago, into an ecologically-sensitive, regionally-differentiated, 'post-modern' civilization. The public works-centered structures of regional subordination to the bureaucratic will of Tokyo have suffocated local creativity throughout all of Japan's islands, sapping democracy and feeding dependency, alienation, indifference and corruption. These are also deeply rooted in Ogasawara, but they are being contested.

It is worth noting that the opponents of the Ogasawara Airport plans have produced a range of interesting, alternative ideas, not only on how to meet the social need for better

communication with the rest of Japan (briefly mentioned above), but also, and more importantly, about the desirable direction of development, and about values. The fundamental difference in their orientation is that it is rooted in the subjectivity of the island people themselves. They want to build upon the existing 'anti-resort,' eco-tourist, small-scale kinds of development that already, in a modest way, flourish on the islands, celebrating difference rather than striving to eliminate it. They would like more communication, not only with Tokyo, but also westward with the other Pacific islands and the wider world. A tax-free status for the islands, they believe, might do more to stimulate the stagnant agricultural and fishing sectors than the projected airport.

The lesson they draw from the experience of the Galapagos Islands is the slightly paradoxical one that the best development is that which conserves, that numbers of visitors should be kept deliberately low, although the 'value-added' component of the visitor experience should be high and heavily dependent on the assistance of local specialist guides. The islanders also stress the uniquely multicultural roots of the Ogasawara life, where roughly one-tenth of the population is descended from early European and American settlers, many known by 'katakana' (Japanese syllabary) names and their families going back up to seven generations. Visitors to Ogasawara are unanimous that it is precisely the differences from the rest of Japan that they cherish about island life. The sea voyage may be long, but it allows for a gradual process of preparation to enter a different, non-homogenized world. For that, many are prepared to return again and again.

Is it too much to see in such thinking the germ of the kinds of 'post-modern,' democratic creativity that planners, politicians and academics in Tokyo insist the country desperately needs to nurture? Might the time be approaching when Ogasawara could be a model for the rest of Japan instead of the last place upon which to stamp the absolute sovereignty of the central bureaucracy?

Note: Main sources on the Ogasawara Islands, apart from occasional articles in the Japanese media are Ogasawara shizen kankyo kenkyukai, ed., *Ogasawara no shizen--Toyo no Galapagos* [Nature in Ogasawara--the Galapagos of East Asia], Kokin shoin, 1992; and Tomoko Bashomatsu (with photographs by Hiroshi Kawata), "Ogasawara shoto henkan 25 shunen oubei-kei imin no kaitakushi" [A History of Pioneering by the Descendants of the European and American Settlers on the Ogasawara Islands on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Reversion of the Islands to Japan], *Asahi Gurafu*, November-December, 1993, pp. 32-41. The author also wishes to thank the Ogasawara Village Office, Mr. Hiroshi Yamagata, editor of the *Ogasawara Shimbun*, and Mr. Takaya Yasui of the Ogasawara Wildlife Research Society for making available various materials during his visit to the Ogasawaras in March, 1999.

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