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Identity and Resistance in Okinawa (review)

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Identity and Resistance in Okinawa. By Matthew Allen. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2002. xi, 265 pages. \$70.00, cloth; \$29.95, paper.

Reviewed by
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Amid the small boom of Okinawa-related books that have recently appeared, Matthew Allen's *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa* stands out as the best English-language study to date in depicting the diversity and complexity within Japan's southernmost prefecture. Writing what he calls a "'bottom-up' analysis of how aspects of identity are produced and reproduced within Okinawa" (p. 16), Allen accomplishes this feat by solidly grounding his discussion of identity and subject-formation in the everyday practices of the people of Kumejima, one of the outlying islands of the Ryukyu Archipelago due west of Naha across the East China Sea. His choice of margin on the margins as his research site is a smart one, for it helps steer him clear of the ruts too often followed by positing an abstract and predetermined political-cultural entity of "Okinawa" from which a single "Okinawan identity" presumed flows. As he cogently sums up this problem, "Ascribing an identity to 'Okinawans' on the basis of how they are seen politically or how they are marketed to Japanese tourists as commodities, has limited usefulness. Below the performance of protest and tourism is a plethora of voices, which in many cases share only a putative identity as Okinawan citizens" (p. 234).

To get at those voices, Allen combines a historian's diachronic perspective with an ethnographer's synchronic sensibility to situate multiple agencies and activities that contribute to the dynamic creation of often ambivalent identities in Kumejima. While occasionally tapping into local historical archives, the bulk of Allen's data stems from his fieldwork as a resident in the Nakachi hamlet in the Gushikawa district of Kumejima. His position as a participant-observer comes across strongly throughout the text as we learn—often in much detail—of his and his family's activities as members of the Nakachi community. Such quasi-autobiographical accounts are sprinkled in among analyses based on the numerous interviews he conducted with school teachers and administrators, farmers, psychiatrists and psychiatric patients, nurses, office workers, tour operators, a priestess, a shaman, and others. Well-articulated social theory (of which Pierre Bourdieu's work is most prominent) sharpens his analysis, although at times its application to certain cases seems heavy-handed.

What generally results from Allen's effort is a more satisfying than usual

sense of how certain real people within Okinawa Prefecture act to identify themselves, sometimes in tandem but often in tension with larger imagined communities such as "Okinawa." In short, starting from the "bottom-up" restores diverse individual and small-group agency to an Okinawa that is too often (ironically) cast as univocal and homogenous when turned to as a site of multicultural difference within Japan or of political resistance against Tokyo-endorsed U.S. military bases there. On this point of depicting a complex of identities in Okinawa, Allen's work bears comparison with Ann Ruth Keyso's refreshing depiction of three generations of Okinawan women in *Women of Okinawa: Nine Voices from a Garrison Island* (Cornell University Press, 2000) and Tony Barrell and Rick Tanaka's offbeat collection of interviews and short essays in *Okinawa Dreams OK* (Die Gestalten Verlag, 1998), but Allen's study possesses more academic rigor and deeper analysis.

Allen organizes his analyses of various sites of everyday practice and identity formation in Kumejima into three parts. The first revolves around issues of history and memory; the second takes up mental health and shamanism, and the third briefly treats tourism. While any one of the nine constituent chapters could stand alone given their diverse range of content, Allen keeps them tied together with sustained attention to the processes of identity formation in each case. The seemingly eclectic nature of the cases he treats is in fact one of the greatest strengths of the volume because it concretely displays the many-layered and multivocal nature of Kume/Okinawa identity and mitigates against a simplistic notion of Okinawan homogeneity in relation to mainland Japan. The production and dissemination of historical narratives of the massacre of Kume islanders by Japanese forces after the Battle of Okinawa, the genealogy of natives and newcomers to Kume, local speech contests among communities on Kumejima, the position of *yuta* (shamans) in the treatment of schizophrenia, the marketing of the island to mainland Japanese tourists—these all work together to put empirical flesh on the bare bones of theory.

Allen is at his best when counterpointing theoretical framework (which he perhaps reminds us of a bit too often) with empirical demonstration, whether the latter comes in the form of historical research or, more often, through an ethnographic thick description (which he perhaps sometimes lays on a bit too thick—more on that later). It is no easy task, for example, to relate the performance of schoolchildren in a "dialect rally" meaningfully to Bourdieu's concept of regional identity and political power, but Allen manages to do so without eliciting chuckles. Similarly, Allen enlists Bourdieu and Michel Foucault in appropriate doses to analyze, among other things, the status and role of *yuta* and their clients in Kumejima and Okinawa at large.

The "resistance" of the book's title comes mainly in the micropractices

that Kume people variously carve out for themselves in face of pressures from larger discourses. For example, educational activities in Kumejima—from organized acts of remembrance of Japanese violence against Kume people at the end of the war to the active promotion and transmission of local language, history, and culture—nominally fall within the province of prefectural boards of education and ultimately the Ministry of Education (Monbushō), but are pursued rather freely under the direction of the island's local boards of education:

Believing that local culture, history, and society should form the center of a person's identity, many local officials attempt to balance Monbusho's views of Japanese history and culture with social education initiatives that recognize the place of Okinawa and Kumejima in both these areas. This orientation toward the local (and in some cases it is highly parochial, reflecting pride in one's district, or even hamlet) informs a type of ideological resistance to attempted homogenizing influences of the Ministry of Education. (p. 110)

Allen does not fully indicate to what extent this “type of ideological resistance” becomes mobilized into other forms of practical action to effect change, but intimates that this “hybridized form of social education” works to strengthen local community by making learning more meaningful for locals and by producing a citizenry actively engaged in creating a sense of the public in Kumejima rather than having it handed to them. Kume youngsters might not always willingly participate in this social ideal, as the need to crack the whip over them to drill for the island's dialect rally reveals, but at least the whip-cracking is by and for local power/knowledge, an arguably worthy goal within the broader picture of power relations among local, prefectural, and national authorities.

As Allen demonstrates in his novel discussion of the treatment of schizophrenia in Kumejima, mental health care on this periphery of the periphery of Japan is also hybridized between local knowledge and modern institutional medicine. A large percentage of Kume people who suffer from mental disturbances, especially those who loosely fall under the category of schizophrenic, seek the services of a local *yuta* in place of or in combination with modern psychiatric treatment. From the viewpoint of psychiatric practice, *yuta* themselves display symptoms of schizophrenia, having been marked in local traditional discourse as *saadaka unumari* (born of high spirit birth rank) through a notification by the gods in the form of illness, strange dreams and occurrences, or hallucinations and surviving the condition of *kami daari* (revenge of the gods) which manifests itself in ways that can resemble schizophrenia. A *yuta* is thus one who, rather than seeking a cure through modern medicine, brings her (*yuta* are usually female) condition

under control within a regime of local knowledge and parlays it into a traditional profession. Putting aside the efficacy of *yuta*—and that of modern psychiatric care—this form of cure-seeking and care-giving represents for Allen another instance of resistance to homogenizing institutions. However, the meaning and value of such “resistance” are unclear. Although certain cultural and societal value can indeed be attached to the preservation/persistence of *yuta* in Okinawa, the relatively high number of people in Kumejima with mental afflictions and attendant disruptions in family life throws into question the overall benefit. To put it differently, not all resistance is healthy resistance, a point Allen does not seem to entertain.

The few limitations of this otherwise deft study are related to this sympathetic positioning of analyst to analysand which is detectable throughout the text. Allen does not exactly experience transference in the Freudian sense, but rather confronts the classic problem of an ethnographer in the field: the modern discipline dictates time spent close to one’s subject—rather than speculation from afar—to engage and understand the deep structure of the *habitus*, but how close is too close? At what point do one’s relations to the local turn from benefit to burden? When does thick description become too thick? Indeed, what in part makes this book so appealing is its detailed description of the local life of real people over unsubstantiated generalizations about “the Okinawans.” The verisimilitude thus created captures the reader, but Allen’s narrative does risk becoming burdened by local color and (auto)biography that at times appears superfluous and tends to slow the flow of the argument. Still, I hesitate labeling this trait an outright flaw on Allen’s part; it may well be the unavoidable dilemma of ethnographic knowledge, even after its modern and postmodern turns. Perhaps the solution here is a more vigilant editor. In any case, Allen could be more explicit about his position and the risks it entails, even if it might mean wearing his sympathy for the local on his sleeve and exposing the rough scaffolding behind the smooth surface of his text. While the frames of representation informing Allen’s analysis necessarily submerge as his vivid portraits of Kumejima emerge, it is ultimately the joint task of author and reader to keep the artifice of those frames in mind if only to maintain a critical perspective.

One very particular case in point is the cover photo of the book, taken by the author: a young boy facing the viewer with tear-filled eyes next to an elderly woman looking at an angle over him with lips parted as if on the verge of utterance. As a mere representation of the book’s content, it is an odd choice of scene because it applies only to parts of the story within. But it is not a mere representation of content. Rather, it denotes an interpretation or statement on that content and implies a certain relation (pathos) to Allen’s subject. Moreover, the photo is no doubt taken out of context to serve this purpose as symbol. Allen provides no caption or explanation of the photo’s

scene or of the images of the people within. What are their names and where exactly do they live? What is the relation of boy to woman? Why is the boy crying? Is it because he has learned of the massacre of his ancestors at the hands of Japanese soldiers (unlikely given his apparent age)? Is it because Nakamura-san, the leader of the children's association, just cracked him around the ear to bring order to the dialect rally practice? Does he miss his schizophrenic mother who has gone to the main island of Okinawa for modern psychiatric treatment? Is he being deprived of an afternoon snack? Or is he simply upset at having his photo taken? The point here is that the boy and the woman are, ironically, objectified in this photo in a way that runs counter to Allen's purpose in the text, which in turn alerts the reader to the selective setting of scenes in this or any other ethnography.

But don't judge this book by its cover. Despite these few lapses, Allen is fully aware of the problems of trying to tackle the issue of identity and of the difficulties facing ethnographic representation. Given these inherent difficulties, he does a marvelous job—perhaps the best possible—representing Kumejima to the reader and demonstrating convincingly the concentric and overlapping circles of identity that Kume people inhabit and the local knowledges they produce and consume. And he maintains an admirably accessible level of sophistication while doing so. Collectively, the well-selected and engaging cases Allen examines in Kumejima go a long way to correct simplified pictures of the complex place that is Okinawa. That fact alone makes the book a must-read for anyone interested in the place. There are many more sites throughout Okinawa Prefecture that invite similar treatment, and other researchers across disciplines would do well to take their inspiration from this book.

Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History. By Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002. xvii, 411 pages. \$45.00, cloth; \$20.00, paper.

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The lives of Japanese "student" soldiers who took part in the kamikaze attacks on U.S. warships in the Pacific during World War II is the fascinating and original topic that forms the subject of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's latest book. She shows very clearly from the diaries and letters of these combatants that many of them were highly educated, sensitive, young men who