Positioning American Japanese in the Context of Japanese and Okinawan Nationalism and Ethnicity

By Stephanie Otani

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Positioning American Japanese in the Context of Japanese and Okinawan Nationalism and Ethnicity

By Stephanie Otani

I have the right...
Not to justify my existence in this world.
Not to keep the races separate within me.
Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity.
Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy...
To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify...
To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial...
To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.

~from the Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People, by Maria P.P. Root

They wear war in their faces. They are the symbols of foreign domination. They embody the transgression of sacred boundaries. In Okinawa, people of Japanese and American descent (or Amerasians)\(^1\) are first and foremost foreigners, no matter how Japanese or Okinawan their language, customs, mannerisms, or worldviews may be. Before they even speak, their face and skin signal to people the circumstances of their births. The rights claimed by Root in the “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People”\(^2\) ultimately culminate in the right to first and foremost be understood as a human being as opposed to racial anomaly or mistake. As of now, these rights are insubstantial claims for those who carry signs of American parentage in their appearance throughout Okinawa and the rest of Japan. Instead, they continue to be externally categorized as *gaijin* or “foreigners” in their own homes.

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1 For the purposes of this paper I will use American Japanese and Amerasian interchangeably to mean a child with one biological parent who was born in Japan and one biological parent who is born in America.

Japan does not contain the linguistic nor legal infrastructure to accommodate them under the idea of Japaneseness. Within Japan, Okinawa is a particularly interesting and relevant site to explore issues of cultural and political legitimacy and conflicts between internal and external identity. The historical experience of Okinawa and its struggle for political sovereignty in international affairs mirrors the experience of American Japanese and their struggle to find a sense of national belonging. It is because of the contentious physical and political space Okinawa has historically inhabited that Amerasians struggle to fit into a larger Okinawan or Japanese identity.

Amerasians Within the Broader Context of Japan

In this section I will discuss the overall Japanese attitude toward multiracial people by examining the terms used to refer to multiracial people and the legal status of international couples. These two aspects of Japanese society reflect its reluctance to incorporate ethnic difference.

Terminology

I have the right... to create a vocabulary to communicate about being biracial.

The first popular term coined to describe multiracial people was ainoko (間の子) literally meaning “child of mixture,” but translated as “half-breed.” It is a pejorative term also used for animals that came into use after World War II, when children were born typically to Japanese women and American servicemen. Although there were some marriages before then, the official

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3 It has been widely established in academia that race is a socially constructed way of organizing people into broad social categories based on physical characteristics, particularly tied to a certain region. I will use this definition of race, and in the context of Japan, refer to multiracial to mean someone who is of Japanese and non-Japanese ancestry.

opposition to marriages was not lifted until 1952 (also the year the American occupation of
Japan ended). This allowed many US servicemen to leave without having to take responsibility
for children. Thus, *ainoko* is often associated with impurity, poverty, and abandonment.\(^5\) It is
interesting to note that the first kanji character used in *ainoko* (間) can be translated as “in
between.” This suggests that these people were in a liminal space between two races and
countries that were largely unreceptive and exclusive. Thus, the children had no ownership of a
physical space or a racial category.

Rapidly increasing globalization since World War II and the Occupation has changed the
popular image of American Japanese into the child of a businessman, and someone who can
successfully navigate his way through two cultures in order to succeed in a world where
important business is done across national boundaries\(^6\). In 1979, the UN’s International Year of
the Child, the term *kokusaiji*, literally “international child,” was coined in order to celebrate
children of international parentage. While this is a much more positive image than the *ainoko*, it
also says that their racial difference can only be realized when interacting with the outside.
Though their difference is not necessarily seen as a negative thing, they are not fully recognized
as Japanese. Their greatest strengths cannot be achieved within Japan, but in the international
space, where cultural, language, or physical national boundaries are being crossed. This partial
belonging is also highlighted by the fact that economically and politically Japan turned inward,

\(^5\) Murphy-Shigematsu, ref. 4 above
\(^6\) While a new multiracial archetype may have emerged that did not involve a soldier-Japanese woman narrative, the
stereotype’s prevalence was dependent upon the geopolitical context. As I will argue later, because of the history of
Okinawa, the stereotypical narrative of the mixed race person in the Okinawa prefecture is still the child of an
American soldier and an Okinawan woman.
became resistant to immigrant labor, and shied away from international relations that had completely devastated them during World War II.\(^7\)

The most popular term now used to refer to biracial people is haafu (ハーフ), from the English word “half.” The strong presence of haafu in entertainment has led to a glamorized, exoticized image (especially for those who have white features) of Japanese with mixed ancestry. Many celebrity multiethnic entertainers exist outside of the social boundaries and discrimination that apply to most Amerasians, particularly those of African American ancestry.\(^8\) Outside of sports and entertainment, American Japanese of African American ancestry are considered culturally inferior.\(^9\) Otherwise, haafu is a generally positive term that escapes a lot of the negative connotations of the past. However, the term haafu still implies that she does not fully embody Japaneseness. No matter the positive associations with haafu, they are still portrayed as the Other, unable to become fully Japanese. The glamorized image of haafu objectifies American Japanese by bringing their otherness to the forefront.

In Okinawa specifically, the term shima haafu (島ハーフ) or “island half” is used. Stereotypically, a shima haafu is the child of a lower class woman with loose morals, who may have worked at a bar or as a hostess and a soldier in search of a good time. The shima haafu is similar to the tragic mulatto in the United States, fatherless and left to struggle in poverty. One of the main distinctions of a shima haafu is his inability to speak English, a sign of living in a “real” family.\(^10\) In order to ameliorate the effects of this negative stereotype, a new term has arisen.

In reaction to the term haafu, the term daburu (ダブル) from the English word “double,” was used to emphasize the fact that they fully belong to two groups, and that they have twice as

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\(^9\) Murphy-Shigematsu, ref. 4 above, pp. 212-213

\(^10\) Johnson, Akemi. *Nichibei Times*. 
much culture as monoethnic and monoracial people. It calls to mind the image of children that come from stable and intact families, with access to two different worlds and groups of people. This term has been a source of empowerment for mixed race people who have experienced discrimination. It is interesting that people who have not been raised with an American parent in the home also find the idea of having two cultures empowering. This could be because in Japan, there is a common belief that the ability to appreciate and fully practice culture and language is transmitted through blood. This essentialism is the reason that American Japanese are considered foreign, but in this case it is reversed in order to justify positive claims to another cultural dimension. Though this is the most positive term to describe Amerasians, it is not commonly used because people often find that they are not fully accepted as Japanese.\footnote{Murphy-Shigematsu, ref. 4 above, p. 214}

Furthermore, it may pressure mixed race children into having unrealistic expectations of their ability to express or outwardly display their “Americanness,” particularly the ability to speak English.\footnote{Fieldwork, Okinawa. I spent ten weeks in Okinawa observing and conducting formal and informal qualitative interviews with American Okinawan biracial children and adults.} While children may feel a pressure to create an inorganic connection to the United States (those who did not grow up with their fathers in particular) by trying to learn English, it is a much better alternative to being associated with the *shima haafu* stereotype.\footnote{Johnson, 10 ref. above, Fieldwork, Okinawa.}

*Legal Status*

*I have the right... not to keep the races separate within me.*

Japanese citizenship laws are not *jus soli*, meaning that an individual born in Japan does not automatically qualify for citizenship. Historically, nationality laws were based on paternity, so children without Japanese citizenship were living as foreigners in Japan. The only way that an
American Japanese child (with a Japanese mother) could obtain citizenship was if the American father did not acknowledge his paternity. Children born to legally married couples were granted US citizenship. Legal restrictions complicated the status of mixed race children until the nationality law was revised in 1985. Even now, though it is possible to have dual citizenship, the nationality law is written under the supposition that “a person can only properly be a citizen of only one state and that a state can protect only citizens who are duty-bound to it and no other.” Currently, Japanese with dual citizenship must choose nationality with a single country and renounce the other by the age of twenty-two (or within two years of naturalizing at the age twenty or older). Through these laws it becomes apparent that the Japanese government wanted to protect the Japanese people by restricting the race of Japanese citizens. There was also a need to “protect” Japanese women by making it harder for any biracial offspring from being considered Japanese. The ultimate penetration of the Japanese nation is the domination of its women, which was not condoned or accepted during a time when Japan was devastated by warfare with the US. In order to preserve Japanese identity, the government made it difficult for the people who are the end result of the corruption of Japanese blood to be recognized as citizens. Even though laws have changed and have made it possible to be recognized as Japanese, the forced allegiance to a single country forces them to deny belonging to the United States (should they choose Japanese citizenship). There is still the idea that allegiance to two races and nations (which are virtually the same according Japanese beliefs), cannot fully exist within the same body.

14 Murphy-Shigematsu, ref. 4 above
Despite terms like *daburu* or *kokusaiji* that positively emphasize the internationality of the individual, the idea that one can only truly belong to one nation still prevails. Though they have grown more inclusive, the racialized, blood-based legal qualifications for citizenship enforce a sense of otherness upon American Japanese (as well as other minorities such as Korean Japanese) by emphasizing a “pure” Japanese ideal.

**The Okinawa-Japan Relationship**

I will now turn to the prefecture of Okinawa and its relationship with Japan to provide context for the American Japanese experience. The insecure status of Okinawa in the political body of Japan is a direct result Japanese politics and racial ideology.

*Strategy and the Desirability of Okinawa*

The kingdom of Ryukyu was a chain of islands to the south of Japan between Kyushu and Taiwan that consisted of four main island groups: Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. The Ryukyuans are considered ethnically distinct, descending from the Sundonants, or Proto-Mongoloid peoples as opposed the mainstream Japanese Yamato race, that descended from the Sindonants or New Mongoloids.¹⁷ Ryukyuans also maintained a distinct language and culture from the Japanese. The kingdom existed independently and was successful in trade with China and Japan. Though it was independent, it was under the quasi-rule and subordinate to both countries.¹⁸ Ryukyan rule lasted for four and a half centuries until 1871. Japan began to partake in imperialism like the Western powers, and Okinawa’s close proximity and position in relation to Southeast Asia and Taiwan made it a very strategic asset. In 1871, the Japanese

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¹⁸ Taira, ref. 13 above, p. 156
government used the death of 54 of 66 shipwrecked Miyako islanders as a way to acquire Okinawa. The government claimed that the travelers were Japanese, and their claim was recognized as legitimate on the international stage.\(^{19}\) Though China was not receptive to the Japanese acquisition of Okinawa, they were also ill equipped to counter the Japanese government’s maneuvers. \(^{20}\) Okinawa, then, became the object of Japan’s displays of imperial prowess.

The predominant idea of Japaneseness is referred to as the “monoethnic myth”—that the Japanese are made up of one race and are contained neatly within the coterminous boundaries of the physical and political state.\(^{21}\) Japan still has yet to reconcile its image with the existence of minorities and its multiethnic population, especially politically. As I will discuss later, the wishes of the Okinawan people have not been at the forefront in policymakers’ minds when writing or enforcing laws that affect Okinawan citizens. The idea of Japaneseness also had to do with location; the core of Japaneseness was believed to be in the geographical center of Japan, where the Emperor resided.\(^{22}\) Given their ethnic and physical isolation from Japan, Okinawans are not considered completely socially or culturally Japanese. As Koji Taira writes, “We consider the degradation of Okinawan identity during the period of 1879-1945 a defining characteristic of Okinawan-Japanese relations.” \(^{23}\) He goes on to argue that the pig-based diet was used as a basis to treat Okinawans as culturally inferior. That being said, scholars attempted to craft a narrative to weave the history of the Okinawan and Japanese people together. However, this was most

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\(^{19}\) Toshiaki, Considering Okinawa as a Frontier, 28
\(^{20}\) Taira, ref. 13 above, p. 156
\(^{23}\) Taira, ref. 13 above, p. 144
likely done in order to come up with a framework or narrative to justify the Japanese annexation of Okinawa in a way that Okinawans would accept.

The first annexation of Okinawa by the Japanese government ended with the Battle of Okinawa—the only ground battle fought in Japan\textsuperscript{24}—in June of 1945. This battle ended in the death of 25\% of the Okinawan population. Twenty-eight thousand Okinawan soldiers and civilians in the military and 94,000 civilian residents made up 61\% of the all the deaths on both sides.\textsuperscript{25} The death toll paints a grim picture of how many human lives the Japanese military was willing to sacrifice in order to stay in the War even though defeat was imminent. During the days of desperation towards the end of the battle, Japanese soldiers stole Okinawan civilians’ food and drove them out of their homes and hiding places in caves and tombs, saving their own lives at the expense of the people. The Japanese army forced civilians to commit suicide so the would not be captured by the US military.\textsuperscript{26} The memory of the Battle of Okinawa that still haunts the island’s conscience, and has made many opposed to militarism, symbolized today by military bases and the thousands of servicemen stationed in Okinawa.

The American Occupation post World War II also brings into question whether Japan valued Okinawa as a part of the nation or as leverage in international relations. US Occupation officially ended in 1952, but only on the mainland and the larger islands; Okinawa remained under the US military jurisdiction for an additional twenty years.\textsuperscript{27} The Japanese agreed to keep military bases in Okinawa despite the people’s aversion to war and militarism because it was distant from the Japanese mainland. This arrangement allowed the Japanese to comply with

\textsuperscript{26} Fieldwork, Okinawa. This information was gathered at the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum.
America’s wishes but still remain minimally affected by the presence of the US military.\footnote{28}{Higa, Mikio. "Okinawa: Recent Political Developments." 
Okinawa: Recent Political Developments 3 (1963): 416} The US was and still is interested in Okinawa because its proximity to Korea, Southeast Asia, and Russia has made it even more valuable since the Cold War began.\footnote{29}{Higa, ref. 23 above}

Japan has used its control of Okinawa as a way to prove its dominance in Asia and deference to the West while neglecting to incorporate Okinawans socially and culturally. The construction of a Japanese national identity that does not include Okinawans has put them in a place where they must adopt and/or emphasize Japaneseness and deemphasize Okinawaness in order to be incorporated into the mainstream and avoid inferior social status.

\textbf{Danger and Resistance: The US-Okinawa Relationship and Military Bases}

Seventy-five percent of US military facilities in Japan are located in Okinawa, and bases occupy 20 percent of the land on the main island.\footnote{30}{Inoue, Masamichi S., John Purves, and Mark Selden. "Okinawa Citizens, US Bases, and the Security of Asia." Economic 
& Political Weekly 33 (1998): 264} American Occupation and the continuing presence of the military bases has led to Okinawan organizing and advocacy for equitable treatment and more sovereignty in political affairs. The movement to actively claim civil rights and better conditions from the US military and Japanese government cannot be divorced from the construction of Okinawan identity.

One major grievance about the military bases is that they are ruining the environmental conditions for citizens. Warfare and later the construction of military bases and hotels have destroyed beaches, ancient shell mounds, and old graves.\footnote{31}{Asato, ref. 20 above, p. 236} Okinawan culture places a very strong importance on the honoring of the dead, and the sacredness of the graves and shell mound sites were violated in order to accommodate military. The Japanese government also proposed a
heliport in Nago, a city in the northwest part of the main island. The construction of the heliport would endanger a coral reef and threaten the dugongs, sea animals that inhabit the coast of Okinawa. The city council immediately passed a bill against the heliport, and a referendum ended with 78 percent of voters opposing the heliport. A campaign calling for a stop to the construction was organized and reached Parliament in Tokyo. However, the organizing efforts were not successful, as the expansions to the base have continued in the same area.\textsuperscript{32}

Another major problem for Okinawans is the restructuring of the economy to support the bases. In order to accommodate the huge influx of servicemen, the Okinawan labor market changed dramatically. More administrative and service industries emerged in order to cater to the needs of the bases. Brothels and prostitution also increased in popularity with the advent of US military forces.\textsuperscript{33} Okinawa has also been created into a popular vacation destination, complete with beautiful beaches and seaside resorts. In order to stimulate the economy and encourage tourism, Prime Minister Hashimoto celebrated the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan by creating a free trade zone system that helped corporations and duty free shops and simplifying visa regulations and initiating tax incentives. Many infrastructural and public works projects sponsored by the government have been implemented to aid the tourist industry. Like the construction of military bases, the development of resorts and commercial business has also violated the natural landscape.

A third grievance held by Okinawans is the prevalence of crimes committed by American servicemen. The classic case cited by writers who study Okinawa and the “base problem” is the rape of a 12 year-old Okinawan girl who was kidnapped, beaten, and raped by three American servicemen in 1995. The incident became an international crisis. The crime was made into a

\textsuperscript{32} Inoue, et.al. ref. 25 above
symbol of the US exploitation of Okinawa, and galvanized citizens to actively oppose the US military presence. However, although servicemen have been involved in gruesome and disturbing crimes, the proportion of crimes committed by American military is actually smaller than their proportion of the total Okinawan population. Crimes committed by servicemen, particularly those of African American descent, are the ones that are covered most often in the media.³⁴

Okinawa has not had sovereignty for over 100 years, and now it is being made to accommodate the interests of two governments interested in maintaining a strong presence in international affairs. The multi-pronged maltreatment of Okinawans inspired the reversion movement to pressure the US to return Okinawa to Japan, which began as early as 1951. Though the Japanese did not do a thorough job of incorporating Okinawa culturally or socially, Okinawans were willing to support reversion to Japan at the cost of the absence of the United States military. Anti-base activism is a means for Okinawans to a) reclaim their space by restricting the construction of bases, b) reshape the job market by de-commercializing and de-industrializing the economy, and c) influence the population’s demographics by decreasing the sexual interactions between Americans and Japanese. Anti-base and anti-American military sentiment puts many people of Okinawan and American parentage in an uneasy position because they can see and understand the problems caused by the bases and simultaneously acknowledge that they are alive because of the US military presence.

Defining Selves, Distancing Others: American Japanese Relationship to Okinawan Identity

*I have the right... not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity*

I have attempted to point out the contentious position that Okinawa holds within Japanese and US politics. Okinawa must emphasize its connection to Japan in order to be valued to the state to be protected from foreign domination, since independence is not a viable option given its economic condition.\(^{35}\) Yet, in the midst of the transfers of power between Japan and the United States, the Okinawan culture has remained strong. In *Dancing With the Dead*, Christopher Nelson discusses a common way of thinking for Okinawans: “‘Be Japanese, by all means, but never forget that you are Okinawan.’” Which is to say, so long as you remain Okinawan, you will be at best, ambiguously Japanese.”\(^{36}\) The practice and promotion of Okinawan culture is never neutral; it only distances the Okinawans from other groups, since the Japanese model of nationhood is homogeneous and ethnic minorities aren’t formally recognized. As evidenced in this quote, there is a social binary in which individuals are either Japanese or not Japanese and the emphasis of a minority culture results in alienation from the mainstream. The resistance toward modernization in order to adapt to the growing presence of servicemen and tourists resulted in support for pre-war Okinawan social structures of communalism and agriculture. In order to maintain their own cultural autonomy, Okinawa must set itself in opposition to the US and military-related matters in constructing its identity, leaving little room for Amerasian people.

While Okinawans wrestle with the perception that they are not Japanese both politically and culturally, American Okinawans have a further struggle. Like monoracial Okinawans, their legitimacy as members of the Japanese nation is also compromised because of their racial and

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ethnic backgrounds. However, they are even further removed from Japaneseness because they cannot physically pass as Okinawan. According to the majority of Okinawans’ understanding of race and ethnicity, people who do not fit the physical criteria are unable to understand and perform Okinawan culture and the Japanese language. Nearly every day they are asked if they can speak Japanese, asked where they are from, and complimented on their Japanese skills. Service people from restaurants to airports will approach them using English, with English menus or extremely simplified Japanese. After years and years of being treated as an outsider, it is very difficult to feel a sense of belonging to society or a sense of ownership over their environment, even for people who have lived in Okinawa for the majority or all of their lives.

American Japanese exist because of the mixing and blurring of political boundary lines caused by military bases and military occupation. It is difficult to support a pro-Okinawan, anti-base stance without condemning the power-imbalanced relationships between American servicemen and Okinawan women and thus, their American Japanese children. Indeed, for some American Japanese it is very difficult to take a complete anti-base stance. They may acknowledge and disapprove of the damages bases cause, but without bases, they would not exist.

Conclusion

By looking at the example of Amerasian children and their status in the context of Okinawa, we can see how the interpretations of others’ ethnic and racial backgrounds cannot be divorced from a historical or political context. Status within racial hierarchy is assigned according to the values of a society. In the case of Okinawa, the identity that will help the

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37 Fieldwork, Okinawa.
38 Fieldwork, Okinawa.
islands establish the greatest degree of cultural and political autonomy is the one that will be emphasized. Until the political climate has changed, it is most likely that American Japanese children will not be able to escape discrimination or being labeled as “other.” When this is achieved, then the rights that Root discusses in “The Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” and their acknowledgement as people first, not racial deviants.
References


Murphy-Shigematsu, Stephen. ""The invisible man" and other narratives of living in the


