

## **Okinawa: Beyond the Ethnic Other**

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### **1. Introduction**

Discussions of ethnic minorities often focus on a search for roots and tradition, and the assertion of ethnic and cultural difference vis-à-vis the majority. The collection of student readings presented here questions such dichotomies by focusing on the identity struggles of Okinawans. They show how and why it has been difficult for Okinawans to assert themselves in opposition to the Japanese nation. During World War II, Okinawa was the site of a major battle between Japanese and American troops, and Okinawans were also subjected to atrocities by the Japanese army. This history of conflict and oppression lingers to this day, making the question of Okinawa's place within the Japanese nation-state a complex one. Okinawans are at once "Okinawans" and Japanese citizens. This unit may be helpful in moving class discussion beyond assertions of ethnic origins and culture and may also help students begin to question the "majority"/"minority" dichotomy that shapes so much of our thinking in the US today.

### **2. Audience and Uses**

This unit lends itself to general discussions of ethnicity in Japan and elsewhere and could be taught in undergraduate classes in history, sociology, and other disciplines. It could be used in a Japanese history class, in a class on postwar Japanese society, as well as in courses on ethnicity, race, and nationhood. Because of the theme of war, atrocities, and historical narrative, it also lends itself to discussions of nationhood, nationalism, war, and peace.

This unit can be used by itself, taught in conjunction with the unit "Multiethnic Japan: Nation-building and National Identity" (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/multiethnic-japan.html>), or in combination with the following other units on race, ethnicity, and nationality in East Asia:

- Nationalisms in East Asia (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/nationalisms.html>)
- Race and Ethnicity in Asian America (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity.html>)
- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity: America, Korea, and Biracial Koreans (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/korean-race-ethnicity.html>)
- Nationality, Nationalisms, and Identity in Contemporary China
- Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Contemporary China: Redefining “Chineseness” (forthcoming on the ExEAS website)
- “Chinese” Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/chinese-perspectives.html>)

For summary information on each of these units, see “Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia” (<http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity-intro.html>.)

### **3. Historical Background**

The Okinawan archipelago is a site of a contested history and ambivalent identities. Before its annexation to Japan by the Meiji state in 1879, Okinawa was known as the Ryûkyû Kingdom, an independent entity with a distinctive culture, dialect, and history. In 1945, Okinawa was the site of the Battle of Okinawa, during which more than one fourth of the population was killed. After the war, Okinawa was occupied by the US much longer than the Japanese mainland. Okinawa’s reversion to Japan in 1972 however did not bring smooth integration. Living standards in Okinawa remain low, and Okinawans continue to face discrimination on the mainland. Home to 75% of US bases in Japan, Okinawa today continues to have a problematic relationship with both Japan and the US.

### **4. Reference Works for Instructors**

\*\*\*     Most important  
\*\*     Recommended

\*\*\*Taira, Koji. 1997. “Troubled national identity: Ryukyuans/Okinawans.” Pp. 140-177 in *Japan’s Minorities*, edited by Michael Weiner. London: Routledge.

Useful background and introduction to Okinawa for instructors or students.

\*\* *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1983.  
[Available online through subscription: [www.ency-japan.com](http://www.ency-japan.com)]

See the article on “Okinawa.”

\*\*Refsing, Kirsten. 2003. “In Japan but not of Japan.” Pp. 48-64 in *Ethnicity in Asia*, edited by Colin Mackerras. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Good outline of the major minority groups and the logic of exclusion in contemporary Japan.

## **5. Student Readings**

This unit can be taught in one three-hour meeting or in two class sessions over the course of one week. If you divide the readings into two sessions, the first could introduce Okinawa (using Hein and Selden's introduction or Taira's article) and the second could discuss Allen and Figal or only Figal. If you prefer to assign a smaller amount of reading per session, select readings according to the star\* system:

- \*\*\* Most important
- \*\* Recommended
- \* Optional

\*\*\*Laura Hein and Mark Selden. 2003. "Culture, Power, and Identity in Contemporary Okinawa." Pp. 1-35 in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

A very useful introduction, which lays out the history and complexity of Okinawan identity.

\*\*\*Matthew Allen. 2003. "Wolves at the Back Door: Remembering the Kumejima Massacres." Pp. 39-64 in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Discusses an oral history project where elderly Okinawans provide personal accounts of the Battle of Okinawa and its aftermath to elementary school children. In a careful analysis, the author shows how these narratives challenge the official Japanese account of history, while at the same time avoiding an outright criticism of Japan itself. It highlights how Okinawans died not simply because of war, but also because they were Okinawans, despite their attempts to be loyal Japanese subjects. The narratives thereby question the relationship between Okinawa and Japan based on this local history.

\*\*\*Gerald Figal. 2003. "Waging Peace on Okinawa." Pp. 65-98 in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

This essay describes attempts to come to terms with the experience of World War II and the Battle of Okinawa, in the form of monuments and tours. Figal describes a cottage industry of competing representations of war from monuments and memorials to peace tours to battle site tours for veterans from all sides. He also shows how Okinawa is situated uneasily between the different sides and highlights attempts of constructing an Okinawan identity which is transnational, transethnic, and transhistorical. Figal illustrates the difficulties in articulating an independent Okinawan identity outside of its history of colonization by Japan, and instead takes Okinawa's complex history as a cornerstone for building an identity which does not need to rely on traditional culture or the nation, but rather supports transnational values of peace that can stand above the nation-state and the dichotomies of "us" and "them."

\*\*Taira, Koji. 1997. "Troubled national identity: Ryukyuans/Okinawans." Pp. 140-177 in *Japan's Minorities*, edited by M. Weiner. London: Routledge.

Provides a simple introduction to the general history of Okinawa and its relationship to Japan.

Hein and Selden's collection also includes the following interesting chapters on popular culture and identity, which could be taught in a third session.

\*James Roberson, "Uchina Pop: Place and Identity in Contemporary Okinawan Popular Music." Pp.192-227 in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

\*Aaron Gerow, "From National Gaze to Multiple Gazes: Representations of Okinawa in Recent Japanese Cinema." Pp. 273-307 in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, edited by Laura Hein and Mark Selden. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

## **6. Discussion Questions**

- What are some of the conflicting elements of Okinawan identity according to Hein and Selden? How are Okinawans situated between Japan and the US?
- The articles by Allen and Figal try to reconstruct Okinawa's historical relationship to Japan through oral history and peace projects. What was Okinawa's relationship to Japan during the war, and how is it reconstructed or renegotiated through the "living history program"? What are some of the

problems involved in peace education, and the representation of war through memorials and museums? What is their relevance to the present?

## **7. Sample Essay or Midterm Take-home Exam Question**

### Instructions

Write an essay of no more than 5 pages, double-spaced, answering the question below. Your essay should have a clear structure, a concise and coherent argument, be conclusive, and integrate several different readings. No research beyond class materials is required and use of materials beyond the assigned readings should be avoided. Make sure to cite the source of evidence and ideas other than your own.

### Question:

Okinawan identity is uneasily located between Japan, the US, and Ryûkyûan history. Okinawans are at once Japanese and not Japanese, and being Okinawan cannot easily be separated from being Japanese. Write an essay, which explores why this is so, and highlights ways in which some Okinawans have tried to come to terms with this situation. First, provide a general historical overview that explains the complexities of Okinawa's relationship to Japan and the problems and pitfalls of articulating an Okinawan identity. Then, using concrete examples from the readings, discuss ways in which some Okinawans have tried to (re) articulate Okinawa's identity and its relationship to Japan. Conclude with your thoughts on the significance of these approaches to identity and the relevance of Okinawan identity struggles to the situation of minorities elsewhere.