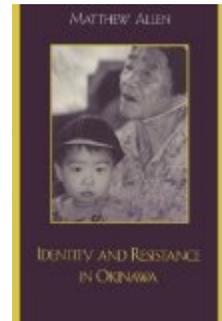


Matthew Allen. *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. xii + 265 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-1715-8; \$93.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-1714-1.

Reviewed by Stanislaw Meyer (Department of Japanese Studies, University of Hong Kong)  
Published on H-US-Japan (July, 2003)



## Searching for Okinawan Identities

### Searching for Okinawan Identities

For the past two decades scholars have successfully accustomed us to the idea that Japan is by no means a homogeneous nation. The center of gravity in Japanese studies has shifted remarkably towards the spatial and social margins of Japan, namely the Ainu, Okinawans, Koreans, and *burakumin*. Studies of Okinawan identity have contributed profoundly to the deconstruction of the Japanese myth of homogeneity. *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa* follows the “deconstructionalist” pattern that has already proven to work in the case of Japan and shows that Okinawa is not homogeneous either. The book questions the identity of Okinawa from her very margins—the remote, tiny island of Kume.

First of all I need to say that *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa* is a pleasure to read. The author writes in a reader-friendly style and does not bother with sophisticated theories that might be too heavy to digest. Rather than discussing Okinawa, Allen prefers to narrate it. The text is variegated by vivid descriptions of situations and people interviewed by the author. Allen shares many of his personal observations and comments on the life on Kume, which he seems to have enjoyed. Photographs from the author’s personal collection help to catch the image of Kume. Every chapter begins with a detailed description of a selected event, such as the dragon boat festival in chapter 2 or the dialect rally in chapter 3, which creates a starting point for the author’s arguments.

The book consists of an introduction and nine chap-

ters organized into three parts. In the introduction the author briefly introduces the history of Okinawa, provides an exhaustive description of his fieldwork location, namely Kume island, and addresses the problem of identity. In the manner of a postmodernist, Allen emphasizes the complex, multifaceted, and endlessly negotiable nature of identity. The argument he develops throughout the book is that local identities are what matter primarily in the case of Okinawa. “Okinawan” identity is a relatively modern construct, formed vis-a-vis “Japan proper” and American military bases. On the local level Okinawa, as an “imagined community,” has such ambiguous boundaries that it casts doubts on whether there are any essential representations of being “Okinawan.” This question is not new and has been addressed by such authors as Glenn Hook and Richard Siddle.[1] Allen, however, goes much further, presenting a claim for the ambiguity and novelty of “Kume” identity. First of all he recognizes the multivocality of Kume, where numerous identities cross and overlap at all levels of the society.

The essays in part 1 serve to emphasize the ambiguity, locality, and diversity of Okinawan and Kume identities. Chapter 1 tackles the problem of the “Japanese-ness” of Okinawa. Allen develops the argument around the history of a massacre of civilians, committed by the Japanese troops on Kume island in the wake of the Okinawa Battle in 1945. Chapter 2 narrates the history of the local community of Torishima village. People from Torishima originally migrated to Kume from a volcanic island called Yuo Torishima at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In spite of successful assimilation, they have preserved their own distinctive identity and traditions, even though these have been given new meanings or have been completely reinvented. In chapter 3 Allen writes about a dialect rally, in which children from each hamlet gather for a speech contest in their local dialects. This event, Allen notes, serves to bring a wider community together, but at the same time reinforces the fragmented and diverse character of Kume (p. 102).

In chapter 4, Allen shifts his attention to the local Board of Education which plays an extremely important role in the life of Kume. The Board of Education is a source of knowledge about local culture and traditions. It helps organize festivals and takes responsibility for the cultural and social education of children in the community. At times, it has even assisted an inexperienced priestess *noro* to perform her religious duties. Allen stresses that the Board, despite being an official agent of the Ministry of Education, challenges the education policies. In other words, it is a source of resistance against centralized and homogeneous Japan. Allen emphasizes the influence of the Board over the life and identities of Kume people.

Part 2 is the most original section of the book as it examines the identity issue from the perspective of mental health problems. In Okinawa, the ratio of people suffering from mental disorder is much higher than in any other prefecture in Japan. Many patients, in spite of having access to the modern health services, prefer to seek help from shamans (*yuta*) who, as persons of "high spirit birth" (*saadaka unumari*), are believed to possess supernatural skills to heal people. As Allen argues, *yuta* "embody 'traditional Okinawa' in contrast to 'modern Japan'" (p. 161). For patients, the decision about whether to rely on *yuta* or modern medicine always involves the identity issue. There is a profound difference between being diagnosed by a *yuta* as being afflicted by the condition of *kami daari* (or "god's revenge"), a socially "acceptable" problem, and being diagnosed by modern psychiatry as mentally ill, which may result in social stigmatization. As Allen demonstrates in chapters 5 and 6, *yuta* themselves often meet the criteria for being defined as schizophrenic, yet they are able to find their proper place and an approved role in society.

Allen continues the discussion on psychiatry and identity in chapter 7, where he examines the situation of people on Kume island with mental disorders. Due to the lack of appropriate health care facilities, patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and their families have estab-

lished an organization, Akebono-kai, whose main function is to help them re-enter society. Akebono-kai provides its members with occupations and opportunities to socialize. Allen notes that mentally ill people cannot escape from stigmatization within their local communities, yet the Akebono-kai, through a constant reference to a set of social and cultural values, affords them a sense of being a member of a wider community and provides them with an alternative "pan-Kume" identity.

In part 3 Allen examines how the tourism industry affects Okinawan identity. After the reversion to Japan in 1972, Okinawa experienced a tourist boom. The tourism business, controlled by Japanese companies from the mainland, has successfully depicted Okinawa as a tropical paradise and an exotic place inhabited by easy-going people. Kume island, too, has been turned into a resort center and sold to the tourists as "Okinawa." As Allen notes, Japan has embodied in Kume an identity over which local people have little control. Put radically, Kume has been colonized by knowledge (p. 226). Yet, the people of Kume resist and try to promote independently an alternative kind of tourism, based not only on the attractiveness of the beautiful sea and the coral reefs, but also on the cultural heritage. This, as Allen argues, contributes to the emergence of a new image of Kume and, consequently, a new "pan-Kume" identity.

Allen's book, however interesting and informative, does not answer all the questions a reader might wish. For example, are the Okinawans "ethnic" and thus an ethnic minority? If yes, what accounts for ethnicity and ethnic identity? In a broader sense the book raises the problem of the extent to which one can apply the "deconstructionalist" rhetoric to minority identities. Allen notes, for instance, that the Akebono-kai provides its members with a sort of "pan-Kume" identity. But what is the significance of this fact? How does it differ, let us say, from the case of members of the Alcoholics Anonymous in Japan or any other country, who also share a sort of common identity? Allen does not convince the reader that going into that level of analysis is necessarily relevant to the overall discussion of Okinawan identity.

Secondly, I cannot refrain from citing the common accusation against social anthropologists, namely that they focus on the social margins, such as gangs and prostitutes, instead of studying the social mainstream and, thus, they have little to say about the society as a whole. How much does the study of *yuta* or, depending on the definition, a mentally disordered woman tell us about the Okinawan identity? Is it really so important that the au-

thor needs to devote nearly one third of the book to this subject?

I disagree with Allen on several points. For instance, I find Allen's suggestion that "Okinawan" identity is a mere response to the Japanese colonialism and that it is limited to political and economic discourses problematic. I would argue that there are essential representations of Okinawan identity, let alone Okinawan beliefs, that are not necessarily products of resistance against colonialism. The people of Kume and other remote islands may identify with Okinawa because, for various reasons, they find its cultural and historical heritage attractive. In Ernest Gellner's terms, Okinawa plays the role of a dominant "cultural pool," which people have joined out of their own free will; they have received certain benefits in exchange for "becoming Okinawan," although citizen-

ship was not one of them.[2]

Allen's book, nonetheless, is an important voice in the discourse on Okinawa. The author deserves special credit for his original and innovative approach towards Okinawan studies. His writing style suggests that he intended to address the book to a wide audience. I ask myself, however, whether the approach from Kume is the most appropriate for readers unfamiliar with Okinawa.

#### Notes

[1]. Glenn D. Hook and Richard Siddle, eds., *Japan and Okinawa: Structure and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

[2]. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

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**Citation:** Stanislaw Meyer. Review of Allen, Matthew, *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

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