



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree

In

Language and
Civilisation of Asia
and Mediterranean
Africa

**“Ryukyu islands between the double colonial structure and
the possibility for Indigenous self-determination”**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Patrick Heinrich

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Lauri Kitsnik

Graduand

Stella Rizzuti

Matriculation Number 889638

Academic Year

2025 / 2026

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Stella Rizzuti student ID number 889638 enrolled at Ca' Foscari in the Master's Degree Programme in Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Asia, author of the final degree thesis Ryukyu islands between the double colonial structure and the possibility of self determination, thesis supervisor Patrick Heinrich, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

☒ that he/she has **NOT** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of the final paper/degree thesis;

☐ that he/she **HAS** used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of his/her final paper/degree thesis, in particular (for each point, write in full the requested information):

- indicate the name of the tool (e.g., "ChatGPT" if an application or "GPT" if a model), with reference to the specific version (for example, "ChatGPT-4, version released in March 2024");
- if more than one tool has been used, specify each of them by indicating its name and version;
- provide information on how the tool was used:
 - ☐ revision and optimisation of texts to improve clarity and coherence;
 - ☐ generation of charts and diagrams for data presentation;
 - ☐ support for the automatic drafting of sentences;
 - ☐ production of illustrative images to complement the methodological section;
 - ☐ other (please specify);
- indicate the sections or chapters concerned;
- indicate how the accuracy, quality and reliability of any information or text that may have been generated were verified.

DECLARES FURTHER

that all material generated by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.

INDEX

要指.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
1 FROM MODERN HISTORY TO THE CONTEMPORARY ANTI-BASE MOVEMENTS	
1.1 The Ryukyu Kingdom and relationship with China.....	11
1.2 The so called “Okinawan character” and the alleged “backwardness”	17
1.3 Okinawan battle and US occupation.....	22
1.4 After reversion: land struggle and anti-base movement.....	40
1.5 Anti base protests: from anti base groups to a social movement.....	45
CONCLUSION.....	54
2 INDIGENOUS PRACTICES FOR SELF DETERMINATION IN OKINAWA	
2.1 Okinawa and indigeneity between the Peoplehood model and neo colonial contestations.....	55
2.2 Land and space of community: challenges to militarisation, pollution and globalising homogenisation.....	59
2.3 Spirituality, sacred ecology and indigenous responsibility.....	65
2.4 Water relations in the creation of a self-determined space: struggles between pollution and the sacrality.....	69
2.5 Indigenous memory and storytelling as a countermeasure to the politics of ignorance.....	72
2.6 Indigenous languages, land and reclamation.....	77
3 INTERVIEWS	
Introduction.....	83
3.0 Table of contents.....	84

3.1 What does “being Ryukyuan” mean to you personally? Have you ever experienced challenges, stigma or difficulties related to how your identity is perceived or expressed?.....	85
3.2 How would you describe your relationship with the land? Do you think that strengthening or rediscovering land-based relationships could have an impact on community life? If so, in what ways?.....	88
3.3 In what ways, if any, has the presence of the military bases influenced community life in Okinawa? Has it effected your personal relationship with land or water?.....	91
3.4 Do you think storytelling can play a role in preserving or revitalising land-based knowledge and the community memory? If yes, how?.....	96
3.5 To what extent do you feel that language loss has influenced the way you express or understand your identity.....	98
3.6 Since the revitalization of traditions cultures and languages passes through the transmission of knowledge (war memories languages, spiritual traditions and farming practices) to the younger generations. In what way could it be done more effectively? In other words, do you think it can work as an incentive for the younger generations to come closer to knowledge that differs from the so-called Japanese education that they are receiving?.....	103
CONCLUSION.....	109
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	110

要旨

琉球列島は最も南日本の地方だ。一般的に、主流メディアでは透明度の高い美しい海や砂浜を擁する異国情緒あふれる場所として描かれているが、かつては独自の言語と文化的慣習を有する独立王国であり、その後、旧日本帝国に併合された。沖縄を、ゆったりとした生活が享受される異国情緒あふれる場所として捉えるイメージは、日米両帝国による沖縄の土地と人々の身体に対する搾取を継続させるための装置として解釈することができる。

第一章は琉球王国と中国、日本、米国の関係を詳しく分析する。特に、日本国家への併合と「沖縄人」というアイデンティティの形成に焦点を当てる。その後、アメリカによる占領と反基地運動に重点を当てる。

第2章では、先住民による土地に根ざした実践という概念に焦点を当て、二重の植民地支配体制のもとで進められてきた土地や身体への搾取に対抗するために、こうした知識——先住民の記憶、言語、農業実践など——を中心に据える必要性について論じる。

第3章では、年齢やジェンダーの異なる5名の沖縄の人々を対象に行ったインタビューの結果を提示し、先住民の実践を再活性化することの重要性、語り継ぎ、軍事基地が彼らの生活に及ぼす影響、そして若い世代への先住民の知識の継承の重要性といったテーマについて考察する。

ここで強調しておきたいのは、「先住民性 (indigeneity)」という概念およびそれに関連する実践が、自己決定をめぐる闘争と結びついた政治的な権利要求を意味しているという点である。自己決定の可能性は、文化的権利の主張と深く結びついていると同時に、米軍基地の存在や、日本政府による政策決定に対する抵抗とも密接に関連している。こうした政策決定は、米国と日本の関係の安定を維持するために、いまだに沖縄の人々とその土地を犠牲として差し出す構造を存続させている。

本論文では、土地に根ざした先住民的实践との再接続が、祖先から受け継がれてきた文化的・歴史的ルーツとのつながりを回復するための第一歩であり、同時に、政治的権利を求めるための重要な基盤となり得ることを論じる。土地に根ざした実践は、先住民の人々が自らの声を表明し、それを国内外の政治的状況において可視化し、社会に届けるための代替的な空間を提供する可能性を有している。

Introduction

More than often Okinawa Prefecture is seen as a tropical paradise where it is possible to enjoy a relaxing holiday surrounded by nature. This vision inevitably invisibilises the still contemporary situation of Okinawa, torn by the militarisation by the end of the US army and the Japanese government's decision of perpetrating this colonial system at the expense of the environment and people's lives. Little importance is given by its past or contemporary history nor to the Indigenous studies approaches that can be applied when discussing Okinawa and Okinawan people in reference to the still ongoing colonial occupation. For these reasons, it is important to focus on Okinawan history and apply concepts related to indigenous epistemology that Okinawans experience to the struggles of indigenous people from all over the world.

Situated between the Kyushu Island and Taiwan, the former Ryukyu Kingdom now known as Okinawa Prefecture has always been a site of contestation due to its strategic position. The kingdom held commercial and tributary relationship with both China and Japan until 1879 the year in which it was annexed to the Japanese state nation formally becoming part of the Japanese empire under the Okinawan Prefecture. After the territorial annexation, the Okinawan subjects were forced to culturally and politically assimilate to the Japanese system, which caused language and cultural loss and the shame of being “different” from the ideal Japanese subject. Although it was formally part of Japan, Okinawans were considered backward and not sufficiently modernised. This stance became particularly obvious during the Battle of Okinawa, where the Okinawan Prefecture became a battlefield between the Japanese and US forces and the Okinawan civilians were often considered as expendable casualties, reflecting the longstanding colonial attitude towards the islands. Not only the Battle decimated and displaced the vast majority of the population, but reinforced Okinawa's marginal position in the Japan state as it became an occupied territory by the US military forces. During the occupation, Okinawa underwent a still ongoing process of militarisation with the construction of military bases under the idea of “security purposes”. This process led to the dispossession of Okinawans' houses and land that made a big portion of the population dependent on the US for economic sustentation. Responding to the following research question: “How can the reclamation of Okinawan indigeneity could challenge the double colonial system in the archipelago, providing possibilities to achieve self-determination?”, the thesis will highlight the possibility to create a space of reclamation where Okinawans can re-centre their perspective on social, economic and political issues regarding the Prefecture. The first chapter presents an historical reconstruction of the recent history of Okinawa, and the second one is focalised on the idea of indigeneity as an identity that can

be employed to rediscover community belonging, ancestral languages and land base knowledge that has sadly been erased or marginalised subsequently to the Japanese colonial rule. At last, the third and concluding chapter will leave space to five different voices from Okinawa discussing topics such as identity belonging, US military presence, language loss and strategies for cultural revitalisation.

The first chapter presents an historical reconstruction of the most significant events that took place in the Ryukyuan Archipelago in the last centuries. Due to being often presented both nationally and internationally as an exotic travel destination with wonderful seaside and resorts where tourists can enjoy bits of slow life while exploring the paradise beaches, Okinawa is often stripped by any historical contextualisation. This serves the purpose of downplaying the still ongoing struggles related to the presence of the military structure and the inadequate response of the Japanese government to tackle the issue. The first section of the chapter will focus on the former Ryukyu Kingdom relationships with both China and Japan, as it occupied a strategic position for trade routes and diplomatic relations in East Asia. This same strategic position led to the gradual loss of independency that started in 1609 with the invasion by the Satsuma clan that installed tributary relationship with Japan and culminated to the annexation to Japan in 1879, justified by the possible threat that the US symbolised and to the necessity of interrupting any Chinese influence on the Kingdom. This first part will focus on the responses of the Ryukyuan elite to the annexation, met with the need to assimilate to the Japanese standard, following the pretext of modernisation. The second part will discuss the colonial project of creating the Okinawan imperial subject, forcibly homologating Okinawans to Japanese standard language and cultural practices, placing Okinawans in a hierarchical submission to the nation state and causing languages and cultural loss as they were deemed “backward”, as difference to Japanese norms and expectations in the Meiji Period. Even though the Ryukyu archipelago was formally part of the Japanese state, as mentioned before, it has always served the purpose of a strategic outpost that could be exploited. This is reflected in the events concerning the Battle of Okinawa that saw communities destroyed, displaced and killed by both US and Japanese military. The aftermath saw the Okinawan territory passed through the US government and the beginning of the military structure that still nowadays exploits land and people. During the US occupation that continued until 1972, the presence of the military forces was not met with enthusiasm by all the population due to the exploitation of the natural resources and the pollution, which led to several movements of protests. Even though in 1972 reversion was achieved, the hope for an improvement of the life condition connected to the demilitarisation of the territory was not met. And thus, as I will explain in the fourth section of the first chapter, movements of protests based on “*kaku nuki, hondo nami*” (on par with the mainland, without nuclear weapons) continued its battle,

becoming an anti-military-base movement. The main shared point raised by the movement is the disingenuous presence of the bases on Japanese territory, leaving Okinawa to carry the burden in support of the US-Japan security treaty. In other words, I will argue how reversion did not resolve Okinawans' issues linked to militarisation and it led to the birth of a more organised movement paralleled by landowner's mobilizations that shifted the attention from opposition to American occupation to the struggle against militarisation. In the last section I will discuss how in more recent times, the anti-base movement shifted from a local movement for de militarisation to a transnational mobilisation, focusing not just on the relocation of the bases outside of the Prefecture, but also focusing on the environmental and gender-based inequalities. More deeply these final parts will focus on local associations' struggle to preserve local environments and endangered species, other than feminist approaches regarding the struggles against militarisation.

In the second chapter, reconnecting to the idea of Island as not an isolated place but as a space where diversified languages, cultural practices and people meet, I will focus on the concept of indigeneity as a political identity to revendicate a space in which self-determination can be practiced. Focusing on different aspects such as the idea of indigeneity, land-based relationship, storytelling, spirituality and ancestral languages, I will argue how the rediscovery of indigenous practices can offer a possible tool to find a solution to the struggle against colonialism. In the first section, I will firstly give a definition of indigenous people following what indigenous scholar Jeff Corntassel studies on the matter. Afterwards, I will focus on the Okinawan case and how Indigeneity has been employed by the Okinawan Indigenous movement and how right-wing politicians have often misinterpreted the idea of self-determination as the political detachment from the nation state. After this section, I will focus more deeply on the concepts linked to the idea of indigeneity as an identity related to land-based relationship, starting from the necessity to revitalise land and community-based practices rooted to belonging and care for the land, in response to militarism, colonialism and pollution. These three structures, heavily related one to the other, have for a long time been an obstacle for indigenous people in Okinawa to reconnect with land, as it has been exploited and polluted for military purposes. Despite this reality, as Chibana highlights, different voices from agriculturally based communities have raised, opening to new possibilities to achieve self-determination revitalising traditional practices and strengthening community belonging¹. These communities, called *shima*, could offer a possible alternative way of leaving, detached from the militarised and capitalistic structure of the

¹ Chibana Megumi (2020), Resurgents create a moral landscape: Indigenous Resurgence and everyday practices of farming in Okinawa, *Humanities* 9, no.4:135 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9040135>

double empire. Through the example of Sakaemachi Market, I will argue how community spaces such as the markets are places where decolonial perspective can take place through access to local food and to exchanges with people from the community. The third part will centre on the water relationship and how it is shaped by pollution caused by the military base. Importance will be given to the centrality of water in the indigenous epistemology in relation to indigenous relationality. The following section will focus the attention on storytelling as a practice central in indigenous spaces. Not only it allows the transmission of knowledge, land-based practices and memories but also challenges the colonial construction of historical facts that are employed in the perpetration of imperialistic structures. For this reason, in this section I will problematise how ignorance is not just the lack of knowledge, but a structure that serves to reproduce imperial spatiality, rising as an example the case of the Futenma Air base. In the second part, beginning from the idea that “restoration of cultural heritage is an indirect form of resistance”, I will discuss how storytelling is an important practice to countermeasure ignorance production and to re-appropriate spaces through the novels of Sakiyama Tami and Shō Tanaka. Equally relevant in the indigenous community spaces is the revitalisation of ancestral languages, as they are deeply connected to speakers’ well-being and land-based knowledge. Subsequently, I will focus on the Okinawan Prefecture situation regarding languages, and how the monolingual Japanese education has negatively influenced the preservation of the languages. Given the standard Japanese education that is received in the Prefecture, I will also delineate non-government ruled strategies for the transmission of ancestral languages as ecological encyclopaedias.

The third and last chapter is constituted by interviews conducted online to five different Okinawan people, among whom four of them are currently professor at different universities around the world, and the other one is an Okinawan person that is the owner of an Instagram page called “Unmuting the Ryukyus” that regularly posts contents regarding Okinawan history and cultural practices, especially focusing on war memories and colonialism. The interviews follow a semi-structured organisation based on a qualitative approach, each of them lasting on average 50 minutes. Each one of the participants was asked the same six questions concerning identity belonging, land base knowledge, storytelling, US militarism, languages revitalisation and the importance of the transmission of indigenous knowledge to the younger generations, followed by follow-up questions in some cases to explore more in details their answers. I employed a convenience sampling since the participants were either people that I had the possibility to contact through Gesshin’s Ca’Foscari university association or contacts handed by my supervisor. All the five participants are people born and raised in Okinawa, as I think it is of vital importance to give voices to the people who experienced

or still experience the situations discussed in the thesis. The interview outcomes were then organised using a thematic analysis. Following each interview, they were transcribed and categorized according to the order of the questions. All the answers were compared one to the other, highlighting similarities and differences based on the lived experiences of the participants and their understanding of the topics. I personally believe that centring indigenous voices, often marginalised, is of vital importance especially considering my positionality regarding the topic. As a white European whose lived experience is far removed from the issues explored in this thesis, I recognize the risk of inadvertently erasing or overshadowing Indigenous voices if the subject is not approached with critical self-reflection. With this in mind, the aim of this final chapter was to engage in dialogue with Okinawan participants about aspects of their daily lives and experiences, without imposing my own interpretations or claiming to speak on their behalf. Instead, this thesis seeks to create space for their perspectives to emerge while remaining attentive to my own positionality and the limitations it entails.

CHAPTER 1

From modern history to the contemporary anti-base movements in Okinawa

1.1 Ryukyu Kingdom and relationship with China and Japan

The history of the Ryukyu Kingdom illustrates how strategically located territories often became objects of competition among regional and global powers. Situated between China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, the Ryukyu archipelago occupied a crucial position in maritime trade networks and diplomatic relations across East Asia. This first segment of the chapter examines the gradual loss of Ryukyuan autonomy from the Satsuma invasion of 1609 to its formal annexation by Japan in 1879. It explores how the kingdom's unique position as both a Chinese tributary state and a Japanese dependency created a system of dual subordination that shaped its political, cultural, and diplomatic development. Particular attention is given to the growing involvement of Japan, China, and Western powers during the nineteenth century, the diplomatic disputes surrounding the Miyako Shipwreck Massacre and the Taiwan Expedition, and the process known as the Ryukyu Disposition, which transformed the kingdom into Okinawa Prefecture. Finally, the chapter analyses the responses of Ryukyuan elites to annexation and the definitive end of hopes for restoration following Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War, highlighting the incorporation of the former kingdom into the modern Japanese state.

The Ryukyu archipelago is a group of islands located in the East China Sea, site of the former Ryukyu Kingdom, a former independent reign that developed trades with China and Japan, before being forcibly assimilated by the Japanese empire, becoming a Prefecture in 1879. Throughout its history, from its tributary relations with the Chinese empire to the later expansionist ambitions of Japan and the United States, the Ryukyu archipelago has repeatedly become a target of imperial control due to its strategic position in the Pacific Ocean. In this reasoning can be configured the invasion of the Kingdom by the Satsuma clan in 1609: on the one hand, the control of the island and the instauration of a tributary relationship would have meant having an advanced position in trades; at the same time, it favoured also the military security of Japan, reliving Tokugawa Ieyasu's concerns about European pressure against Japan, especially regarding the activities of Spain in the Philippines.²In April 1609, the Japanese occupied and looted Shuri Castle, imposing the payment of

² George H. Kerr (1989) *Okinawa the History of Island and people* pp. 156-159

an annual tribute of 11,935 *Koku* to the Satsuma domain. Moreover, the king was expected to pay an annual tribute of 8,000 *koku* from its private income. The foreign trade was monopolised by the Satsuma clan and the Amami, Yoron, Toku and Kikai islands were removed from Shuri's control and put under Satsuma domain.

After the Satsuma invasion, Ryukyu's relationship with China remained formally unchanged as a loyal tributary state, but it functioned as a semi-colonial buffer kingdom used by Japan to access Chinese trade, creating a "dual subordination" which affected Ryukyuan character. On the one hand, elements of race, religious practices and language formed ties with Japan; on the other, Shuri and Naha continued to be culturally influenced by China, with young men sent to Peking or Ch'uang-Chou for training. However, Chinese were forbidden to settle in the Ryukyu islands and during Chinese diplomatic visits on the territory it was mandatory to hide any sign of Japanese influence from objects to knowledge of the language, to conceal the nature of Ryukyu subordination. This subterfuge was justified by Ryukyuan with the recognition of both Japan and China as their "parents", to whom reference and respect were due. In this situation, compromising and adaptation were fundamental, altogether with the acceptance of the alien that undermined own individuality, leaving Satsuma to control the foreign affairs and aspect of internal administration and nothing but figuring out how to survive with the resources of the countryside.³ This ambiguous relationship among the Ryukyu Kingdom, Japan and China caught the attention of the European and United States empires that sought to expand their domains in East and South-east Asia, putting the leverage on the "feign independence" of the Kingdom from Japan, that made the kingdom look accessible and desirable for economic and militarist purposes. In June 1853, Commodore Perry landed a token U.S. force and marched into the royal Shuri Castle to ask for Okinawa cooperation and the establishment of a military base in Naha in exchange for U.S. friendship. He claimed that the U.S. should have taken the islands under their control, but President Pierce refused, asserting that the conditions did not justify an occupation, leaving the Commodore with just a 'friendship agreement'. After this attempt, France, England and Holland tried to negotiate a treaty. These attempts alarmed Japan, who replied by landing an imperial military force in Naha after the Meiji Restoration, establishing the Ryukyu *han* (fief) and then, after the abolition of the *han* system, creating the Okinawa Prefecture in 1879.⁴ Even though the

³ George H. Kerr (1989) *Okinawa the History of Island and people* pp. 166-168

⁴ George H. Kerr (1989) *Okinawa the History of Island and people* p. 4

after the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty (1871) set aside for a period the issue of China and Japan “double influence” on the Ryukyu domain, due to its inclusion of the provision to not encroach “territory owing allegiance to both the signatories of the treaty”, it was inevitable that the issue would occur again, due to Japanese objective to establish a modern and sovereign state.

Before the abolition of the *han* system, the Japanese government renamed the Ryukyu Kingdom “Ryukyu *han*” and the king as the *han 'o*, the king of the Ryukyu *han*. The 14th of September 1872, an embassy from the Ryukyu *han* travelled to the capital for a ceremony in the Foreign Ministry’s reception room, receiving the decree that granted a “patent of investiture”, confirming Sho Tai’s authority as the *han 'o* and Ryukyu as the Ryukyu *han*. With this imperial decree, the Ryukyu *han*’s foreign policy passed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign affairs. Until the Miyako Shipwreck Massacre, it can be said that nothing changed in the perception that the kingdom could be able to maintain its sovereignty, due to the similarity of the *han* representative’s duty in Tokyo and to the possibility of maintaining tribute trade with China. The Miyako Shipwreck Massacre (18/10/1871) marked the start of a crisis related to the Ryukyu double relationship with “the two parents to whom respect was due”. During this event, a tribute ship from Miyako Island ran into a storm and was wrecked off Bayaowan on the southeastern coast of Taiwan where fifty-six survivors were massacred by aborigines. As a response to this massacre, Oyama Tsuneyoshi, the governor of Kagoshima, urged for a proposal for Taiwan’s subjugation. This decision revealed that, even though at first Japan still followed the policy of concealment toward China, it was soon set apart in favour of the affirmation of Japan’s authority abroad, beginning to consider the incorporation of the Kingdom into Japanese policy. At the same time, Ryukyu's imminent loss of self-rule becomes more obvious. To organise the best possible situation for Taiwan’s invasion, it was necessary to have the international actors' approval that didn’t hesitate to arrive. The U.S. minister to Japan, Charles E. DeLong, asserted that Japan had the right to invade Taiwan because that aboriginal territory was not under the control of China, it was an “unclaimed territory”, according to international law. Even Charles W. LeGendre, expert on conditions in Taiwan, supported the Japanese invasion and its right to be “the first coloniser”. For this reason, the Meiji government started to prepare the punitive expedition which had two purposes:

- to “occupy aboriginal territory” in an imperial expansion of Japanese sovereignty.
- serve a notice to China that Ryukyu was a possession under Japan jurisdiction.

The ambiguity of Ryukyu's position was further revealed by the March 1873 Foreign Minister Soejima visit to China to present the ratification papers for the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty. Japan's expedition's objectives were to find pretext for the Taiwan invasion and to find out China's position on the massacre.

On China's side, Mao Changxi, a minister of foreign affairs Office, replied that twelve Ryukyans were rescued and sent back home safely and since the Ryukyu Kingdom was a Chinese tributary state, the matter was not one of Japanese concern. He then went on explaining that Taiwanese aboriginal tribes could be divided into "cultivated tribes", under Chinese rule and "wild tribes", the latter group being the one that committed the massacre. According to the Japanese empire, this explanation justified the attack on Taiwan. On May 17th, 1874, a total of 3,650 departed from Nagasaki and landed in Sheliao, under the plan to occupy aboriginal territory, ignoring Chinese demands for withdrawal. To sever even more the Chinese influence on the Ryukyu's matters and to transform them into domestic affairs, management of the Ryukyu han was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior. Next, Ambassador Yanagihara was sent on the 12th of June to the Qing court and ordered to use the recent expeditions to sever the tributary relation of the Ryukyu *han* with China. However, the expedition encountered hardships related to China's different position on Japan maneuver in Taiwan, considered a violation of the Friendship and Trade Treaty. To solve the deadlock, the Minister of the Interior Okubo Toshimichi was sent. Upon his arrival, even for him, the negotiations encountered issues related to Taiwan jurisdiction. Finally, thanks to Sir Thomas Walde, British ambassador to China, the matter was resolved as China found the invasion understandable for the "protection of Japan's citizens". The victims of the massacre were referred to as "people belonging to the nation of Japan".⁵

This statement, however, did not mean that China was backing down from its tributary position. However, on the other hand, Japan interpreted it as the recognition of its right of jurisdiction over the Ryukyu.

After Okubo's return to Japan, on July 14th, the government emanated directives that sought to, not only terminate Ryukyu's relationship with China but also setting the first stepping stone on the

⁵ George H. Kerr (1989) *Okinawa the History of Island and people* p. 45

process of incorporation of the territory into Japanese polity by legally stationing Japanese troops there. Following these directives, even though a series of objections from the Ryukyu royalty took place because the relationship with China symbolized the foundation upon which the Kingdom relied for its existence, ships to China were forbidden. In response to this prohibition, a movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom started to be organised by Sho Tai that in secret sent his brother-in law Sho Tokuko to China in December 1876 with a message concerning the cease of tribute but not the enforcement of the order. At this point, Hue Ruzhang was appointed as Ambassador in Japan to take up the tribute interdiction to Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In November 1877 he departed from Shanghai and was hosted in Tokyo where he met officials from the Ryukyuan residence. For the first time, the Ambassador revealed the policy of concealment and referred to it as a “folly” because China had other lands that had sworn double fealty, such as the Kazan Khanate in Central Asia, so the Ryukyuan situation should make no difference. In September 1878, Hue Rizhang visited the Foreign Minister Terashima Munenori to ask for an explanation about the cessation of tribute but was welcome with a refusal on discussing the matter and the insistence that the Ryukyus were under Japan sovereignty, and thus an internal matter to Japan.

At the same time, in 1873, the Tokyo office of the Ryukyu *han* was abolished and the officials who had talked with the Chinese Ambassador were sent home. Moreover, from that moment on, travels outside the *han* must be approved by the branch office of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The royal government decided to not submit to the directive and in response the Japanese government appointed Matsuda Michiyuki as the head of disciplinary action. With the backing of police and half of a battalion, he went to Shuri castle on March 27 and ordered the evacuation of the place, removal of the King to Tokyo and the handing over of the various registers of property, persons and officials.

On March 31st after the departure of the king and his consorts and the confiscation of the castle, the Ryukyu *han* was abolished and under the *hanseki hokan* (Restitution of land and people to the Imperial Court) incorporated into Japan’s central government structure as Okinawa prefecture. These series of disposition called “Ryukyu Disposition”, the Ryukyu kingdom was annexed to Japan empire and its complete detachment from China.

Even though relationships with China were cut, the government implemented policy based on preserving traditional customs and political mores, to avoid turmoil and in the hope to appease China. However, the policy had no effect in preventing boycotts and disobedience in the region and even attempts from Sho Tokuko to appeal to Beijing for help. On the 3rd of July, he submitted a letter to

Li Hongzhang asking for armed intervention to help one of China's tributary Kingdom, freeing it from Japan and returning it to China's sphere of influence. This letter marked a change from early petitions linked to the different understandings of the situation that Sho Tokuko had on the matter. This time, he was very aware that the restoration of the dual allegiance would not mean the freedom in sovereignty of the Kingdom.

Given the difficulties in negotiation between Tokyo and Beijing, in 1879 with the visit of former U.S. president Ulysses Grant and his mediation between the two poles came as a golden opportunity, which revealed the entanglement of Japan's treaty revision with the European and U.S. military power. In other words, Japan realised that to begin negotiating with Western powers they needed to modify the Treaty with China first. In September 1880, the Japanese government proposed to divide the Ryukyu islands, ceding the southern island groups of Miyako and Yaeyama to China. In exchange for a modification of the Treaty that allowed Japan to have commercial relationships with China. Putting the leverage on a possible Treaty between Japan and Russia, on October 28, Japan was able to sign a special Treaty with China regarding the Ryukyu, with an agreement of ratification after 3 months. This Treaty stipulated the cession of Miyako and Yaeyama to restore the Ryukyu Kingdom and to preserve the old tributary system. Ryukyuans were not informed about this agreement, however the Ryukyuans in self imposed exile in China were informed by Li Hongzhang and submitted a petition as a sign of protest. The decision was made based on the common idea that Miyako and Yaeyama were little islands that could not serve as bases to establish an independent kingdom. In January 1881, Ambassador Shishido did not receive any sign of ratification of the treaty and left Beijing, stating the final breakdown of negotiations to divide the island. Outside of the Ryukyu issue, China's tributary system was collapsing under the France influence in Vietnam, with just Korea remaining as a tributary state. With the fall of China hegemony, even the Ryukyuan resistance movement showed signs of changings. Young people from noble families were sent to Tokyo to receive a "modern education", and came to accept the Disposition of the Ryukyu, trying to find a way to shape their identity in response to modernization. In 1893, this new elite founded the Ryukyu Shimpō, with the aim to promote assimilation to Japanese society. Their views reflected this willingness to conform to Japan by criticizing the old restoration movement and the old Kingdom was considered outdated and feudal. Japan's victory in the first Sino-Japanese war put an end to the hope of the restoration of the Kingdom. In the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), even though the Ryukyu archipelago was not mentioned, stated the end of China's tributary system, obliged to recognize the independence of Korea over which it had traditionally held suzerainty; to cede Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaodong (south

Manchurian) Peninsula to Japan.⁶ Severed every tie between China and the Ryukyu, Japan organised districts, abolished the former royal offices, enacted land and tax reforms, completing the transition from former Kingdom into part of the modern Japanese State.

1.2 The so called Okinawa character and the alleged backwardness

The incorporation of the Ryukyu Kingdom into the Japanese Empire involved far more than the reorganisation of territory and administration. It was also a process of cultural transformation aimed at redefining Okinawans as imperial subjects and integrating them into the ideological framework of the modern Japanese state. This section examines how the Japanese government, intellectuals, and local elites contributed to the construction of an “Okinawan character” through policies of assimilation, education, and social reform. It explores the tensions created by the simultaneous inclusion and marginalisation of Okinawans within the empire: while they were encouraged to identify as Japanese through narratives of common ancestry and cultural unity, they were also frequently represented as backward, primitive, and inferior in comparison with mainland Japan. By analysing debates on ethnicity, education, migration, gender, and colonial representation, this section highlights how Okinawan identity was shaped by unequal power relations and by the contradictory position Okinawans occupied between coloniser and colonised within the Japanese imperial order.

The territorial and political assimilation of the Ryukyu region was not a matter of mere administration reforms but also involved the creation of an “Okinawan character”, with a redefinition of the Okinawan subject in strict relation to the Japan empire, as the Father and the other colonial subjects, Sons and daughters of the Empire. In this paternalistic representation, the mainland Japan (*naichi*) had the duty to educate the colonial subjects to achieve modernization. This vision of racial hierarchy with the Japan race on top has one of its concrete deceptions in the exhibit called “The House of Peoples”, organised at the Fifth Industrial exhibition in Osaka (1903).

The exhibition showed a man with a whip that presided over Koreans, Ainu, Taiwanese aborigines and two Okinawan women, in a full display of the structure of domination between the colonised and discriminated Other and the imperial race. Okinawan newspapers reacted with disdain to this exhibition, on the basis that the lining up of Okinawans, who shared common roots with Japanese people, with inferior ethnic groups was an offense. Even though the control of Okinawa from 1879

⁶ Britannica (2026) The Battle of Okinawa <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Okinawa>

to the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 put its foundations on the same basis as the subjugation of the other imperial subjects such as invasion and occupation; political annexation; paternalistic enforcement of modernization; compulsory cultural assimilation to Japan, Okinawans, especially the elite part of the Prefecture, and even studies of Japan's colonialism excluded Okinawa from the colonial subject discourse.

The motivations lied on two main arguments:

- Okinawa is seen as a prefecture, opposed to the governments that ruled the colonies (*sotōkufu*).

- the assumption that Okinawans came from the same ethnic group of Japanese people.

Of course, there was a significant difference in the administration of the colonies and the Okinawan Prefecture, significant was also the economical differences between Mainland Japan's Prefecture and the Ryukyu, in an unequal relationship of power. It is vital to take into account and analyse this power unequal relationship when thinking about Okinawan identity and how it started to be interpreted after Japanese annexation, creating the cultural *other* characterised by cultural and economic backwardness but at the same time assimilating the population to Japanese culture and ethnicity, looking down to the ideological struggles that took place in the negation of their identities.

The Japanese term for "ethnos" is *minzoku*, a "group that shares a common language and culture". Since its annexation to Japan, Okinawan ethnicity has been subsumed under Japan both in terms of common origin and language on the one hand and cultural practices on the other. The necessity of this kind of anthropological and philological studies to investigate the common ancestry of the two populations stemmed from the necessity of filling the gap between the ideology of ethnic homogeneity that was the base of imperial Japan and the diversity in daily practices.

Beside the studies, the Meiji government enacted a program of assimilation (*dōka*) with the objective of assimilating Okinawans' speech, dress, work and leisure activities from those labelled as "Okinawan" to those labelled as "Japanese". Everything connected with "Okinawanness" began to be considered "backward", in a binarism in which Mainland Japan represented the model of modernity to follow and to look up. This claim was started by the Japanese popular Rights Movement during the dispute between Japan and the Qing dynasty for the possession of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Some writers of the movement argued that the Japanese control of the island was necessary to rise from the Feudalistic system.

After the creation of the Ryūkyū Shimpō intellectuals used their influence to advocate for cultural assimilation, comparing Okinawa Prefecture with the rest of Japan. During the 1920s, writers such as Matsuoka Masao associated the “Okinawan loose lifestyle” to a series of characteristics such as lazy men, overworked women, walking barefoot and its reasons to be found in a series of historical events that weakened the moral character. Others found the reasons in inappropriate reforms that focused more on appearances rather than on content, leaving Okinawa in “backwardness”. Generally, the discourse on Okinawa backwardness was defined in an antithetical position to “modern Japan”: if Okinawans were characterized by laziness, lack of hygiene and education; Japanese represented the opposite. Even the political-economic relationship between Japan and Okinawa was articulated in a binary discourse in which Japan occupied the developed position, and for this reason every kind of economic distress was identified with “the premodern Character” of Okinawa. Producing a “Japanese” identity became an imperative to overcome this state of, first of all, economical backwardness. Moreover, assimilation was necessary to distance themselves from other colonial subjects and minority groups.⁷

The most common solution to fix the economical issues was to plan programmes to promote more education. An emperor centred education to build citizens loyal to the Empire, able to contribute to the military and economic growth of Japan. The base of the education was the learning of ‘Standard Japanese’, even though this principle encountered some hardships in the first years, as an Official from the Ministry of Home Affairs stated in 1894:

We have no other recourse but education in breaking the stubborn thought of the Okinawans and assimilating them to civilization of the home islands (*naichi*)...

He then went on stating the necessity for Okinawans to learn and use Yamato-go (Japanese) while in school.

The cited “stubborn thought” refers to the Okinawan elite resistance affiliated to the Qing dynasty that hoped for the Chinese intervention to prevent the Kingdom annexation to Japan. This resistance was considered a danger and the elite considered potential traitors. For this reason, the reorientation away from China became a military and educational issue. In this climate of “production of a Japanese

⁷ Stanislaw Meyer, Okinawa: a different Japan? A historian ‘s perspective
https://journals.univie.ac.at/index.php/aaj/article/view/082_005-010_ART_MEYER201

identity”, many Okinawans that emigrated outside the Prefecture in other colonial territories, especially in Taiwan, frequently found themselves stuck between two identities: “the Japanese” and the “primitive”. In stark contrast with the economically critical situation, Taiwan was developing its economy and thus led many Okinawans to look for job opportunities on the Island, urged also by the Okinawa Normal School to train as Japanese language teachers. However, immense class differences were shown in the way Okinawans took part in Taiwan’s job market and general development: on the one hand, the elites were able to take part in its development through administration and professional positions. On the other hand, the working class found themselves in the bottom of the job market as construction workers, frontier policemen, servants and, for women, prostitutes, navigating in a job market often restricted to Ryukyuan. For this reason, despite the differences in job occupations, both the elite and the working class had to hide their identity and assimilate willingly or not to the “Japanese identity”, changing their names and casting aside their cultural practices.

On the one hand Okinawan labourers were exchanged for Taiwanese aborigines by Japanese colonists, on the other hand women were heavily accused by the Okinawan elites of ruining the image of the prefecture abroad through two main reasons. The first one connected to the first efforts to build market connections with Taiwan that were carried by women who arrived at the country as itinerant peddlers. Even though they had the huge merit of the expansion of trade, they were deemed as a problem for misinterpreting cheap goods as high-quality items and for being “pushy”. Moreover, they were called “Japanese savages” due to tattoos on their hands, called *hajiichi*. Following this discontent, members of the elite pushed for the abolition of tattoos and a change in the regulation of merchants. Due to these regulations, in the 1910s the opportunities for women were reduced to bars, restaurants and brothels. The latter situation created an additional remonstrance of the elite that did not want to be identified with the “Ryukyuan bordellos” in Taiwan.

In this climate of what Christy⁸ calls “sibling rivalry” in which the Ryukyuan, pushed by policies from mainland Japan, strived to assimilate to the coloniser “Japanese character”, creating a sameness to Japanese, backed up by the ideas of common archaic origins and the successful absorption of an emperor centred moral education, being lined up with primitives and inferior ethnic group was

⁸ Christy, A. S. (1993). The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 1(3), 607–639. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1-3-607>

considered an insult. For this reason, the “House of Peoples” exhibit during the Fifth Industrial Exhibition in Osaka in 1903 was considered an outrage to Okinawans as “true Japanese”. The exhibit showed a display of Koreans, Ainu, Taiwanese aborigines and two Okinawan women, all presided by a man with a whip.

The presence of a man with a whip, identified as a Japanese coloniser, and the different colonial subjects of the Japanese empire, pictured perfectly the structure of domination between the imperialistic power and the colonies. This deception enraged the Okinawans elites that wrote in the *Ryūkyū Shimpō*:

To line up Okinawans with Taiwanese savage and Hokkaidō Ainu is to view Okinawans, who are truly Japanese as one of these.”

Another common point of the imperial subject deception that can be found in the display was the “emasculatation” of the colonial subject, painted as female in stark contrast to the male coloniser. This image of Okinawans as not just female but also prostitutes, besides from the general “emasculatation” of colonial subjects, was linked with the Japanese interest in Okinawa’s issue. By 1903, according to different Japanese journals, the ratio of prostitutes to men in Naha was far higher than in other prefectures. This issue was englobed into an “ethnic” issue, so prostitutes became the representative of all Okinawans, and the problem of prostitution became an Okinawan “truth”. This kind of nationalist discourse did not consider how the sex tourism industry that has been developing on the territory was heavily related to powerful constructions of race and gender and on a “racial geography of sex” that exploited women's bodies in economically disempowered regions. For this reason, becoming Japanese meant also to distance themselves from effeminacy linked to the Okinawan identity.

This depiction must be understood in the context of the ideology of “family state” (*kazoku kokka*), picturing Japan as the father and Okinawan and the other colonial subjects as the children. This image carried a lot of different meanings, according to different context and formulations made by Okinawans. Accepting both the idea of Okinawans as Japanese and their identity as “children” of the Empire, meant also recognizing their position of weakness in relation to other prefectures. If on the one hand, Kamekawa Tetsuya stated that being “culturally some ten years behind”, meant that it was not fair to hold the same standards for the Okinawa’s prefecture and the more industrialised others,

on the other hand Wakigamu Rōjin, prefectural assemblyman, denounced the opportunistic tone linked to the idea of childness of the Okinawan character.⁹

1.3 Okinawan Battle and US occupation

The final phase of Okinawa's modern history was shaped by the devastating impact of the Pacific War and the subsequent establishment of American military rule. The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 transformed the archipelago into one of the bloodiest battlefields of the Second World War, causing enormous military and civilian casualties and leaving the region physically and socially devastated. In the aftermath of the conflict, the United States occupied the Ryukyu Islands and incorporated them into its postwar security strategy in East Asia, viewing Okinawa as an indispensable military outpost during both the early Cold War and the broader struggle against communism in Asia. This subchapter examines the contradictions of American rule, which combined promises of democratization and economic development with extensive military control, land expropriation, political restrictions, and the continued expansion of military bases. Particular attention is given to the experiences of Okinawan civilians during the occupation, the emergence of resistance movements centred on land rights and political self-determination, and the growth of the reversion movement that demanded the return of Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty. Ultimately, this section argues that the reversion of 1972 was not simply the result of diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Japan, but also the outcome of decades of Okinawan political mobilisation that challenged American assumptions of Okinawan passivity and asserted the population's right to determine its own future. Before the Battle of Okinawa, in 1943, the United States' army recruited experts on East and Southeast Asia such as political scientists, economists, lawyers and anthropologists to prepare for Japan's occupation. The outcomes of the research were collected in handbooks, such as the Ryukyuan Handbook that provide an outlook into the Ryukyuan's society. In October 1944, the Tenth Army military government headquarters had prepared a list of supplies and equipment; on October 10 the preliminary bombing started, causing the destruction of most of the capital city Naha. As a response the Japanese Army moved the civilians to the northern part of the island.¹⁰

⁹ Christy, A. S. (1993). The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 1(3), 607–639. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1-3-607>

¹⁰ Mizoguchi, S. (2018). Narratives of American Occupation in Okinawa. *Japan Studies Review*, 22, 57–59. URL: fiu.edu

On April 1, 1945, the American army entered the Okinawan territory, starting one of the biggest battles of the Pacific war and the US occupation of the region after the Alliance victory. The Tenth Army invasion of the territory was favoured by General Buckner, a prominent promoter of the operation not only because he believed that the Okinawan Prefecture was the most strategical point from which to stage Japan invasion, but also because setting bases on the territory could have meant prevention against a future aggression from Japan and at the same time to defend themselves from a possible Russian attack through the Chinese ports.

According to recordings contained in Buckner diary, Buckner's strategy for the invasion relied massively on U.S. "tremendous fire power"¹¹. The strategy was challenged by General Ushijima Mitsuru's Thirty-second Army fortifications, which due to its scarce numbers had the possibility of just a part of the region. Under the suggestion of Colonel Yahara Hiromichi, the Army moved to the more military strategic southern part, leaving the unpopulated north to the Americans.¹² The US marines arriving from the north arrived at the east coast of the region on the 4th of April and set the goal to the conquest of Ieishima, to block the possibility of reinforcements. The 77th Division took the island after 3 days of street-to-street fights in the main town of the island. At the same time, a naval fight had begun with Japanese kamikaze hitting American ships. The biggest attack came on April 6-7 through suicidal raids by more than 350 kamikaze and the battleship called Yamato. As the Japanese attacks continued, Admiral Spruance urged Buckner to speed up the operations. On April 4, elements of the XXIV Corps entered in contact with the first of the three Japanese Defence lines. After a month of intense fighting, on May 5, the Americans were able to break through Japanese defence, but despite the victory the American army was surrounded by a sense of discontent given by the long duration of the operation. The elements of the 10th army that had moved toward Naha encountered Japanese resistance that counted 60.000 men, fighting from prepared positions and using Okinawa's cave for protection against American bombardment. Relying on the numerical superiority and the better quality of the equipment, Americans used heavy artillery support to burn all the caves in which Japanese soldiers were hidden, in waging war. Despite the fierce resistance, on May 12, Americans broke into Naha suburbs and entered the city, while even Shuri fell on June 1. The Japanese army was then being fully exhausted by mid-June, and fighting ended on June 21. On June

¹¹ Buckner, S. B., Jr. (2024). *Tenth Army Commander: The World War II Diary of Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr.* (C. L. Kolakowski, Ed.). Casemate Publishers. ISBN: 9781636241999.

¹² Carafano, J. J., & Sarantakes, N. E. (2001). Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations. *Naval War College Review*, 54(4), Articolo 23, 4–21. URL: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss4/23>

22 Colonel Ushijima committed seppuku, officially ending the battle. In total, 110.000 Japanese soldiers were killed, and Okinawan civilian population was reduced by one-fourth; 100.000 between Okinawans women, men and children were killed during the fights or by committing suicide under order of the Japanese military.¹³

The suicide order was connected to soldier's order to "never surrender" in order to not reveal battle plans to the enemy and to the possibility of civilians in Okinawa to know these military secrets: for this reason, the order to "never surrender" was extended even to civilians, under the slogan "*kyōsei kyōshi no ittaika*" (Imperial soldiers and civilians live together and die together as one). This motto is linked to the pre-war period education of Japanese people, including Okinawans, that dying for the emperor was to be considered the greatest honour. The emperor's glory and honour were more important than individual life or the life of a relative. This propaganda taught that Americans and British were the enemies, and anybody that was caught dissenting or questioning the propaganda was considered a spy. During the Battle there were, indeed, people that worked as spies, but nonetheless numerous innocent civilians were killed by their relatives accused of spying. Civilians dead due to the War can be categorised in 3 different groups: Civilians who died in Attacks by the Allied Military Forces, Civilians killed by the Japanese Military forces, Civilians who died due to Other War Related Causes. Among the civilians killed by the Japanese Military forces, and in this last category, people accused of being spies can be found. While Japanese army proclaimed that the emperor would defend every civilians in return of support to Japan, issuing restrictive decrees on Okinawans that had to contribute to food levies, wages and corvee labour, leading to the increase of violence on the Okinawan people, Americans started to distribute leaflets, utilising the contents of the Ryukyu Handbook with the purpose to cast doubt on waging the war. Although many civilians lost their lives due to cruel Japanese policies, many others cooperated with Japan for the defence of the island, employing the territorial knowledge of the Island and distributing food to the troops. After the end of the War, as a result of the Battle, 75% of the Okinawa prefecture population was dislocated from their original homes and placed in internment camps where in some situations the Okinawans did not suffer from food shortage as testified by a woman: "(..) In my internment camp, the U.S military supplied us with ample rationing. Military officers also provide us with special rationing such as milk and canned food".¹⁴

¹³ Britannica, the Battle of Okinawa <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Okinawa>

¹⁴ Mizoguchi, S. (2018). Narratives of American Occupation in Okinawa. *Japan Studies Review*, 22, 57–59. URL: fiu.edu

On the other hand, different people suffered from malnutrition in the camps, according to another woman “At first, we lived in a huge tent which accommodated from 50 to 100 people...The food situation was also terrible. Although the U.S. military equally distributed foodstuff, ration was not enough to survive. Everyone suffered from malnutrition”.

Beside from malnutrition, another big issue, that is still unresolved in the Contemporary period, is rape by the hand of American soldiers. Rape testimonies were very common among women who survived the War. By the end of 1946, 30 rape cases were reported, and many Okinawan women were said to have prostituted themselves for food. At first, only black soldiers were considered rapists and the Director of General Affairs for the military government, Lt. Cmdr. James Watkins IV noted an “extreme ill will that had developed between the blacks and the islanders” where respect for the American authority had been replaced by fear for rape and violence. In response to this situation, an Okinawan negotiated with the Occupation forces to monitor them to prevent other rapes from happening, motion that was granted because the military government understood that the success of the Occupation depended also on the good behaviour of the American soldiers¹⁵. Despite the withdrawal of black units between 1946 and 1947, the problem related to civilians and soldiers was not resolved at all. Indeed, conflicts among the Philippines' replacement unit and Okinawans increased, due to the atrocities committed by Japanese in the Philippines during the Pacific War. These frictions between the US army and the Okinawans civilians remained a huge impediment in the reconstruction's plans of Okinawa and was not resolved at all by the military government. The cause of violence and rape cases can be found in the disruption of the chain of command because the Truman administration left the Ryukyu islands administration to the State Department, the Navy and Army that enacted different occupation plans. Finally on July 1, 1946, all the administrative authority of Okinawa was passed to the Army.

Overall, a general ambivalent sense of ambivalent feeling was found toward the American soldiers: many people admitted that American army made a greater effort to save Okinawans than the Japanese Army and contrasted the image of the benevolent American soldier with the one of the cruel Japanese soldiers that forced people to commit suicide¹⁶ (*shūdan jiketsu*). Despite the ideal goal of Americans as stated by General Mc Arthur was to “teach the islanders the meaning of democracy”, the main reason behind the American occupation of the Islands was to be found as the Joint Chiefs of Staff

¹⁵ Mizoguchi, S. (2018). Narratives of American Occupation in Okinawa. *Japan Studies Review*, 22. URL: fiu.edu

¹⁶ Seigen Miyasato (1992) USCAR Policies 1962-1972

stated, “in the Island strategic position for American postwar security arrangements”. Indeed, the Okinawan region, according to Mc Arthur, “was suited as an advance base not only because of natural factors such as size, geographical location and water supply, but also because inhabitants are clearly not fit for independence...utterly incapable to provide their own defence”¹⁷. Indeed, Okinawa was included in the list of “primary base” areas. However, the idea of unconditional US rule over the region was challenged by the Department of State since according to the Postdam Declaration of 1945, the island should be returned to Japan after demilitarization. Following this statement, a series of three debates succeeded one another in 1946, 1948 and the third between 1952 and 1953.

The first debate ended without any concrete resolution to the issue of Okinawa administration, whilst the region started to be called “junkyards” of the Pacific and “forgotten islands”.

To emphasize the low interest in Okinawa matters during the period, in February 1946, Headquarters together with the Army Forces and Western Pacific received 31 million dollars of the esteemed 93 million needed to build base facilities.¹⁸ The purpose of this operation was to provide restoration for the damages caused by the war. At first, Americans decided to release the lands of the people in the camps and dismantle them, but at the same time they confiscated 20% of the land under cultivation before the Pacific War for the construction of Military bases. As the time passed, Americans transformed Okinawans form of income, making the civilians tied economically to the military bases. Since the most important commercial crop, sugar cane, was not restored until 1951, most of the civilians found themselves working as construction workers, ground keepers, drivers, domestics and concessionary jobs all linked to the Military bases. Even though the military government propagandised the idea that the bases were built on the cooperation between the two parts, the Okinawan Times reported a different situation more similar to the idea of helping on the construction to survive rather than the enthusiastic version broadcasted by the US. The second debate resulted in the inclusion of the Okinawa provision in NSC 13/2 that stipulated the necessity for US government to decide whether intended to retain the facilities in Okinawa. From this provision, Kennan supported by General Mc Arthur suggested to claim the island as a “consequence of military conquest”. The

¹⁷ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

¹⁸ Mizoguchi, S. (2018). Narratives of American Occupation in Okinawa. *Japan Studies Review*, 22, p. 72. URL: fiu.edu

suggestion, despite being supported by Mc Arthur, met resistance from the State. Even though art. 3 of the Peace Treaty declared that:

United States will have the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of the island ¹⁹

John Foster Dulles and other State Department members involved in peace settlement with Japan showed their concerns about occupation, because not only it would have gone against the “no aggrandizement” principle, but also could have carried numerous political complications. In a memorandum of June 27, 1950, Dulles stated that if “Japan renounced sovereignty in favour of none” four major drawbacks that would influence the international order could have risen:

- sovereignty was vested in the inhabitants that could decide to expel the US from the soil.

- the victors of the war, including the USSR, have rights to sovereignty on the islands.

- United nations was free to deal with the islands in its own way.

- United states has acquired sovereignty²⁰

For these reasons, according to Dulles it was strictly necessary to accept some form of Japanese sovereignty over the region, so that legally the United States could continue to control the islands. In this situation, the concept of “residual sovereignty”²¹ served the purpose, even though it did not clarify the final disposition of Okinawa that had to be formulated combining the inhabitants’ desires with the requirements of international peace and security.

A major boost on the construction of the bases was given by the Cold War that renewed interest in Okinawa, as a strategic point from which to monitor the political situation in Asia, with a total expense of over one billion dollars, shifting the perception of the islands from being a “junkyard” to a “useful outpost against the Communist peril”. Thus, the Cold War positioned the island as a part of the ideological alignment of the US that brought the Islands as an example of the successful process of democratization.²²In this period of shifts, in 1951, the third debate took place, beginning with Far

¹⁹ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 26

²¹ Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-54

²² Mizoguchi, S. (2018). Narratives of American Occupation in Okinawa. *Japan Studies Review*, 22, p. 72. URL: fiu.edu

Eastern Command's Staff Study report on Okinawa that stated the possibility of Okinawan bases' protection recurring to the same strategy of the Security Treaty. In other words, without involvement of full and exclusive control by the United States. Following the report, a State-Defence working group was established and it was decided to return Amami Island to Japan, and to keep the rest of the Ryukyu archipelago under the US control for an indefinite period. During the meeting to inform the Japan Ambassador Eikichi Araki, if Japan didn't show more interest in the security of the Islands, the US occupation forces would not give up their control over Okinawa. However, the statement did not mean that Okinawans inhabitants were convinced of the necessity of the Occupation and neither that Americans thought that they had successfully convinced Okinawans of the necessity of their control. According to the US officials, the islanders approval of American occupation passed through different aspects: the attitude of the Okinawans, US relationship with Japan and its world wide international position, therefore it was necessary for USCAR to acquire "reasonable acquiescence" of the Okinawan people for two main purposes: maintenance of the bases and avoidance of arise of problems with Okinawans that could have caused disturbance in international relationships not only with Japan but also with other Asian countries.²³

In 1951, with the signing of the Treaty of Peace by Japan and the U.S., Okinawa became a territory of the US. Despite the Treaty, Japan had "residual sovereignty" and thus Okinawans were neither considered Japanese or Americans, receiving education in Japanese but using US dollars as the official currency and needing to hold a travel permit to go to Japan. During the 1950-1960s, the presence of military bases increased and were being used for testing and storage of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as aircraft and naval equipment. The presence of Americans the increase of military bases on the territory, added to the poor life conditions given by the loss of the lands confiscated by the American army, led to an aggravation of the relationships between the indigenous population and the American occupiers. This feeling reached its peak in 1959 when a US fighter plane crashed into a school during a test flight, one of the many "incidents" that Okinawans had and still endure due to the presence of the military bases on the territory.²⁴

²³ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

²⁴ Haw, J. (2013). Okinawa and the U.S. military, post 1945. *Scientific American*.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/expeditions/okinawa-and-the-u-s-military-post-1945/>

As happened in all the occupied areas after World War II, US army established a command organisation that, even though, changed its name from “Military Government” to “Civil Administration”, in December 1950, its general set up remained unchanged with an Army officer in charge of the Okinawa Base Command that also acted as Deputy Governor. A changing in the govern structure was registered with the Executive Order 10713 in 1957 that installed a High Commissioner in place of the Governor, and the US army was placed under CinCPAC in Hawaii. According to the Executive Order, the President delegated the Secretary of Defense to exercise administrative rights. Moreover, within the Department of the Army, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations was delegated authority to handle routine matters in Okinawa, while to the Under Secretary was given the responsibility for international affairs and administration of the Ryukyus. The Secretary of State was appointed with the responsibility to conduct relations with foreign countries ‘with the respect to the Ryukyu Islands’. This autonomy was guarded by the Army which also controlled the vast majority of the USCAR asset, having eight of the fifteen top official positions occupied by Army officials.

USCAR declared mission was to “assure that this strategic area will contribute most effectively to the peace and security of the free world”²⁵, promoting US best interests and assisting in the so called ‘democratic development’ in the Ryukyu archipelago, to achieve a viable economy and to improve the standards of life in Okinawa. The idea of creating a democracy under a military government was, to say the least, contradictory. Indeed, the promises of responsibilities to Okinawans never dreamed of under Japanese rule and a “showcase of democracy” were not convincing enough for the inhabitants of the archipelago. As the High Commissioner successively stated the only effective mean through which acquire acquiescence of Okinawans was the economic benefits. For USCAR, it was vital to analyse the local situation and to understand the correct ways in which economic benefits could have been used to seize discontents. Overall, the years before the reversion, from 1954 until 1970, were years of tumultuous protests against the occupation and as a response, decades of harsh military rule that provoked the awakening of indigenous political consciousness that expressed itself in the Okinawa People’s Party, a party against American Occupation of the islands.

This movement heavily challenged the idea of Okinawans as “docile”, depiction commonly shared by the Americans, and emerged in 1951 with the signing of 71% of the electorate to a petition of reversion in August 1951 with the hope that would have influenced the US and Japanese representatives at the San Francisco Peace Conference. Sadly, it was not the case, and art.3 of the

²⁵ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

peace treaty granted the US full right of administration, legislation and jurisdiction on the territory. The USCAR (United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands) governed, during the 1950s, governed Okinawa prefecture with a military approach, causing troubles to the advocates of reversion such as Yara Chōbyō, a teacher and one of the founding members of the founding members of the Okinawa Teacher's Association (OTA). Approaching the Reversion movement as a teacher, he was determined to promote education in Okinawa, and for this reason was viewed with suspicion by the USCAR.

In 1953, he went to Japan for six months and campaigned for funds to rebuild schools destroyed by the War, after his return he was labelled as a Communist by the USCAR, became subject of surveillance by the American intelligence agents and his passport was withdrawn and couldn't receive any loan by the banks. In a letter written on February 1954, Civil Administrator Bromley cautioned Yara to stay out of politics, asserting that the 'Reversion movement could cause confusion to the Ryukyans and comfort the communists'²⁶. The idea of equating the commitment to the Reversion with Communism, caused the USCAR to adopt cruel methods to intimidate the teachers and for Yara to resign from the Chairman position of the reversion association in 1954. The inflexible position adopted by USCAR regarding the suppression of the Reversion movement caused a powerful and determined response by the Okinawa People's Party which demanded 'immediate and unconditional reversion'²⁷ in the meantime a people's government that had fully autonomy, to escape USCAR method of removing democratically elected representatives from the office, as it had happened with the election of Tengan Choko, joint candidate of the Okinawa Socialist Masses Party and the Okinawa People's Party, declared invalid on the basis of having been convicted by a military court of embezzlement in 1946. The interference was opposed by GRI (Government of the Ryukyu Islands) and the OPP (Okinawa People's Party) that created an 'anti colonization group'.²⁸

Another big uproar was caused by the removal in November 1957 of the elected Naha's mayor Senaga Kamejiro ordered by the HICOM. Again, Okinawan proved that the 'docile and resigned character' that Americans had attributed to them, was a propagandised construction of the coloniser, in fact the very own election of Senaga Kamejiro as Naha's mayor came as a reaction to the perceived disregard

²⁶ Sakanaka Tomohisa (1968) the present status of the Okinawan reversion movement, *Journal of Asian Studies* (1969) 28 (5): 16–20. doi.org/10.1017/S0021911800084400

²⁷ Senaga Kamejiro (1959) *Minzoku no Higeiki*

²⁸ USCAR Civil Affairs activities in the Ryukyu islands: for the period ending 30 June 1953, vol 1, no 2, pp. 42-3 https://books.google.it/books/about/Civil_Affairs_Activities_in_the_Ryukyu_I.html?id=6MArAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y

that the USCAR had for the Landowners, rooted in the failure in understanding the importance of the land for Okinawans, generally considered an ‘irreplaceable heritage graciously bequeathed to us by our ancestors’.²⁹

As a response to President Eisenhower’s announcement in January 1954 in which he declared the intention of the US to maintain the military bases for an indeterminate period, GRI and OPP summed up the aims concerning the issue of the land in ‘four principles’, written in a resolution published at the end of April:

- just compensation for the use of the land.

- payment of land acquisition.

- opposition to further land acquisition.

- proper compensation for loss and damage to the land, property, arising from the acts of US military personnel.³⁰

On the one hand, the requests generated unanimous support from all the political spectrum, accompanied by a period of efforts to persuade the US to pay attention to indigenous sensibilities over the land, on the other hand generated more confrontation scenes of military seizure. These ventures culminated in a visit in October 1955 by a special subcommittee of the US House of the Representatives Committee of Armed Services, headed by Melvin Prince. This subcommittee recognised the importance of the land for Okinawans, linked to “the strong Ryukyuan tradition against relinquishing title to the land” and acknowledged the gap in understanding between the two parts, but at the same time it defined Okinawans position as “extreme”.³¹

When on 10 June 1956, the subcommittee endorsed a sum payment for all military requisitioned land, mass rallies that counted more than 160,000 Okinawans broke out in 56 different parts of the islands. The mass rallies were just the tip of the ice of a process that ended with the decision of the US to abandon the lump sum payment plan and double the rate of land rental.

²⁹ M.Ota, *Essays on Okinawa Problem* (2000), Yui publishing pp 245-246. ISBN 13: 9784946539107

³⁰ Christopher Aldous (2003) *Achieving Reversion: Protest and Authority in Okinawa, 1952-70*, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2003), p. 495 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876580>

³¹ Prince Recommendations OPA U81101473B

It can be said that the 1950s was a period in which the 'land issue' and struggle to Reversion were dominant fights carried out by the Okinawans, both by the political exponents and the small communities that organised acts of peaceful resistance through sit ins, resisting against the intimidations of the USCAR and contributing to gradually erode American morale. Moreover, what happened to Yaga, Isahama and other people who fought for the Reversion movement, together with the reported cases of beatings by US Military personnel and cases of imprisonment, casted a light on the use of repression during the US military rule in Okinawa.³² At the end of the 1950s, a stronger sense of confidence grew after the approval of the Basic Education Law that allowed Okinawans to be educated as Japanese nationals.

At the same time, in the US the reports written by Syracuse University and Conlon on US foreign policy, defined Okinawa as a 'political liability' and the necessity at some point to return Okinawa to Japan, without dismantling the military bases. In this climate of possible changes, the Reversion movement was relaunched in April 1960 with the name Council for the Return of Okinawan Prefecture to the Fatherland, having as the key sponsoring organizations the Council of Okinawan Prefectural Youth Associations, OTA and the Okinawan Government Employee' Labour Union. The USCAR, as a response, contacted exponents of the Okinawa Liberal Democratic Party to ask their support in moving together against the newborn organisation that was a possible threat to the party and bore anti US sentiments. Freimuth of the liaison department, the same man that contacted the Okinawan Liberal Democratic Party, suggested that the chief executive contact the leaders of the OTA to inform them that the Reversion campaigns had carried anti US feelings out and political difficulties which mustn't happen again. This attempt to a dialogue with the Reversion movement without the use of repression, was the result of a more moderate politic called "appeasement policy", started by the High Commissioner Booth.³³ The line of the appeasement policy was kept in June 1961 during President Kennedy and Prime Minister Ikeda meeting in Washington where the US president stated that the 'US would make further efforts to enhance the welfare and well-being of the inhabitants of the Ryukyus and welcome Japanese co-operation in these efforts', with the purpose of containing the Reversion movement.³⁴ In March 1962, President Kennedy announced the "Kennedy

³² Christopher Aldous (2003) *Achieving Reversion: Protest and Authority in Okinawa, 1952-70*, Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2003), p. 495 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876580>

³³ Ibidem, pp. 493-495

³⁴ K.Nakachi, (1989) *Ryukyuan-U.S.-Japan Relations 1945-72* pp. 104-108 <https://it.scribd.com/doc/81784920/Post-Reversion-Okinawa-Study>

Policy”, in which the Ryukyu archipelago was recognized as part of Japan and looked toward the day when the security interests of the free world would have permitted reversion to the homeland. Moreover, the public display of Japanese flag was allowed and plans to discuss with Japan for agreements on Japanese assistance were made. The main aim of the policy was to make both Okinawa and Japan satisfied with the status quo. However, the policy was not met with total agreement by all the government organs: the Army and High Commissioner Caraway opposed to some relevant aspects. The Army was against any formal statement that could have encouraged new pressure for reversion and opposed the election of the Chief Executive by the legislature. Both the Army and the High Commissioner discouraged the increase of Japanese influence in Okinawa’s matters. Especially regarding the assistance issue, Caraway was against the increase of aids from Japanese.

It can be said that the 1960-67 period didn’t record many changes in authority, but the exercise of power underwent some changes, liberalising policies of devolution of power to lessen the pressure for reversion. One of the main changes was devolving more power to the GRI. Trough the so called ‘direct rule’, the High Commissioner instituted reforms to change the GRI, that he heavily criticised as inefficient, brushing aside the possibility to transfer authority to it due to its unreadiness to assume the responsibility required. Therefore, despite the liberalization of some policies, the new High Commissioner Paul W. Caraway believed that this new policy would not lessen the Reversion movement’s pressure. On the one hand, the Reversion movement tried to speed up the reversion process; on the other hand, USCAR tried to delay it, bringing the focus of the contention between the two parties were travel restrictions, approval of publications and control of labour.

Regarding travel to Japan, it was a matter that not only involved a revindication of freedom, but it was also impregnated with an emotional subtone, since the reversion was strictly linked with the construction of bonds between Okinawans and Japanese, embracing each other as fellow nationals. In those years, the Reversion movement petitioned for freedom of travel between Japan and Okinawa, in January 1961 Akamine Takeji, chairman of Fukkikyo sent a letter to the high commissioner to demand for relaxation of restrictions so that Okinawans could ‘travel within their own country’. Indeed, travel to Japan held some complications due to the inconvenience of applications for permits and passports, and in case of a possible security risk additional documentation had to be submitted. Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties viewed this long procedure as ‘an attempt to trap perjurers rather than obtain necessary information’³⁵, statement echoed by Kaysen who stated that

³⁵ Memo of CA 8 (17 August 1959); from: Irving Einstein (legislative and Legal Dept); pp. 18-21

many Okinawans refused to submit the document because the questions resulted as too personal. Application of travel restrictions burdened USCAR with administrative and public relations issues, same problems that were found in the control of publications. A clear example of these issues was the case of a ‘song book’, in 1961, described by USCAR as containing songs with political and leftist-inspired “*utagoe*” movement. This book was submitted by Yara, as the head of the OTA, to the GRI for the permit to publish the book, as required by the provision of the code of the penal law and procedure (CA ordinance 144), and then the instance was forwarded to USCAR by the GRI. After, the Office of Public Affairs of USCAR transmitted the application to G-2 for the background check of the publication, who replied that it could not recommend against publication on security grounds. but proposed to review the contents of publication to ensure it was not meant for political propaganda. Whilst USCAR organs of administration were deciding what to decide about the book, OTA printed the book on 22 December 1960 and published it on the 24th, without waiting for GRI authorization, entitled *Aisho Kashu*, with 3000 copies sold by 10 January 1961. When USCAR contacted GRI to ask for the reason for the book’s publication, the latter replied that OTA assumed that the book would have been automatically published; on the contrary, USCAR decided that legal action against OTA would be considered. However, as Kaysen had observed in his report of December 1961, the restrictions that USCAR tried to impose were merely relevant and fruitless since it did not require translated copies for clearance. Moreover, there were not any restrictions on import of publications to Japan, so the book continued to be read.

Regarding the OTA legal actions, during the 50s, USCAR tried different methods to take down the Associations, for its main role in the Reversion movement; an association with different shapes that went from cultural goals to political ones, it undoubtedly became a serious issue to deal with. As already mentioned before, OTA was immensely vocal on the necessity of Reversion, defending its endorsement in 1959 as the members pointed out that the ‘most important educational problem in Okinawa is how to carry out the education of Okinawa as Japanese nationals’³⁶, stance stemmed from the necessity to raise Okinawan children with a sense of belonging to the Nation, strictly linking reversion to education. Another factor that may have contributed to the push of OTA for Reversion is connected to the economic incentives that Reversion could have offered in terms of salary and

³⁶Christopher Aldous (2003) *Achieving Reversion: Protest and Authority in Okinawa, 1952-70*, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May 2003), p. 495 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876580>

working conditions. Indeed, Okinawan teacher's salaries and other remuneration were about 20% below those of mainland Japan.³⁷

Among the methods to take down the association, USCAR dwelled on two in particular: split OTA on the one hand and trying to satisfy their economic demands on the other. For the first one, Colonel Hicks, chair of an ad hoc committee to deal with OTA, in January 1966 talked about the necessity to 'bore into OTA', with the purpose of causing a split in its ranks. Another method revolved around compiling as much evidence as possible against OTA, to try to convince GRI to rescind its charter. However, this method was discarded because it might have involved the action of 'intelligence agencies' to obtain copies of OTA financial records, an action that could have backfired if it were discovered.

Caught between these two methods, the Reversion Movement grew in strength, reaching 17,000 participants during a rally on April 28, 1966. USCAR, as a response, demanded GRI to intervene to take actions against those deemed to be responsible, primarily teachers who were defying the law with impunity. It can be said that the years between 1960 and 1967 were years in which the Reversion movement continued to earn ground to achieve the goals, above all thanks to the instances pushed forward by the OTA association. Indeed, in these years, OTA confirmed itself as the main organ that fought for the Reversion to Japan, claim centred on the importance of an education based on a sense of pride, linked to the belonging to 'Fatherland Japan' and economical advantages to fill the salary and work conditions gap of Okinawan people. To further enhance the strength of the Reversion movement, in 1964 the split of the Okinawan Liberal Democratic Party occurred, as a response to Caraway's failure to implement the points promised by Kennedy policy. The inability of the US to grant the promised points and the constant charges of the opposition parties caused the Party to split in two: the reformist and the conservatist, with two different ways of thinking regarding several aspects of the relationship with the US. The reformist claimed a bolder stand toward the United States, an increase in autonomy through public election of the Chief Executive and a timetable for reversion. The split of the Party was successively resolved with the creation of a new party named Democratic Party in December 1964, in which the reformist line prevailed³⁸. Moreover, on the one hand, OTA's position increased in stability while, on the other hand, USCAR and, first and foremost, GRI's inability and inadequateness to control and contrast the Reversion movement was further backed up

³⁷Guidance for reasonable elements of OTA, 12 September 1966

³⁸ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

by a confrontation between the government and opposition over two educational bills regarding political activities of teachers on February 24. In this confrontation, the opposition was able to postpone the plenary session and to sign an agreement shelving the two bills.³⁹

During the years between 1965 and 1967, the Reversion Movement received a major impetus from external factors, among which the visit of the Japanese Diet members of the Japan Specialist Party and the twin education bills are the main relevant ones. The visit from members of the Japanese Specialist Party during mid-January 1965 increased leftist activities, further boosted by the American participation in the Vietnam War and the possibility of an Okinawa direct involvement in the conflict. Two cases during 1966 and 1967 showed the declining influence of USCAR over the Okinawans and the increasing strength of the Reversion movement. In 1966, High Commissioner Watson ordered the transfer of the “Tomari” and “mackerel” case from GRI to the USCAR court, following the GRI Central Court ruled that portions of USCAR ordinances were invalid under the Executive Order. The transfer order was encountered by numerous protests from political groups and media. The Democratic Party joined the opposition party legislators in passing a resolution to request the return of the two cases to the GRI Court. Consequently, the Joint Struggle Council for the Retraction of the Court Transfer Order was formed, and the issue became the focal target of criticism. On December 2, 1968, the USCAR Court decided to validate Tomari election to the legislature and in the ‘mackerel case’ ruled that the taxes imposed by ordinance on mackerel were valid, conceding Okinawan the points of the dispute. In a meeting between High Commissioner Unger and Chief Executive Matsuoka on March 15, 1967, it was clearly stated the necessity to strengthen the Okinawan police, GRI and Democratic party, to be successful in preventing disturbance from the opposition of that scale to happen again without US direct intervention. The refusal to resort to US intervention reveals that both the cause of autonomy and self-rule had been getting increasingly advanced. In that sense, examples of the advancement of these causes are the rescission on February 5, 1965, of the 144 section’s ordinance for prior approval of publications. Moreover, High Commissioner Watson tended to not interfere with legislature’s work if bills did not interfere with US mission on the territory. However, despite his attempts to find a common ground with the Reversion movement, accommodating the request for public election of the chief executive by authorizing the direct election through the

³⁹ Miyasato, S. (1992). USCAR Policies, 1964–1972. In *Okinawa 20: Proceedings of a seminar on Okinawa reversion and its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations* (pp. 25–42). Japan Center for International Exchange.

legislature, the Reversion movement was not satisfied. During a meeting on March 29 1966, Yara declared that CE election did not happen due to the “servile attitude of the Democratic Party”⁴⁰, and at the same time, Kyan Shinei, chairman of the Reversion council declared that the US were “too nervous about the type of chief executive the Ryukyuans would elect”⁴¹

It was clear that by the end of 1967, the issue shifted from reversion itself to the actual timing and conditions of it. However, the High Commissioner Watson did not perceive the political climate as a critical one, hoping to keep the reversion movement sedated, taking several measures to expand local autonomy. He began by reducing the number of ordinances made by the USCAR from 145 to 89 and allowed the Chief Executive to appoint directors of the GRI departments without his approval. After his elections as Chief Executive, Watson followed the roots that grounded in the same assumptions that underpinned the American occupation of Okinawa, namely the belief that economic improvements would quell the reversion movement, promoting several economic reforms. These reforms that constituted a more general plan had the aim to grant that the level of public health, educational and welfare services advance toward level obtained in comparable areas of Japan by 1971.⁴² However, with the failure of the United State congress to meet USCAR’s budget request, USCAR had to turn to the Japanese government to financial assistance regarding the improvement of Public Health, education and welfare, the most neglected sectors, with the hope to sedate Okinawans dissatisfaction. As the establishment of the US-Japan Consultative Committee and the US-Japan Ryukyus Technical Committee revealed, USCAR was open to accepting aids from Japan, but set four conditions to the acceptance:

- that they contributed to the welfare and wellbeing of the Ryukyuans.
- that it be absorbable during the period available.
- that it does not interfere with the administrative rights of the United States.
- that it does not work against the mission of the United States to defend the area⁴³

⁴⁰ Ryūkyū Shimpō 29 March 1966 <http://english.ryukyushimpo.jp/2016/01/06/24262/>

⁴¹ Okinawa’s reformist chief executive’, Japan quarterly January-March 69, vol. XVI, no2 pp 8-10.

⁴² Seigen Miyasato (1991) USCAR policies 1964-72, Okinawa reversion: its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations p.30 <https://jcie.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/CommemorativeEventsSummaryOkinawaReversion.pdf>

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 31

Between 1966 and 1969, with Ferdinand Unger as the High Commissioner, aid from Japan were further expanded and increased. However, compared to his predecessor, he made a step forward in stating to the legislature that “we are both looking forward to the earliest possible date when circumstances will permit reunification with Japan.”⁴⁴ In the middle of 1967, all the Ryukyuan ships were allowed to fly the Japanese flag and representatives of the Japanese Government and USCAR reached agreements to transfer to the Japanese Government of the authority and identity papers to Okinawans travelling outside the islands. With the Sato-Johnson meeting approaching on 14 November 1967, the legislation proposed a reversion solution, carried to Tokyo by a delegation. However, with the failure of the meeting to set any date for the reversion, the opposition parties and activists from Japan organized several demonstrations which culminated in the April 28 Reversion Day Rally.

After the rally, the main political focus was shifted to the election of the Chief Executive scheduled for November 1968. After Unger’s announcement, on February 1, 1968, that President Johnson had amended executive order 10713 to provide for popular election of the chief executive and that the election would take place in November. Promptly, OTA assumed leadership of the opposition forces, inducing 11,000 members to canvas for Yara, pushing the instance of immediate, unconditional and complete reversion that revealed to be more appealing than the conservatives’ goal of gradual reversion (*ittaiika*). Yara’s election, even though the legislation control was still in the hands of the conservatives, symbolised a political setback for USCAR. However, his victory did not mean that the tumultuous political and social change was becoming quiescent. Indeed, several days after Yara election a B-52 failed to take off generating an explosion at the end of the runway and the eruption of criticisms from all the political elements. The Joint Struggle Council to Protect Human Life was formed, the biggest rally in Okinawa during the Occupation happened, together with a general strike joined by all the revisionists and labour organisations. The strike was stalled off with the collaboration between the Japanese Government and the Chief Executive Yara, but the decision created strong discontents among the reversionists, that stemmed into more extreme views to deal with the American presence on the region. The Okinawa Reversion Council (*Okinawa-ken sokokufukki kyōgi-kai*) added two more points on the “essential policy”: removal of American bases from Okinawa and abolition of the US-Japan Security Treaty; furthermore, in accordance with the Okinawa Prefecture Labour

⁴⁴ USCAR, Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands, Vol. XV 1967 p. 310

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v14p2/d731>

Unions Council, a mass rally was organised. During the rally, American military resorted to violence to seize the participants, causing several injured including the Chairman of the Socialist Masses Party. USCAR found itself further unable to control the protests while the discontent of Okinawans pushing for reversion increased strongly, as Secretary of the Army James V. Siena stated: “the longer we administer the islands, the longer frustration and the greater their desire to return”. However, High Commissioner Lampart considered two issues the obstacles that separated the possibility of reversion: the return of governmental administrative rights to Japan and its timing and the status of US military bases after reversion. After the summit meeting of November 1967, it was clear the differentiation that USCAR made between reversion and the administration of the bases, as Lampart was sure that “the majority of the Ryukyuans, while desiring the return of governmental control to Japan, took it for granted that the United States bases on Okinawa will remain for number of years to come”. From this statement, USCAR policy of maintaining control and effective use of the bases was clear, while leaving Okinawans and Japanese Government space to organise the administrative aspects.

In the joint communique of 1967, an Advisory Committee to the High Commissioner was established, with the aim to minimize the stresses which could have arisen when the administrative rights were restored to Japan, beginning its operation in March 1968. The first decision taken by the Committee was the invitation of the Japanese Government to send a survey team as a first step in the promotion of the reversion. The team formulated a three-years plan for integration, formulating a plan for aid program to Okinawa that would have started after 1968. However, at the same time, Unger emphasised the unchanging will of the US army to use the Okinawan military bases, affirming that the control of the radioactive contamination, the stationing of B-52 bombers and the calls made by nuclear powered submarines to Okinawan ports were all outside the jurisdiction of the Committee.⁴⁵ Finally in November 1969, a joint communique by President Nixon and Prime Minister Sato stated the beginning of negotiations to institute reversion of Okinawa in 1972.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Okinawans achieved reversion to Japan. The actions that brought the movement to the goal lay their foundations on the struggles of the farmers against the confiscation of their lands for the construction of the military bases and on the subsequent organisation of OTA and other associations. Considering these two aspects, the Reversion was primarily an Okinawan achievement that invalidated the US

⁴⁵ Seigen Miyasato (1991) USCAR policies 1964-72, Okinawa reversion: its long-term significance in US-Japan Relations p. 40 <https://jcie.org/analysis/books-reports/okinawa/>

⁴⁶ Christopher Aldous (2003) Achieving Reversion: Protest and Authority in Okinawa, 1952-70, pp. 504-506 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876580>

assumptions of Okinawan docility and political immaturity, revealing them as a construction to control and sedate the Reversion movement.

1.4 After reversion: land struggle and anti-base movement

The reversion of Okinawa to Japanese administration in 1972 marked a significant political achievement for the movement that had opposed American rule for more than two decades. However, for many Okinawans, reversion did not bring the fundamental changes they had expected. While sovereignty formally returned to Japan, the extensive network of United States military bases remained largely intact, and many of the social, environmental, and political issues associated with their presence continued to shape everyday life. This section examines the contradictions of the post-reversion period, focusing on the persistence of the military infrastructure, the unequal concentration of bases in Okinawa, and the tensions generated by land expropriation and military land use. Particular attention is given to the emergence of anti-base movements, landowners' organisations, and legal challenges against the Japanese state, which reflected a growing perception that Okinawa continued to bear a disproportionate burden in support of the U.S.–Japan security alliance. By analysing disputes over land rights, base consolidation policies, and grassroots activism, this section argues that reversion did not resolve the Okinawan question but instead transformed it, shifting the focus of political struggle from opposition to American administration to resistance against the continued militarisation of the islands under the framework of Japanese sovereignty.

Despite the historical importance of Reversion, Okinawans perceived scarce improvements regarding the issues related to the military bases. In other words, inhabitants when faced with Reversion, based on the “*kaku nuki, hondo nami*” (on par with the mainland, without nuclear weapon), did not expect that it would have just meant a regularisation of the pre-existent situation, applying the US-Japan Security Treaty. For many Okinawans the “*kaku nuki, hondo nami*” meant not only the removal of American nuclear weapons but also the reduction of the bases to the same level of those in the other Japanese prefectures. Instead, concerns linked to the base presence such as regular appearance of B-52s, occurrence of accidents, crimes against Okinawan residents, racial tension amongst US forces, drug and prostitutions did not decrease as expected after reversion. After reversion, in 1972, military bases occupied the 286.6 square kilometres, making up the 27% of the main island of Okinawa, implementing the description that saw Okinawa as “not an island of bases but an island inside a large

base”.⁴⁷ After reversion, the reversion agreement included a Memorandum of Understanding on the bases, structured in 3 charts, that disposed of the 134 active bases on the territory:

- Chart “A” included 88 facilities that were kept by the US for military use.

- Chart “B” listed 12 facilities to be returned at an appropriate time in the future.

- Chart “C” referred to a list of 34 bases that had to be returned in the immediate future.

Both the governments considered necessary a further realignment and reduction of the bases that was discussed during Prime Minister Sato Eisaku and Nixon summit on January 6, 1972, in which Nixon stated to understand this necessity taking into further consideration the possibility of adjustments in the facilities. The 14th session of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee, as part of this process of adjustment, took place on January 23, 1973, having the aim to formalize the Japan Facilities Adjustment Plan (JPFA). The meeting was attended by Robert S. Ingersoll, Ambassador of the United States, who had visited Okinawa in June, right after reversion. During his stay, he had the opportunity to encounter the damages done by the US forces related to crimes and the extensive use of Okinawans’ land that as he stated lived in harsh and difficult conditions, often displaced and in direct contact with pollution and other security issues that the bases produced:

“The Okinawans were forced to live in very crowded areas. They could see the expansive lawns, golf courses and other recreational areas occupied by the Americans (...) Again I was the butt of the Japanese government’s effort to reduce our use of the land. To convince our military commanders and their staffs that it would be to their budgetary benefit and to the American diplomatic advantage to consolidate some of these facilities and thus release some of the land areas we are occupying to civilian Okinawan use”.⁴⁸

The JPFA concerned facilities all over Japan, among them the Kanto plan and the Kadema plan; the former dealt with the release and relocation of more than 6,000 acres of high value real estate at numerous facilities, coming as the result of pressures to reduce land use around Tokyo due to the increase of the population. The headquarters of the US Forces Japan and the Fifth Air Division were relocated to Yokota. By the end of 1982, the realization of the Plan was completed. The latter, called

⁴⁷ Robert Elderidge (2004), POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002

⁴⁸ Robert Elderidge (2004), POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002

Kadenma Plan, went smoothly due to the smaller consolidations planned in 1973. With the plans successfully executed, the SSC met again to approve the first phase of the Okinawa Base Consolidation Plan concerning the return of 48 facilities for a total of 2,778 hectares.⁴⁹ The US bases were re-organised in: Facilities and Areas for Release without Relocation; Facilities and Area, Release of which Will be the subject of Further discussion.⁵⁰ As a result of these confrontations, during a meeting held on July 8, 1976, Japan and US agreed on the next phase of base consolidations and returns in Okinawa, regarding the return of 12 twelve facilities for a total area of 2,478 hectares⁵¹. Between 1973 and 1976, 63 facilities were marked for release. However, the release of the bases was not unconditional, but contingent upon relocation; therefore, several facilities—such as Naha Military Port and Ie Jima Auxiliary Airfield—have not yet been returned. Among the reasons of the slow return of the land, two of the main ones are explained by Director General of the Defense Facilities Administration Agency Shikimura Muneko during a meeting of the Upper House Budget Committee on May 13, 1987:

-difficulty in selecting a site for relocation.

-The opinions of landowners, who opposed the return of the land due to the loss of the rental fee that it would have caused, made him realise the negative sides of the plan.⁵²

Moreover, when thinking about the reasons behind the delay of land's return, other 3 factors cannot be ignored: Okinawa "strategical" position and thus considered "vital" and more important than many other bases in mainland Japan; due to the importance of the facility, many cannot be released if there was no guaranteed possibility on the continuation of the function exercised in that base; while most of the land in mainland Japan which hosted bases was nationally owned, Okinawan lands were generally privately owned and thus needed a clarification of the property rights other than the agreement of the owner.

⁴⁹ Kikimura and Kinjo, *Doko e Iku*, p. 237

⁵⁰ Press Release, Sixteen Meeting Japan-United States Security Consultative Committee, July 8, 1976, Diplomatic Records Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 1-511-11 <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/scc/index.html>

⁵¹ Robert Elderidge (2004), *POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002* p.60 Robert Elderidge (2004), *POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002* p.60

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 62

However, if compared with the Kanto plan, which orchestrated the return of lands that hosted leisure activities, the confiscated lands in Okinawa were strictly connected to the survival of the owners, and thus the return was considered vital.

This sentiment was deeply felt during the years until nowadays, being the propulsion of the birth of the Antiwar Landowners Association and several other strategies to renew the connection to their land. The Association was founded on December 9, formed by farmers in opposition to the cooperation with the central government. The association counted members from very diverse backgrounds, employment and ideologies, all sharing antiwar ideas. Among them, the scholar-activist Arasaki was one of the most fervent members. Along with the dissatisfaction feeling related to the perception that Okinawa was being sacrificed in favour of the America-Japan relationship, the Law Concerning the Temporary Use of Public and Other Land in Okinawa legislation (*Okinawa ni okeru kōyōchito no zantei shiyō ni kansuru hōritsu*) bill prepared in November 1971 and then approved by the Diet on December 14 was the spark that ignited the dissatisfaction that led to the founding of the Association. The association counted members from very diverse backgrounds, employment and ideologies, all sharing antiwar ideas. Among them, the scholar-activist Arasaki was one of the most fervent members. Along with the dissatisfaction feeling related to the perception that Okinawa was being sacrificed in favour of the America-Japan relationship, the Law Concerning the Temporary Use of Public and Other Land in Okinawa legislation (*Okinawa ni okeru kōyōchito no zantei shiyō ni kansuru hōritsu*) bill prepared in November 1971 and then approved by the Diet on December 14 was the spark that ignited the dissatisfaction that led to the founding of the Association. The bill was seen as a violation of the postwar Constitution articles 29, 14 and 95 that protected private property, equality under the law and the impossibility of special law to be applied without a referendum⁵³ Despite the criticism, the bill went into effect in May 1972, and its effectiveness carried on until May 15, 1972. During this period, pressures were put on non-collaborative landowners to get along and lose their lands: landowners were contacted at their workplace and homes, interfering with their search for jobs; another attempt to force cooperation was led through positive and negative economic incentives, among others, large rental fees paid to induce them to lease the land is a method still used nowadays. For those who succumbed to the pressure, it was given an additional payment for

⁵³ Robert Elderidge (2004), POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002 pp. 63-64 Robert Elderidge (2004), https://www.academia.edu/80952932/Post_reversion_Okinawa_and_US_Japan_Relations_A_Preliminary_Survey_of_Local_Politics_and_the_Bases_1972_2002

cooperation; on the other hand, for the landowners who did not cooperate, rents were paid in a one sum payment and then taxed heavily.

As a protest against the bills and the methods that followed, the Council to Protect the Constitution from the Unlawful Use of the Land for Military Purpose (*koyochiho iken sosho shien kenmin Kyoto kaigi*) was founded on February 16, 1976, by 18 organisations that included the Communist and Socialist Party⁵⁴. The council filed a lawsuit against the Central government with the accuse of violation of their rights on March 8, 1977. While, as the expiration date of the bill was approaching, the Government began to consider the possibility of a new bill to allow the continued use of military land. At the same time the new bill was created, the prefectural government proposed its own draft, even though it was not considered by the central government. Eventually, even the opposition agreed on the new bill that extended the *koyochiho* to another 5 years.⁵⁵ The news was received with big surprise by the delegation of anti-base groups from Okinawa and mainland Japan that were in Tokyo for a rally against the new bill.⁵⁶ The rally recorded 7000 participants and was the first large-scale rally regarding the “Okinawa issue” since reversion. However, before the vote for the new bill scheduled for May 18 and was not effective until the next day, for four days the permission for land use had expired. During these days, when the government was using the land without legal permission, hundreds of landowners entered their properties situated on the US facilities and had picnics and planted crops as a symbol of reclaiming their land, while the newspapers denounced the central government as guilty of being in violation of an illegal occupation.⁵⁷ Subsequently the Naha Defense Facilities Administration Bureau worked on an effective method to continue to use the land, without having to prolong the *Koyochiho* due to its anti-constitutional nature. Among the considered solutions, the possibility to apply the Special Measures Law on US Military Land (*Beigun Yochi Tokubetsu Sochiho*) was taken into account. First enacted in 1952, the Special Measure was organised in five steps: approval by the Prime Minister of the land that the US military could use; written approval by every landowner of the report based on the examination of land and assets; the DFAB submission of

⁵⁴ Moriteru Arasaki (1972) Okinawa Gendaishi <https://it.scribd.com/document/1014512048/A-Lateral-Reading-Contemporary-History-of-Okinawa-by-Moriteru-Arasaki>

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 59

⁵⁶ Moriteru Arasaki (1972) Okinawa Gendaishi p. 92 <https://it.scribd.com/document/1014512048/A-Lateral-Reading-Contemporary-History-of-Okinawa-by-Moriteru-Arasaki>

⁵⁷ Moriteru Arasaki (1972) Okinawa Gendaishi p. 56 <https://it.scribd.com/document/1014512048/A-Lateral-Reading-Contemporary-History-of-Okinawa-by-Moriteru-Arasaki>

the report to Prefectural Land Expropriation Committee (*Ken Tochi Shuyo Inkai*) for the decision on the approval use of the land; after the notification, the prefectural land committee would hold a public deliberation in which DFBA and landowner would speak; final decision of the Committee. The plan was approved for a period of 5 years in January 1981. During that time, members of the Iken Kyoto and other anti-war groups mobilised and sat into the hearings but were unable to prevent the proceedings from being carried out. The approval of the plan and the opinions of the polls on the 10th Anniversary of the Reversion revealed a Conservative trend disclosing. Indeed, the polls showed that 63% of the people saw reversion as a “very good thing”, growing to 88% in 1992. Among the reasons, health care and welfare expansion, improvement of the infrastructure and increase in exchanges with the mainland were the main factors cited in the reasons.⁵⁸

However, it does not mean that the anti-war movement ceased to exist with the birth of a new movement known as “Hitotsubo Hansen Jinushi” or “One Tsubo Anti-war Landowners”, that included owners of lands used for US facilities in the Kadena Air Base ⁵⁹. With the passing of time, land leasing would become more problematic with the new employment of coercive methods and the attempt to prolong to twenty years the lease of the land. In response to the proposal, it was pointed out that the leasing was based on the consent of the landowner and that proceeding against the will of the owner was illegal. From February 16, 1986, eleven hearings were held regarding the expropriation of land, however the landowner frequently complained about the unjust treatment endured during the sessions, such as being “forcefully brought to a conclusion” ⁶⁰. As it can be expected, Okinawans were not satisfied with the amendments and the feeling that Okinawa was the sacrificial lamb for the stability of the US-Japan relationship began to grow strongly.

1.5 Anti base protests: from anti base groups to a social movement

⁵⁸ Robert Elderidge (2004), POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002 pp. 66-67

https://www.academia.edu/80952932/Post_reversion_Okinawa_and_US_Japan_Relations_A_Preliminary_Survey_of_Local_Politics_and_the_Bases_1972_2002

⁵⁹ Moriteru Arasaki (1972) Okinawa Gendaishi p. 88 <https://it.scribd.com/document/1014512048/A-Lateral-Reading-Contemporary-History-of-Okinawa-by-Moriteru-Arasaki>

⁶⁰ Robert Elderidge (2004), POST reversion Okinawa and US-Japan relations: a preliminary survey of local politics and the bases, 1972-2002 p. 68

https://www.academia.edu/80952932/Post_reversion_Okinawa_and_US_Japan_Relations_A_Preliminary_Survey_of_Local_Politics_and_the_Bases_1972_2002

This chapter examines the evolution of Okinawan resistance movements from the postwar period to the contemporary era, focusing on the relationship between militarization, colonial domination, and social activism. While the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 was celebrated as the culmination of a long political struggle, many Okinawans soon realized that the presence of U.S. military bases and the burdens associated with them remained largely unchanged. As a result, anti-base activism continued to develop, shifting from demands for reversion to broader critiques of militarism, land dispossession, environmental destruction, and gender-based violence. Through the analysis of landowners' movements, environmental campaigns, and feminist organizations, this final section explores how Okinawan resistance evolved from a local struggle into a transnational movement that challenged both American military power and Japanese state policies.

Since the Post War Period, Okinawa Prefecture has experienced ongoing social mobilization and protests against military occupation and US bases. Over time, these movements shifted focus and scale, especially in the 1980s, evolving from local to transnational efforts. International attention for protests—such as those opposing base construction and the Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence—helped forge connections with anti-war groups in the US and other Pacific nations. The first large scale movement was registered in 1951, having as its aim Okinawa return to Japan. The general feeling of the struggle was of being left behind by Japan that was achieving independence, leaving Okinawa to American military rule. However, Okinawans protests were ignored by both US government and Japan, leaving the vast majority of Okinawans disposed from their lands with them being confiscated for the construction of US military bases and facilities. The use of coercive methods to confiscate the landowners' territories generated the second way of protests in June 1956, that was seized only with the promise of economical assurances. It must be noted that the element in common with all the island wide struggles had been their nonviolent character. Indeed, even during the Koza riot in 1970, born from an Anti-American feeling where mobs destroyed cars and part of the military buildings, harmed people were not registered due to the attention of the protestants to not endanger people in the cars and the buildings. One of the hypotheses raised by Arasaki Moriteru (2001) behind the non-violent nature of the protests was the still vivid memory of the Battle of Okinawa during which people experienced.⁶¹

-
- ⁶¹ Arasaki Moriteru (2001) The struggle against military bases in Okinawa- its history and current situation p. 102 DOI:[10.1080/14649370120039506](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370120039506)

The island struggles and its social mobilization focused until the half of the 1960s on achieving the same rights and living conditions of the mainland with a strong sense of Anti American and Anti base feeling. The turning point of the movement during those years was the uprising of the Vietnam War and the possible involvement of Okinawa, due to the strong presence of military bases on the territory. Even though the bases had been built forcibly on the Archipelago, the recognition that passively accepting the bases began to spread, and thus the movement turned explicitly into an anti-war movement. Indeed, the connection between militarism, colonial struggle and anti-war movement was furthermore explored in the following years, even though the creation of transnational links that transformed the local protests in transnational movements connected to other regions and states occupied by the American Army. With Reversion, Okinawans began to notice that their hope to free themselves from the American Occupation had come to nothing, and Reversion was just a step to strengthen Japan and US relationship to the expense of Okinawan people. The years after Reversion registered protests against the presence of the Self Defence Forces, deployed in the Prefecture as soon as Reversion happened. Even though, due to their low-profile technique, nowadays the dissatisfaction rate regarding Self Defence Forces is at its lowest, ten years after Reversion, in 1982, during a military parade reached its highest point. During the parade, in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the SDF's deployment in Okinawa, the military parade was disrupted by protesting people. The dual American and Japanese colonial domination over the territory becomes evident in Japan's post-reversion role, which entailed the preservation of the U.S. military base system in its entirety, thereby perpetuating Okinawa's structural dependency on the bases as a means of economic and social survival. The general Japanese government policy regarding the base land consisted in creating a huge group of beneficiaries from the base land, the owners of the land where the bases were located. As soon as Reversion took place, the Japanese government raised the land rent six times in a single step. With this strategic manoeuvring, not only they created a group of people that economically could benefit more from the bases but damaged the core of the anti-base struggle. The people who, during the 1950s, landowners were the back bones of the struggle, became conservative forces tied to the bases for their livelihood. However, 10% of the landowners, the so-called anti-base landlords, did not bend to the benefits of the lease contracts and thus, the government enacted a special law for compulsory land confiscation, with the effect of reducing the anti-base landlords. Despite these measures, the struggle against the bases and the colonial rule was not suppressed and was re-organized in a new anti-base movement in 1982 called "One tsubo anti base movement", joining

forces with the original anti base landlords and buying small lots of base land from the original owners.⁶²

The third wave of protest was triggered by the rape of a twelve-year-old girl by three American servicemen in September 1995. Although other cases of sexual violence involving U.S. personnel had been reported previously, this specific incident provoked a widespread uprising due to two key factors. First, there was a growing awareness and consciousness of women's and children's rights, reinforced by international meetings such as the Beijing World Conference on Women. Second, the incident occurred in a sensitive political context marked by the redefinition of the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance and the impending renewal of base land–lease contracts with anti-war landowners, scheduled for November 1995 in conjunction with President Clinton's visit to Japan. The redefinition of the Alliance meant for Okinawans continuing to endure the burdens of US military occupation and continuing to be complicit in wars unwillingly. Despite the effectiveness of Japan's government policy to keep the military base's land, once again the anti-war landlord's movement proved to be the beacon against the double colonial rule and the spark to ignite another wave of protests where Okinawans continued to ask for the reduction in size of the bases as a first step that would have led to the removal. Under the protests, the two governments, pretending to concede some of the demands, cut the size of some bases and replaced them with new ones, as happened to the relocation of the Futenma base to Nago City, unequivocally rejected by citizens through the vote on the referendum.

Despite being still economically tied to Japanese government funds for 'development' and the lease on the land, the 1995 protests, with a vast participation of base landowners and not just anti-war movements, revealed the strong anti-base conscience that had grown through the years, and is continuing to shape daily life reality and consciousness of Okinawan people that continue to struggle and fight for the reduction and relocation of the bases, transforming the movement in a more regional and then transnational one, attracting in the years international media attention and tying itself to feminism, anticolonialism and environmental.⁶³ In January 1997, the Association to Protect Life was

⁶² Arasaki Moriteru (2001) The struggle against military bases in Okinawa- its history and current situation p. 104 DOI:[10.1080/14649370120039506](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370120039506)

⁶³ Arasaki Moriteru (2001) The struggle against military bases in Okinawa- its history and current situation pp. 106-108 DOI:[10.1080/14649370120039506](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370120039506)

formed in opposition to a Heliport feasibility study requested by the Japanese government to establish the land in which the Futenma airbase would have been relocated. The Association raised a petition against the study that by April was signed by 70% of the residents of Henoko Bay, in the Yanbaru region, in the north part of the region. Because the vast majority of the Okinawans lived in the centre and south part of the Prefecture due to the abundance of water and other natural resources, the northern part was nearly left untouched. The underuse of the area, however, makes it an easy target for concretisation and restoration plans, regarding not just the construction plan for the bases but also the construction of facilities by the Japanese government in return for the acceptance of the bases in the area.⁶⁴ Hence, with the failure of the Association To Protect Life to avoid the study from being conducted, citizens of the region established an anti-military base community group called Citizens Committee to Advocate a Referendum Concerning the Construction of a Heliport, described by Inoue Masamichi as a “a movement that turned discussion of the heliport into a referendum on a range of issues related to the US military, the US Japan Okinawa relationship, peace and war, the social influences of the US forces, Okinawan development, the Japanese government’s treatment of Okinawa and the Okinawa people, and the environment”.⁶⁵

The council approved a region-wide referendum to be held on December 21, 1997, and, since the council had achieved its main aim, it was reformed in October with the name Committee to Oppose the Heliport Construction and Demand the Democratisation of Nago City Government. The first group that joined the newly formed Committee was the Juku no Kai group, that common folks such as farmers, fisherfolks, artists and homemakers who’s daily and work life would have suffered from the construction of the Heliport and thus were determined to protest against it. The activities of the association had a local focus on Kushi, where they attached anti-Heliport signs and posters and placed anti-base banners on the group’s office main road. Their aim to protect the district naturally intertwined the group’s activity on the natural aspects of the area, leading the first campaign in Okinawa to focus on the environmental impacts of the bases on the Okinawan prefecture. One of the assets used to conduct the campaigns was the presence of the dugong in the area, creating ‘dugongs watching’ tours conducted by Eco-Net Chura to provide evidence of the presence of the dugongs in

⁶⁴ Caroline Spencer (2003) Meeting of the dugongs and the cooking pots: anti-military base citizens’ groups on Okinawa p. 80 DOI:[10.1080/1037139032000129676](https://doi.org/10.1080/1037139032000129676)

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 89

the area.⁶⁶ It was the focus on the dugongs and the attention to environmental issues that furthermore contributed incorporating the environmental issues to the anti-war and anti-base movement, transcending the borders of the Okinawan archipelago and intertwining its fight with Japan-wide campaigns. It was the focus on the dugongs and the attention to environmental issues that furthermore contributed incorporating the environmental issues to the anti-war and anti-base movement, transcending the borders of the Okinawan archipelago and intertwining its fight with Japan-wide campaigns. Thanks to the efforts of *Juku no kai* (Afterschool organisation) (during the Second World Congress for the Conservation of Nature in Amman, the conference recognised the dugong as an endangered species and recommended its protection. Thus, the construction of the Heliport has become a dilemma for the Japanese government, since the Henoko Bay is a feeding ground for the mammal.

The intertwining of the local environment struggle for the natural conservation and the global anti-base movements, reveals that “Okinawa is starting to address the global audience concerned with the global militarisation dominated by the American Empire”,⁶⁷ in what Tanji describes as a “globalisation theory and local reality”. In other words, using dugongs as a symbol of the fight against the militarisation of the Okinawa territory, the movement had the possibility to reach an international audience in a meso-level of political interaction between Okinawa anti-base groups and global anti-base social movements.

The meso- level political interaction is even more clear with references to the Okinawan Women groups, the main groups that first crossed the divide between north and south in the anti-base network campaign, taking often the leading roles, contributing on the attention to military violence as a patriarchal mean of control and subjugation and especially rape as one of the most effective tool to exercise it. Indeed, one of the examples is the protest in 1995 after the rape of a 12-year-old schoolgirl in Kin Town. The violence was consumed during the period of the Fourth Beijing International Women’s NGO forum in September 1995 where seventy-one women from Okinawa participated. The conference generated an increase in the participation of women in the political and social

⁶⁶ Caroline Spencer (2003), Meeting of the dugongs and the cooking pots: anti-military base citizens’ groups on Okinawa pp. 128-130 DOI:[10.1080/1037139032000129676](https://doi.org/10.1080/1037139032000129676)

⁶⁷ Miyume Tanjii, Okinawa screaming anti-globalisation protest in the American empire." *Arena Magazine* (Fitzroy, Vic), (54), pp. 13–14 <https://arena.org.au/informit/okinawa-screaming-anti-globalisation-protest-in-the-american-empire/>

movements, with the foundation of the Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence based in Naha, that organised the rally in October 1995 as a protest against the rape case.

On the local level, great attention was given to the rape victims of American soldiers: through a public statement issued on the 23rd of September 1995, the group declared the start of interrogation residents of small communities in which rape victim lived. The group was aware of the violence issue and the consequent violation of women rights. In November 1995, the group organised the “12-day Sit- in Demonstration” from November 9th to the 20th, expressing anger towards the violence perpetrated by the American soldiers and called for the protection of human rights and for harsh punishments of sexual crimes.⁶⁸ Other rallies and manifestations were organised to put emphasis on the sacrifice of women and children as a result of the military bases or the organisation of the peace Caravan for the 50th anniversary of the US invasion of Okinawa, as a reminder of the violation of women and children rights during the War and the Occupation.⁶⁹

The astonishing work and attention to gather awareness on the rape problem on the Okinawa Prefecture by the OWAAMV generated a Peace and Feminist Movement which instances continue to be carried nowadays. Indeed, the Movement, from its creation, problematised the connection between sexual violence against women in Okinawa and the structural violence of violence, taking the 12-year-old schoolgirl rape as the example of how sexual violence is a form of in-built violence in the military organisation. And thus, according to Takazako, the US Military violence was a form of structural violence that legitimised the actions by leaving the perpetrators unpunished, a “cultural violence” at the expense of the victims, left often with no justice due to social stigma and the protection given to the perpetrator. Of great importance on the matter was the attempt of the OWAAMW to cast a light on the number of rape cases in Okinawa with the attempt to compile a record of Sexual Violence chronologically. The first version, published in 1997, was a ten pages list with official statistics and newspapers as the main sources (Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, 1997).⁷⁰ An action taken to concretely give support to the victims of sexual violence was

⁶⁸ Kozue Akibayashi (2020), *Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence: An Island Feminism Reclaiming Dignity*, pp. 35-39

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/35155285_Okinawa_Women_Act_Against_Military_Violence_a_feminist_challenge_to_militarism

⁶⁹ Caroline Spencer (2003), *Meeting of the dugongs and the cooking pots: anti-military base citizens' groups on Okinawa* p. 135 DOI:[10.1080/1037139032000129676](https://doi.org/10.1080/1037139032000129676)

⁷⁰ Kozue Akibaysahi (2020), *Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence: An Island Feminism Reclaiming Dignity*, pp. 35-39

the creation of the so called REICO, the first rape centre on the Okinawa Prefecture that granted emergency call, shelters, clinical and psychiatric help. The importance of shared memories of women traumas in the Okinawan territory, linked to the patriarchal oppression perpetrated by the Government throughout the centuries is vital in the form of Feminism promulgated by the OWAAMW, a movement called Archipelagic Feminism by Ayano Ginoza.⁷¹ In this vision, the Island becomes the place where women lives are rooted in and routed, creating a Transoceanic dimension, shifting the idea of the Islands as isolated to a vision of the Island where experiences intertwine and converse, and women and girls from different races, class and nations can create connections.

The base of the Archipelagic Feminism is to be found is the Storytelling, a tool trough which Okinawan feminists share their experience to delineate the militarized power structure and discuss ways to create a new vision of a demilitarised future. Thus, trough the shared memories, the “tempus nullius”, a “blank slate upon which colonizers can carve their channel for power trough time, and which would direct the enactments of violence”,⁷² generated by the colonial custom of Renaming could be challenged. The custom of naming, according to Takazato, creates articulation of self not made by the Ryukyuans, that have for a long time functioned as a “blank screen” upon which people have projected fantasies and desires.

Indeed, not only Japan and the American Occupation forces can be identified as the colonial powers that moulded the islander’s identity according to their usage, but this trend can be dated back to the Ryukyu Kingdom, term used by the Ming Dynasty for designating the Ryukyus as a tributary state. The cultural and political assimilation by Japan entailed not just a forceful cultural assimilation that entailed the loos of customs and traditions, deemed as barbaric, but also the renaming of Okinawan women who suffered the loss of their traditional names such as Nabe, Kamado and Ushi that carried the meaning of health, abundance of food and life sustaining fire, and thus connected to the islanders’ epistemology and cultural roles, crucial to the understanding of the island and the environment. Beginning to analyse the continuum of patriarchal violence from the ages of the Ryukyu Kingdom to the contemporary times, Archipelagic feminists’ goal is to deconstruct the gendered stereotype of indigenous people as “vulnerable” and in need of protection of a “strong military presence”. Indeed,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/35155285_Okinawa_Women_Act_Against_Military_Violence_a_feminist_challenge_to_militarism

⁷¹ Ayano Ginoza (2018), Archipelagic Feminism: critical intervention into the Gendered Coloniality of Okinawa <https://manifold.umn.edu/read/ces0702-07/section/1f30ad41-550a-4df2-9448-4b84f160090a>

⁷² Ibidem

as Takazato argues, even the dominant discourse that attributes to the Ryukyu Archipelago the “Pacific diplomacy title” and Ryukyuans as loving people living in a matriarchy run by a priestess, undermines the gender-based oppression of women during the centuries and legitimise the militarised presence of a “stronger” power that can protect the defenceless and peaceful inhabitants. Indeed, the high-ranking priestess power was a mean to maintain the male centred monarchy by maintaining its prosperity, while the king and the male patriarchal order enforced their power through conquerors. The disposition and exploitation of women and girl, as every oppression, not just alimented from the outside with the patriarchal imposition but also promulgated from the inside. Indeed, women, with assimilation to Japan became in charge of the growth and education of Patriotic male, through the *ryōsai kenbo* ideal (Good wives and good mothers) that inevitably created a differentiation between “good” women, the virtuous wife and mother to be defended and “bad women”, the comfort women. However, both models shared the common destiny of disposition in accordance with the male power. Indeed, even the “good mother and good wife” women suffered the same tragic destiny of death or sexual violence during the Battle of Okinawa, where Japanese soldiers ordered the suicide of women to protect their chastity, in fear of American soldier rape. At the same time, the leader of the villages had the patriarchal responsibility of enforcing the Japanese order, murdering their relatives and loved ones. After the Battle and with the start of the American Occupation, according to Takazato, the archipelago comes to “The Beginning of a new war, namely sexual violence against women in Okinawa by US military presence”, built with the complicity of the Ryukyu government that agreed to the construction of “special districts of brothel to create a stable society”. This society, that according to the government would have granted the safety of women, the “good women”, and a major economic growth due to the dollar payments of the US soldiers, was once again built on a colonial premise that took away the indigenous voices and identities.

Conclusion

This chapter delineated a historical account of the Ryukyu archipelago, highlighting the influence of the relationships with outside forces had on the political and social life of the territory. The history of the islands is profoundly connected with the colonial occupations that, not only shaped the political and economic asset of the region but also deeply transformed the identity of the inhabitants, becoming subject of colonial forces that perceived the region as a “blank space” to be militarily and economically exploited, but leaving at the same time the inhabitants outside this process of economic, political and social changings. In this scenery, between the forced assimilation and then the American Occupation and Reversion to Japan, inhabitants struggled and tried to find their own identity, always linked to the oppressor force, inevitably tied. However, thanks to the increasing interests of Okinawan people in global de-militarisation movements and the birth of a political conscience, works from different scholars on indigenous epistemology linked to the Ryukyu archipelago and other militarised island in the Pacific, it seems to be possible to theorize and create an indigenous space, in which Okinawans are the direct creators and moulders of their identity. As I will argue in the Second Chapter, following the Island Studies view of the Island as not a remote place, but a place of interconnection in which shared memories and practices intertwines to create a decolonial space, that gives a different perspective about militarisation and colonial experience, and at the same time constructing an alternative to the capitalistic and militarised present of the Islands, with memories, land-based practices and other customs as the starting point to build the bases of a decolonial future.

CHAPTER 2

Indigeneity and land-based knowledge in Okinawa as tools for self-determination

2.1 Okinawa and indigeneity between the Peoplehood Model and neo national contestations.

Starting with the definition that the UN nations give of Indigenous People, this first section of the chapter will define who is considered indigenous, posing great importance on the concept of sustainable self-determination theorised by Jeff Corntassel. Afterwards, I will focus on the Okinawa Prefecture case and how the struggle of the Okinawa Indigenous movement for self-determination has gone under severe misconception by right wing politicians, due to the common idea of indigeneity as sovereignty from the State, weaponising the most shared idea of indigenous people as “backward”.

When talking about who is to be considered indigenous and what are the characteristics that can be referred to Indigenous population, it is easy to fall into common misconceptions and an essentialised colonial perspective. Taking into consideration my position as a Japanese studies master student who is not indigenous or any kind suffered from any kind of backlash from colonial occupation, it was beyond necessary to approach this topic with the required carefulness and attention to the different discourses, giving special space to indigenous scholars and experiences to understand the most suitable way to approach the topic. The main idea that remains in the European context about indigenous people is heavily connected to the idea of ‘primitivity’ and ‘backwardness’, as a residual of the colonial (and ongoing post-colonial) history. For this reason, it is important to note that what is referred to as ‘indigenous people’ is a relational category, constructed on the basis of imperial and colonial relations with the colonised people, an identity that shifts with time and space and not something static and exotic for its difference from the Euro and U.S.-centric perspective. According to the definition proposed by the United Nations Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:

Indigenous peoples are characterised as non-dominant groups within society who self-identify as Indigenous, maintain historical continuity with pre-colonial and pre-settler societies, are characterised by their strong relationship with their ancestral lands and natural resources, and distinct social, economic, and political

systems, determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, unique languages, cultures, and belief systems.⁷³

With reference to this definition and the Peoplehood matrix theorised by Jeff Corntassel⁷⁴, indigeneity can be understood through three key factors: relationship to land, common spiritual bond and language use and their interrelationships between their ancestral relations with the land based on oral or written histories that state them as the descendants of the original inhabitants of their ancestral homelands; people who may have their formal or informal political, economic and social institutions, which tend to be community based and reflect their distinct ceremonial cycles, kinship networks and continuously evolving cultural traditions; people who speak (or once spoke) an indigenous language often different from the dominant society's language; people who distinguish themselves from the dominant society while maintaining a close relationship with their ancestral homelands and sacred sites which may be threatened by ongoing military, economic or political encroachment or may be places where indigenous peoples have been previously expelled.⁷⁵ Considering the UN definition and the Peoplehood Matrix, it becomes clear that one of the main issues concerning Indigenous peoples and their lives within colonial spaces is self-determination. However, rather than approaching this issue through a rights-based discourse may risk limiting the broader applicability and transformative potential of decolonisation. For this reason, it is necessary to consider self-determination in relation to its viability with economic, environmental issues and cultural possibilities, centring indigenous relationships with the natural world, and not just as the political legal recognition of indigenous right. This concept, theorised by Jeff Corntassel, under the name of Sustainable Self Determination⁷⁶. According to this idea, sustainability is more than a legal struggle, it is linked to spiritual and relational relationships where indigenous political autonomy intertwines with governance, environment and community health. In other words, Sustainable Self Determination is a process through which indigenous peoples have the freedom to practice indigenous

⁷³ United Nations (Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues). (2004). *The concept of Indigenous peoples* https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

⁷⁴ Corntassel, J. (2003). Who is indigenous? 'Peoplehood' and ethnonationalist approaches to rearticulating indigenous identity. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9(1), pp. 75–100
[researchgate.net/publication/248947250_Who_is_indigenous_'Peoplehood'_and_ethnonationalist_approaches_to_rearticulating_indigenous_identity?__cf_chl_tk=_XDK6dysLNZ4RCvnmqKCFN6FaGGAM6wbHPbhuy_Gns-1790532511-1.0.1.1-AeTxpub5XCuoUsXgjoJpaW_JPaFJG6GlsXyw_ciXbo8](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248947250_Who_is_indigenous_'Peoplehood'_and_ethnonationalist_approaches_to_rearticulating_indigenous_identity?__cf_chl_tk=_XDK6dysLNZ4RCvnmqKCFN6FaGGAM6wbHPbhuy_Gns-1790532511-1.0.1.1-AeTxpub5XCuoUsXgjoJpaW_JPaFJG6GlsXyw_ciXbo8)

⁷⁵ Corntassel, J. (2003), Who is indigenous? 'Peoplehood' and ethnonationalist approaches to rearticulating indigenous identity, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 9(1), pp. 75–100
[researchgate.net/publication/248947250_Who_is_indigenous_'Peoplehood'_and_ethnonationalist_approaches_to_rearticulating_indigenous_identity?__cf_chl_tk=_XDK6dysLNZ4RCvnmqKCFN6FaGGAM6wbHPbhuy_Gns-1790532511-1.0.1.1-AeTxpub5XCuoUsXgjoJpaW_JPaFJG6GlsXyw_ciXbo8](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248947250_Who_is_indigenous_'Peoplehood'_and_ethnonationalist_approaches_to_rearticulating_indigenous_identity?__cf_chl_tk=_XDK6dysLNZ4RCvnmqKCFN6FaGGAM6wbHPbhuy_Gns-1790532511-1.0.1.1-AeTxpub5XCuoUsXgjoJpaW_JPaFJG6GlsXyw_ciXbo8)

⁷⁶ Corntassel James (2008), *Toward Sustainable Self-Determination: Rethinking the Contemporary Indigenous-Rights Discourse*, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol.33, no.1, *Disrupting States: International Discourses of indigenous Rights and Responsibilities*, pp.105-132 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238086401_Toward_Sustainable_Self-Determination_Rethinking_the_Contemporary_Indigenous-Rights_Discourse

livelihoods, maintain food security and apply natural laws on indigenous homelands. This process, rejecting the compartmentalisation of standard political definitions of self-determination, interlocks with the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural practices to future generations, that protect from the jeopardization of the communities. In this frame of sustainable self-determination can be situated the struggle of the Okinawan indigenous movement.

The movement, born in the 1990s, regarded the recent Okinawan prefecture history as both colonial and occupied by Japan and US imperial forces.⁷⁷ For this reason, it strove for self-determination and decolonisation, achievements that are not yet fulfilled. However, it can be surely stated that the first stepping stone was the recognition of the Okinawans inhabitants as indigenous by the UN human rights bodies in the early 21st century. Despite the international recognition and the UN recommendations to the Japanese government to implement appropriate measures such as the protection of indigenous land rights, the Japanese government continues to avoid addressing the matter, nullifying the struggles of the Indigenous movement, struggles implemented by the rise of a neocolonial wave, which based its claims on the use of the term “indigenous people” in reference to the inhabitants of the Ryukyu Archipelago and on the common idea of what the goal for “decolonisation” carries, assuming it was related to political independence, an idea not commonly shared by people of the movement⁷⁸. To better explain what the main reasons of the claims of the neocolonial wave were and before going in depth of the issue, I believe it is vital to clarify the difference between Decolonial and decolonial, considering the concept of Decolonial geographies that “challenges ongoing colonialism and the colonial power that operate in the knowledge production and land dispossession”⁷⁹. Decolonisation (with the capital D) generally focuses on formal independence and on the undoing of the multiple effects of colonisation, including the dispossession of land and the shared knowledge related to the imperial States occupation and disposition of the territories. It can be said that Decoloniality is the re-appropriation of land, centring indigenous resurgence, focusing on rethinking the world from marginalised places, revitalising indigenous knowledge and practices.⁸⁰ On the other hand, decolonization

⁷⁷ Ishigaki Naomi (2020), Indigenous movement in contemporary Okinawa: its history and present situation, Okinawa International University <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/iaaes2014/paper/20789>

⁷⁸ Nishiyama Hidefumi (2022), Decolonial encounter with neo-nationalism: The politics of indigeneity and land rights struggles in Okinawa, University of Oulu, pp. 1-25 [10.1111/tran.12582](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582)

⁷⁹ Funds-Flores Jairo (2023), Anibal Quijano: (Dis)entangling the geopolitics and coloniality of curriculum, the Curriculum journal vol.35 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372682017_Anibal_Quijano_Disentangling_the_geopolitics_and_coloniality_of_curriculum/citation/download

⁸⁰ Naylor Lindsay (2018), Inventions: Bringing the decolonial to political geography, Political geography journal, vol.66, p.205 https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/12160/1/Gilmartin_Interventions_2018.pdf

(with the lower-case d) refers to the process of “liquidation of the diverse effects of colonisation, such as the denial of rights to Indigenous peoples and the ongoing dominations by the colonisers descendants”⁸¹.

The rise of the neocolonial wave in the Okinawa Prefecture was registered after Takeshi Onaga, member of the Okinawa indigenous movement, speech at the 31st session of the Human Right Council in September 2015, in the middle of the debate for the construction of a new US base at Henoko, met with overall aversion sentiment registered by the *Ryūkyū Shimpō* (journal of the Ryūkyū islands). During the speech, the term indigenous people were not used, but it was stated the importance of Self-determination, in reference to the importance of Okinawans political voices in the matters concerning the US presence on the Island. By no means, during the entirety of the speech, the idea of independence was mentioned, but rather it was asked to focalise on demilitarisation and decolonization, in accordance with Ayano Ginoza definition of Okinawan indigeneity as “a social movement and a political ideology by which awareness of original occupancy provides a principled basis for making claims against the state that helps to transform US militarism and colonialism”⁸². However, even though Takeshi Onaga, and the whole Okinawan indigenous movement, did not strive for independence, but rather to self-determination and for the Japanese government to respect the UN recommendations, in December 2015 Tomigusuku City, one of Okinawa Prefecture municipality, issued the first statement against them. The statement, initiated by conservative council members including the mayor Haruki Gibo, based its main reasons on connotation issue related to the Japanese term for indigenous people (*senjūmin*) that carries the meaning of “backward people” and the identitarian problems related to it. Indeed, the statement declared: “Most of us, Okinawa Prefectural People, do not have the self-awareness that we are indigenous people” and goes on affirming that the recognition of Okinawans as Indigenous peoples will form discrimination⁸³. It is clear that this statement focused its attention just on the problematic nuance of the term *senjūmin* without even considering the colonial occupation and its implication on the people and the Land such as the death of their families or the dispositions during and after the Battle of Okinawa, decontextualized the movement to a mere identity issue. Another declaration that aligned to the one issued by the Tomigusuku municipality was released by the Ishigaki municipality that weaponised the boat collision accident between a Chinese trawler and Japan coast guard boats between the disputed islands that Japan, China and Taiwan all lay claim to. Exploiting this event in the framework of ‘China threat’, the Council called for militarisation of the region as defence against the foreign forces. According to this vision, reclaiming the indigeneity of the Ryūkyū

⁸¹ Nishiyama Hidefumi (2022), Decolonial encounter with neo-nationalism: The politics of indigeneity and land rights struggles in Okinawa, University of Oulu, pp. 1-25 [10.1111/tran.12582](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582)

⁸² Ginoza Ayano, Space of Militourism: Intimacies of US and Japanese empires and indigenous sovereignty in Okinawa, international Journal of Okinawan Studies, vol.3, pp.7-23 <https://riis.skr.u-ryukyu.ac.jp/publications/1387/>

⁸³ Nishiyama Hidefumi (2022), Decolonial encounter with neo-nationalism: The politics of indigeneity and land rights struggles in Okinawa, University of Oulu, pp. 1-25 [10.1111/tran.12582](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582)

archipelago inhabitants meant shedding doubts on the territorial status of the island and by consequence creating issues related to international security.⁸⁴

It is clear, as I have already stated, that the neo-national countermeasures laid their claims on a variety of different aspects based on the lack of recognition of the past and present colonial history of the territory, which has its main symbol in the presence of the US military bases on the Archipelago, built on the relationship of interest between Japan and the US, sacrificing the wellbeing of the Okinawans. The same realisation of the disarmament of Japan could be possible due to the use of Okinawan lands and people as sacrificial lamb. Even though the Okinawa Prefecture was never formally referred to by Japanese politicians as a colony, the structure and effects of colonial powers are evident. The exemplification of the still present colonial patterns is the impossibility of Okinawans to exercise the right of self-determination regarding their basic human rights, as it was showed by the disregarding of Okinawans instances related to the San Francisco Peace Treaty. As Nomura Koya states Okinawans, being just the 1% of the total population present on the Japanese territory, suffers from the “dictatorship of the majority”⁸⁵, in other words democracy, without the problematisation and the de-radicalisation of colonial patterns, enforces the existing colonial ideologies at the expense of indigenous lives. Thus, as the Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel stated “Indigenous resurgence consists in having the courage and the imagination to conceive life outside the State”⁸⁶, it is vital to apply a contextualised form of indigeneity, one that is connected tightly to the reappropriation of Land and liquidation of the diverse forms of colonialism. For this reason, in the next part of this chapter, starting from the concept of “relational epistemology”, I will argue how different land-based knowledge practices are the starting point for the creation of an “other” de-colonised and de-militarised space where indigenous individuals can heal and nurture their knowledges and at the same time, a space in which self-determination can be possible.

2.2 Land and space of community: challenges to militarism, pollution and globalising homogenisation.

In this section, considering the idea of rejuvenation of indigenous practices and pollution as a tool of perpetuation of colonial policy, I will argue how the military occupation of the territory and the following disposition of the Ryukyu Archipelago as a “junk heap”⁸⁷ for the US bases discarded materials. This situation has profoundly scarred Ryukyuan relationship with Land and causing difficulties to obtain self-determination

⁸⁴ Ibidem

⁸⁵ Nomura Kōya, Shimabuku Annmaria (2012), *Undying colonialism: A Case Study of the Japanese Colonizer*, The New Centennial Review, Vol.12, no.1, pp.93-116 [10.1111/tran.12582](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582)

⁸⁶ Corntassel James (2012), *Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination*, *Decolonization: indigeneity, Education and society*, Vol.1, no.1, pp.86-101 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267380756_Re-envisioning_resurgence_Indigenous_pathways_to_decolonization_and_sustainable_self-determination

⁸⁷ Mitchell Jon (2013), *Okinawa: the Pentagon’s toxic junk heap of the Pacific*, The Japan times <https://apjjf.org/2013/11/47/jon-mitchell/4039/article>

through this ancestral relationship, rendering inhabitants economically dependent on US bases for their sustenance. As a response, inhabitants have been organising agriculturally based communities where re-discovery of indigenous knowledge and practice of self-determination are the main objectives. Furthermore, I will highlight how, through the example of Sakaemachi Market, markets could offer a symbol of resistance to touristification. Indigenous scholar Deloria Jr. argues that “a fundamental difference exists between indigenous community and Western European in how Land is understood. American Indians hold their Lands, places, as having the highest possible meaning and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind; on the other hand, Western Europeans place history, time, in the best possible light, with the assumption that time proceed in a linear fashion”⁸⁸. In indigenous epistemology, Land is not a place disposed for human activities use, rather a “place of knowing, experience and relation with the world”.⁸⁹ In this framework, the human body relates to the Land sharing water, mountains, the sun, animals, plants and spirits all intersected to create Indigenous knowledge. This relationality, in other words, the relationship that humans have with the natural environment that bridges the non-human and human worldview and plays a vital role in how environmental issues are perceived and tackled, according to indigenous epistemology and a euro-American capitalistic perspective.⁹⁰ Of course, it should be noted that indigeneity is a socially constructed category, that puts its bases on the relationship with land and imperialistic forces and political struggles from territorial occupation, rather than one based on the notion of inimitable biological characteristics. This territorial occupation and the disposal of imperialistic forces on the territory created a discrepancy on the way US and Okinawans recognise the environmental issues

On the one hand, US military forces on the archipelago territory recognise the environmental struggles when they become a problem for the continuation of military operations; while, Okinawan people emphasizes the connection between people and the place, embedding the relationship with the Land with a sense of responsibility and identity where Land is not just soil to be disposed but the place where conversations with ancestors can happen⁹¹: its dispossession is equivalent to dispossession of the social relationships related to the Land. Through this contextualization, the chemical weapons waste produced and still being produced by the US military bases, during the Okinawan Battle, US occupation and know with the Japanese government complicity can be read as the enactment of “ongoing colonial relations to Land, and not just a side effect of

⁸⁸ Coulthard Glen (2010), Place against the Empire, *Affinities: A Journal of radical theory, culture and action*, vol.4, no.2, pp.1-5 <https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/affinities/article/view/6141>

⁸⁹ Ibidem

⁹⁰ Oshiro Akino (2023), From “footprint” to relationships: Impacts of US military base on Okinawa, *Sociology compass*, vol.18, issue 1, pp.1-18 <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soc4.13099>

⁹¹ Chibana Megumi (2018), Till the soil and fill the soul: Indigenous Resurgence and Everyday Practices of Farming in Okinawa, Hawaii University <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/7988a962-e0b5-49c9-bb43-d8e7cc84fda1>

colonialism”⁹². Indeed, during the Battle of Okinawa, the US military expended 200.000 tons of heavy munitions, 5% of which failed to detonate, left on the soil with high risks on the inhabitants’ safety. Moreover, the munition used contained Trinitrotoluene (TNT) and cyclonite. The first one is known for the damages that cause to liver, blood and immune system and for causing reproductive problems. While the second one causes seizure and damages to the neurological system. More unconventional weapons were used during and after the Battle, leading to the first recorded account of the effects of the chemicals on the inhabitants. In 19510s, a 17-year-old girl called Nishie Yukie and her family of eights that were hospitalised after recording eyes sting and the skin turned dark brown. Within a year, every member of the family passed away, prompting surveys that examined the well water they had been drinking. These surveys found that the water contained high levels of arsenic⁹³. The occupation years have come to be known as the period of the Bayonet and the Bulldozers, due to the seizure of land to expand the military bases that displaced 250.000 residents out of 675.000 on the main island, that had to choose between migration or work in the bases, where they were assigned to the most dangerous jobs⁹⁴. Even after Reversion to Japan, the US continued to dispose of the Okinawan land as they pleased, in accordance with the Japanese government, even though the principle through which Reversion pledged was *kaku nuki hondo nami* (no nuclear weapons and a base presence proportionate to the mainland)⁹⁵ (poisoning the pacific), occupying areas vital for the ecosystem and causing the endangerment of species such as the dugong and the Yanbaru kwina. Still nowadays, Okinawa Prefecture is employed as the storage of nuclear weapons, having the most concentrated stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction on the planet, counting one thousand warheads and thirteen thousand tons of chemical weapons⁹⁶.

As Max Liboiron argues in “Pollution is Colonialism”⁹⁷, Pollution is not just a consequence of the disposition of the Land, but an enactment of ongoing colonial relations that enables settlers the state access to land and resources, weakening the spiritual and material sustenance of indigenous groups, and at the same time allowing the development of capitalistic settler societies. Thus, colonial relations and land dispositions is related to the

⁹² Liboiron Max (2021), Pollution is Colonialism, Duke University, chap.1 <https://www.dukeupress.edu/pollution-is-colonialism>

⁹³ Mitchell Jon (2020), Poisoning the Pacific: the US military’s secret Dumping of Plutonium, Chemical Weapons, and Agent Orange, Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, chap.2
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362156679_Poisoning_the_Pacific_The_US_Military's_Secret_Dumping_of_Plutonium_Chemical_Weapons_and_Agent_Orange

⁹⁴ Ibidem;

⁹⁵ Mitchell Jon (2020), Poisoning the Pacific: the US military’s secret Dumping of Plutonium, Chemical Weapons, and Agent Orange, Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, chap.2
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362156679_Poisoning_the_Pacific_The_US_Military's_Secret_Dumping_of_Plutonium_Chemical_Weapons_and_Agent_Orange

⁹⁶ Ibidem;

⁹⁷ Liboiron Max (2021), Pollution is Colonialism, Duke University, chap.1 <https://www.dukeupress.edu/pollution-is-colonialism>

unconditional access to indigenous lands by the settlers, to the future of the territories and the inhabitants' lives. In this view, pollution is one of the essential parts of the interlocking logics, mechanism and structure that allow colonialism to produce and repeat itself, maintaining differentiations through appropriation and access to Land, keeping it reserved for settlers' aims and unavailable for other Land relations.⁹⁸ According to activist and geographer Laura Pulido⁹⁹, "Land is thoroughly saturated with racism. There are at least two primary land processes to consider: appropriation and access". Appropriation refers to the diverse way through which land was taken from native people; access is the process that follows the appropriation and is deeply racialised, as it is racialised the concept of property: "Property is best understood as a measure of what white settlers is capable of claiming as their own"¹⁰⁰ and as law theorist Cheryl Harris goes further into saying the same right to use and enjoyment, the reputational value and the power to exclude are all characteristics of whiteness, shared by various forms of property"¹⁰¹

Considering the settler-owned land and its connection to Pollution and colonial relations, the construction of indigenous spaces where rediscovering and rejuvenating cultures, languages and traditions through the act of Resurgence could offer a pathway for the establishment of a sustainable self-determination. The term Indigenous Resurgence refers to a political and cultural movement focused on reclaiming Indigenous culture, land, and sovereignty by turning away from state-dependent solutions toward independent, community-led rejuvenation¹⁰². The movement is based on three principles:

- colonialism as an active structure of domination and fundamentally oriented towards the elimination of Indigenous societies.

- the prevailing normative discursive environment powerfully reflects these underlying imperatives.

- Indigenous peoples must seek to turn away from this hostile environment wherever possible and channel energies into independent programmes of cultural, social, spiritual and physical rejuvenation. In other words, the resurgence movement does not believe that any relevant changes to the settler societies can be done by the inside, but rather survival and decolonization efforts should be directed toward the creation of alternative social realities, reconnecting communities to languages, cultures and traditions, forms of governance and cooperation

⁹⁸ Ibidem;

⁹⁹ Pulido Laura (2000), Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol.90, issue 1, pp. 12-40
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/0004-5608.00182>

¹⁰⁰Moreton-Robinson Aileen (2015), *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Indigenous Americas) <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/40111>

¹⁰¹ Harris Cheryl (1993), Whiteness as a Property, *Race and the Law* pp.1-10
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2025.2607604>

¹⁰² Elliot Micheal (2017), Indigenous Resurgence: the Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol.51, pp.61-81 [10.1017/S0008423917001032](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917001032)

with others working together for the creation of a new contemporary social world¹⁰³. However, since one of the aims is the cooperation with other realities, even though the movement places its bases on the detachment from settler societies, it does not advocate for permanent cessation of dialogue with settlers, but rather the aim is to renew the forms of dialogue regarding matters of justice and decolonization on a base of mutual recognition and reciprocity. And thus, Indigenous Resurgence has its bases on the “everyday acts and practices”¹⁰⁴, rooting from the modalities of pre-existing ways of being and acting in Indigenous communities and social histories that acts as “original instructor”.¹⁰⁵ It is a place-based movement that emphasizes accountability at community level and the teaching of respect, reciprocity and non-domination among people, land and environment. However, it must be noticed, to avoid essentialised views, that the movement reflects the heterogeneity of practices and indigenous histories, and thus reflects the diversity of the communities. Moreover, since it is a movement that not only focuses its attention on the rediscovery of indigenous cultures, traditions and languages, but also on their revitalisation, past practices should be “drawn critically with an eye to radically transform the colonial power relations that have come to dominate the present.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, traditional frameworks should be subject to critical interrogation in order to avoid replication of colonial values, resisting essentialised versions such as the understanding of women and men roles in the communities, and thus Resurgence cannot be tackled without considering critical re-thinking and self-re-interrogation.

In the Okinawa Prefecture, according to Megumi Chibana¹⁰⁷, there have been recent recordings of inhabitants involved in farming practices that constitute the exercise of Indigenous rights and self-determination, handing an alternative to the settler colonialism structure. One of the several examples is the village of Youthful Exuberance, in the northeast coast of Okinawa, placing itself as a “counterproposal to the economic dependency of Okinawans on the military bases”¹⁰⁸. Another community that centres sustainable and ecological agriculture is the Okinawa Harisa Club. Ano, one of the farmers of the community, with the role of promotion of local agriculture and support to young farmers, states that one of the aims is to promote organic, multi-crop farming

¹⁰³ Alfred Gerald Taiaiake (2009), Colonialism and State Dependency, *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, vol.5, no.2, pp.1-19 <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijih/article/view/28982>

¹⁰⁴ Cornthassel Jeff (2012), Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to Decolonization and sustainable self-determination, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol.1, no.1, pp. 86-101 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267380756_Re-envisioning_resurgence_Indigenous_pathways_to_decolonization_and_sustainable_self-determination

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem;

¹⁰⁶ Coulthard Sean Glen (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, pp.1-25 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2325548X.2016.1146013>

¹⁰⁷ Chibana Megumi (2020), Resurgents create a Moral Landscape: Indigenous Resurgence and Everyday Practices of Farming in Okinawa, Kanagawa University, pp.1-14 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347798473_Resurgents_Create_a_Moral_Landscape_Indigenous_Resurgence_and_Everyday_Practices_of_Farming_in_Okinawa

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem;

and new farmers initiatives to support cultural revitalization. Indeed, one of the main focuses of the community lies in the importance given to the re-discovery of practices, traditions and stories through the cultivation of rice. As Ano states: “in the old days Kayo was famous for rice farming, the rice straw was used to make a rope for the tug of war event”¹⁰⁹, and thus the proposal of rebuilding the rice fields can be framed in an attempt not just to self-determination, but also a space where healing and rediscovery of traditions and land-based practices can happen. The Indigenous resurgence through land cultivation is also linked to the reconnection with spiritual practices, as the events related to the Sobe community reveals. The community sustenance, since the USCAR order of eviction for the base construction, related to negotiations with the US military for the cultivation of the lands it was the main source of provision. Not just the land was vital for cultivation, but according to the name given by the community before the displacement *furu subi* (Old subi) and *mu subi* (new subi), where the latter contains 11 sacred sites for prayers, due to its abundance of water and suitable feng shui placement. Thus, the preservation of the land in this case is not just connected to the self-determination through agriculture practices but also to the maintenance of the indigenous cosmology, with the protection of the spiritual groundwork.¹¹⁰

The creation of spaces for self-determination practices and the restoration of memories and traditions passes through the creation of what Ryohei Dōmae¹¹¹ calls social space, a place that reflects the collective dimension of the lived experiences through the interplay of action and cognition in a specific group, that are identified together by their shared goals, belonging and interactions. Besides from the community of farmers that I previously cited, other examples of this type of social space are the Kyōdōten community and the Sakaemachi Market. The former is a community run stores operated by residents of the community in the Kunigami Village¹¹². The latter is a market established in 1949, described as a “postwar social hub of recovery” by the official website, due to its connection to the war events and distinguish itself due to its community-based shops and products, having as its customers local inhabitants, a tendency that reflect its function as a social space for the community, rather than a tourist attraction, maintaining its connections with the past history both prior and during the Pacific War, as before the war the market was the place where the Okinawa Prefectural Girl’s High School and the Women’s Division of the High School were situated. And thus, the market situates itself as a place where both economic and social interactions take place, operating in a contest of cultural values where actions as preparing seasonal food, using traditional measurement tools or using local languages contribute to economic and social resilience. This resilience, cultivated through routines and gendered labour,

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem;

¹¹⁰ Ibidem;

¹¹¹ Liu Sida (2024), Social spaces: from Georg Simmel to Erving Goffman, the Journal of Chinese Sociology, vol.11

¹¹² Lebra William, Maretzki Thomas (1963), The Community Cooperative in Northern Okinawa, Economic Development and Cultural Change, vol.11, no.3 part.1, pp.225-238
<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/450007>

has its foundation and is shaped by indigenous knowledge, contributes to the creation of spaces that give an alternative to the gentrification and globalisation of food policy, that inevitably shape the space of the market¹¹³. These changes enacted by the neoliberal urban policies pose a challenge to the identity of the market as a site of cultural transmission, embodying the rapid shifts given by social changes without losing its role as a hub for memory and indigenous sovereignty. An active and important role in the market life is held by women, especially older ones, as both keepers of historical and food-related knowledges with their engagement in food preparation, seasonal knowledge and emotional labours that not only ensure the circulation of food, but helps to sustain community memories, contributing to the creation of place-based identities. This transmission of memories and the creation of place-based social spaces are two main aspects of the resistance against homogenisation and touristification that is possible through the sustenance of localism based on social proximity, memories and mutual care in continuity to its function as a living postwar archive and community rebuilding space.¹¹⁴ Its role in the struggle against the amnesia of redevelopment and anchor to its past and cruel history is carried out through the traumatic memories of the Himeyun Student Corp, a group of women employed as nurses during the Battle of Okinawa, that is a symbol of resistance to homogenisation and loss of memory through the women's sacrifice. Postwar women transform the traumatic space and memories in spaces of care and sustenance through storytelling, food preparations and caregiving as a counter point to violence and precariousness. Thus, by restoring and nurturing collective place-based memories and sustaining mutual care and aids, the communities create an alternative to the neoliberal urban space, challenging the relationship created by the imperialistic forces, opening the possibility to exercise indigenous sovereignty.

Thus, the creation of indigenous place-based communities opens the possibility to exercise sovereignty, crossing a different pathway offered by the interdependence to the US and Japan imperialistic and colonial plans of land exploitation. Moreover, the instauration of land-based social spaces gives the opportunity to revitalise practices, languages and memories often lost in the neoliberal and colonial development, reconnecting to the ancestral land and the traumatic past and opening up to the possibility of different ways of perceiving and building human and non-human relationships terms.

2.3 Spirituality, sacred ecology and indigenous responsibility.

In this section I will discuss how, through the concept of sacred ecology and traditional knowledge, the land is interconnected to the spiritual life, creating a relationship of interdependence and responsibility. This interdependence is often contested and made at risk due to the commodification of the sacred spaces. Such is the cases of the *utaki*, the Okinawan sacred groves that became commodified tourist spaces and power spots

¹¹³ Ginoza Ayano, Fustè-Fornè Francesc (2026), Everyday Gendered Spaces of Memory, Community, and Resistance on Sakaemachi Market (Okinawa), Island studies Journal, early access pp.1-27 <https://isisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/159141-everyday-gendered-spaces-of-memory-community-and-resistance-in-sakaemachi-market-okinawa-1.pdf>

¹¹⁴ Sakaemichi Market Promotion Association <https://www.kyoto-nishiki.or.jp/en/union/>

for tourists' usage. Focusing on the case of Sefā utaki, I will show why even though the spaces are contested, they offer a possibility to rediscover spirituality connected to the land and indigenous responsibility.

Sacred ecology provides a new tool to analyse the earth and the land as a system of interconnected relationships, where also the human world is a web in this ecosystem. This view, fluid and interconnected in all the aspects, is positioned in stark departure from a mechanical, disembodied view of the world. This view that can be englobed in the vast and diverse category of indigenous environmental knowledge has come to be widely accepted and used as a valid tool of understanding by scientific experts¹¹⁵. As the Report Our Common Future¹¹⁶ affirms: “Tribal and indigenous people lifestyles can offer modern societies many lessons in the management of the resources in complex forest, mountains and dry land ecosystems...these communities are the repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge”. Although the term “traditional” can be considered problematic, in this case it refers to cultural continuity transmitted through social attitudes, beliefs, principles and conventions of behaviours derived from historical experience.¹¹⁷ As the Inuit participants to the conference in 1995 further stated traditional knowledge is the pool of practical common sense, teachings and experiences related to the spiritual health, way of life and authority system, passed through generations.

In this framework, indigenous ecological knowledge is the knowledge acquired through the relationships of living things with the environment and thus is totally embedded in the land where they are developed. It is also adaptive and dynamic, modifying its form based on the circumstances and adapting to changes. Of course, in the management of the spaces and the Land, local and traditional knowledge are not sufficient since they are to be applied to capitalistic societies based on the exploitation and the subsequent pollution of the soil. This type of knowledge should have survival and adaptability as its main characteristics, adapting to the particular instances of the ecosystems, that is not just the management of the lands, but also linked to the various contestations related to human activities. For this reason, in this framework it is important to consider adaptive management and social learning as two tools to grant the application of traditional knowledge. The former refers to the necessity to acknowledge the constant change of ecosystems conditions and the necessary adaptation of the institutions in responding to the feedback, adjusting or evolving. The latter refers to the importance of resilience, in other words the ability to adapt and to absorb changes, under the assumption that nature cannot be controlled or predicted.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Berkes Fikret (1999), *Sacred ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*, Routledge, chap.1 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203123843>

¹¹⁶ Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: our Common Future (1995) <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Berkes Fikret (1999), *Sacred ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*, Routledge, chap.2 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203123843>

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, chap.4

In the contemporary Okinawa Prefecture, we can find a great spiritual and religious diversity, ranging from Christian churches, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines. In addition, places not officially registered as sites of spiritual life are also present in the territory. Among them, of particular importance are the family tombs, located on the roads and the *utaki*, known in the category of *uganju* (sites of worship) together with roadside altars, sacred springs and sacred groves.¹¹⁹ The worship of the *utaki* sacred grove has been central to the indigenous spiritual life, nowadays posing some serious questions about ownership and commodification for tourism use. According to the *Ryukyu Koke yurai ki*, 929 *utaki* sites have been registered through the realm. *Utaki* is a sacred place where the Ryukyuan spirits and ancestor and visit or are worshipped. Generally, they do not present any infrastructure except for a stone where offerings can be placed. However, the most important ones, often related to the king dynasty present a structure composed by an *haiden* and an *ibe*. The former one is the worship hall, now marked by a torii gate as an effect of the assimilation of Ryukyuan cultures to Japan in the colonial period. The latter is the innermost part of the shrine, which contains object of worships. At the present time, however, many *utaki* are threatened with destruction due to the urbanisation and the construction of the military bases. Furthermore, the rapid and significant increase of tourists on the soil has been constantly put at risk the ecosystems and the endangered species present in the sacred grove of the *utaki*¹²⁰. Not only the *utaki* and the other places of worship were vital for the spiritual community life, but they are also sites of florid ecosystems life: preserving them means also preserve the endangered plants and animals who reside in them. An example is the survey conducted on Tarami Island, a small island located in the North of Ishigaki Island, where its village was built on the Feng Shui village method, a technique employed for the construction of all the historical villages. In the layout of the village, it appears that the black slope forest where *utaki* sites are located, not only are merge with the presence of sacred springs but also contains 46 different tree species such as Fukugi and Tamanu. However, as already mentioned, protection of the ecosystems is challenged by the increase of uncontrolled tourism and the lack of proper organisations focalised on the preservations of the sacred sites, as the case of the Sefā Utaki shows¹²¹.

The first issue related to the *utaki* is related to ownership in both the legal, cultural and conceptual sense. The *utaki* has been incorporated by mainland Japanese in the creation of the nation state, as a primordial form of the mainland *Shinto*, which has become in contemporary Japan one of the main reasons of the rise in tourist activities related to Okinawa, with especially Japanese people going to the *utaki* for their alleged spiritual

¹¹⁹ Rots P.Aike (2019), Strangers in the Sacred Grove: The Changing meanings of Okinawan Utaki, Religions, pp.1-19 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050298>

¹²⁰ Chen Bixia (2022), Utaki and Ashagi sacred Forests in the Ryukyu Islands: Vegetation Structure and Conservation Management Challenges in Sacred Forests of Asia <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143680>

¹²¹ Ibidem;

energy.¹²² On the community level, most *utaki* have a local function as the worship sites for priestess who engage in ritual practices and for hired spiritual mediums who are hired by people to communicate with the ancestors. Moreover, recently in the 21st century, there has been an increase in the interest by natural scientists to *utaki*, due to their natural beauty and diversity. Describing the sites as “biodiversity footprints”, scientists have started conservation projects to protect the flora and the fauna, mapping the ecological values of the sacred sites. Considering the environmental issue related in vast majority to the presence of the military base on the territory, preserving the ecosystems in the sacred sites is a matter of uttermost importance. However, biodiversity preservation, especially in big sites such as Sefā *utaki* which host 25 different species of plant 18 of which native to Okinawa, is challenged by the mass tourism and the difference conception and understanding it carries to the different people.

Sefā *utaki* is a sacred grove located in the Chinen peninsula in the southeast of Okinawa, composed of 5 different sacred spots, other than a place of biodiversity where butterflies, spiders, birds, mongoose and baths can be spotted. It is a site strictly tied to the Ryukyu Kingdom, as during that era it was relate to the ritual mythological system that provided the ruling dynasty with legitimacy¹²³. After the annexation to Japan, it lost much of its importance, remaining unknown even in the after-war period, visited by pilgrims and spiritual mediums. The situation registered a change when in 2000 it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, together with other 8 *utaki* sites. Thus, this led to an increase of the tourist activity, registering 400,000 tourists, especially from Japan, visiting the place. This situation led increasing tensions among various actors: tourists who visit the place for its alleged spiritual energy; pilgrims, spiritual mediums and local people that claim a different use of the site. The lack of central authority who regulates the access to different part of the site creates dispute and different ways to negotiate their presence in the space. For example, tourist guide may ignore the sign that prohibit the entrance to some areas of the site to show it to tourists.¹²⁴ On the other hand, Sefā *utaki* is still used as a worship space, and it is not unusual for local people to try to avoid the entrance of the tourist in the sacred space. It can be said that the site’s attraction can be attributed to its acquired title as World Heritage and also to its newly assigned status of power spot, in other words a sacred place that is believed to contain profound spiritual energy, providing spiritual energy to the visitors. However, this definition is not met with enthusiasm by everyone, especially Okinawan worshippers that deny the existence of personal benefit, reclaiming the importance of the site in the community level, as the central of the spiritual community life. The lack of a system of authority is to be dated back to the 1930s, when imperial authorities annexed the local worshipping system into the *shinto*-system, under the *utaki saihen* (reorganisation of *utaki*).

¹²² Rots P. Aike (2019), Strangers in the Sacred Grove: The Changing meanings of Okinawan *Utaki*, Religions, pp.1-19 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050298>

¹²³ Aike P. Rots (2019), This is not a Powerspot, Asian Ethnology, vol.78, no.1, Special Issue: religious Authority in East Asia, pp.155-180 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26704750>

¹²⁴ Ibidem;

Under this plan, every entrance had to be signalled by a *torii* and a shrine building should have been built. However, this plan did not materialise, as Seifā utaki became in 1941 appropriated by the imperial military forces, due to its strategic position on top of a hill ¹²⁵. Nowadays remaining of the war memories can still be found through the sign of the artillery batteries built in the space used for the *agari-umāi* ritual.

Nowadays its visits are strictly related to the power spot belief and for its beautiful picture spot, inevitably creating clashes with Okinawan visitors. An example of this conflict is the case registered by Aike Rots during one of his visits to the sacred forest¹²⁶. Two Okinawan women, probably two *yuta* (spiritual mediums hired by locals to discover and solve spiritual causes), were visiting the sacred place and conducting prayers. Having placed their ritual offerings on the step behind the *sangūi* (two large rocks leaning against each other leaving open a triangular tunnel space), they started their ritual prayers, but suddenly tourists came into the sacred space and interrupted the ritual. On the women's side, the event was interpreted as an invasion of the ritual, while the tourist, not understating what they had done, were just trying to find the perfect picture spot. The core issue related to this event is the lack of municipality intervention in declaring limits of access to the tourists, due to the dependence to the tourist agency: blocking the access to certain parts would mean decrease the numbers of tourists willing to visit the place and thus lowering the economic incomes. The impossibility, or the lack of real attempts to regulate the tourists' flux into the sacred grove is linked to the Heritagisation. Indeed, the heritagisation of the site was met with different and contrasting responses by the population. On the one hand, it was considered an effective strategy for addressing rural employment issues and economic decline, as it was supposed to lead tourists to spend time in rural areas. However, the expectation was not met, as the vast majority of the tourists come for a daily trip from Naha without spending time in local places. On the other hand, from a preservation perspective, the increase of mass tourism has caused problems to the forest ecology, such as the endangerment of endemic insects and plants that were a common sight ten years ago. In response to the endangerment of the ecosystem, local organisations have come up with a plan to turn the former parking space into a butterfly hotspot, planting trees that attract the butterflies and other insects.

It can be said, taking Seifā utaki as the best-known example, that indigenous responsibility in the maintenance of the sacred space as places where community wellbeing, spiritual life and ecosystems preservation are intertwined is challenged by the commodification of the tourist industry. Not only the lack of regulations

¹²⁵ Ibidem;

¹²⁶ Ibidem;

through structures makes the survival of the sacred groves dependent on the tourism industry demand but also relates Okinawan spiritual life to the concept of power spot, a concept created by Japanese for other Japanese, which helps in the implementation of the idea of Okinawa as an exotic place¹²⁷. Indeed, by the common descriptions, Seifā utaki is described as one of the last remaining pieces of the Ryukyu Kingdom, stripped by any kind of historical background, and depicted as an ancient Ryukyuan form of shamanism, related to a unique appreciation for the nature. This construction of the utaki sacred grove as an “exotic location” strip away of the reasons behind the sacredness of the spaces, framing them in the Japanese nation state system and commodifying them for tourist use.

2.4 Water relations in the creation of a self-determined space: struggles between pollution and the sacrality.

Considering the idea of relationality, this section focuses on the importance of water relations in indigenous epistemology and how militarisation has actively been shaping them in the Ryukyu Island, endangering species and increasing the possibility of contacting illnesses due to the polluted waters.

According to the indigenous epistemology, re-claiming indigenous people's relationship with water acts as a reminder of the relationality with water. Indeed, water is not just, as the land, an element to be disposed for human consumption but the space in which reciprocal relationship between human and non-human takes place: water gives life and possibility to survive, and at the same time offers a possible path to challenge colonialism, imperialism and militarism through the re-formulation of relationships and the possibility of creating decolonised indigenous space.¹²⁸ Moreover, reclaiming the accountability to water views and water relationship, paired with land-based knowledge could significantly help enacting personal wellbeing and respect of all living beings. This intersectional vision of relationality is presented in “Taking up to the white women”¹²⁹, where Aileen Morton Robinson states: “Indigenous cultural domains relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory”. And thus, water is not a source to be weaponised and polluted for infrastructure use, but rather, according to the Indigenous feminist framework, water is a relative with whom we engage in social and political relations through interdependency and respect. Moreover, Kim Tall Bear¹³⁰ adds to this concept the importance of the framework of caretaking, in other words the

¹²⁷ Aike P. Rots (2019), This is not a Powerspot, *Asian Ethnology*, vol.78, no.1, Special Issue: religious Authority in East Asia, pp.155-180 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26704750>

¹²⁸ Oshiro Akino (2023), From “footprint” to relationships: Impacts of US military base on Okinawa, *Sociology compass*, vol.18, issue 1, pp.1-18 <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soc4.13099>

¹²⁹ Moreton-Robinson Aileen (2021), *Takin’up to the white woman: Indigenous woman and feminism*, University of Minnesota Press <https://www.upress.umn.edu/9781517912284/takin-up-to-the-white-woman/>

¹³⁰ Tall Bear Kim (2019), *Caretaking Relations, Not American dreaming*, *Kalfou: A journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic studies*, vol.6, no.1 <https://doi.org/10.15367/kf.v6i1.228>

obligations of human kin with other kin. The framework of relationality and caretaking combined creates the basis for an ontology of decolonisation to tackle settler colonialism and pollution and re-storing and rejuvenating indigenous traditions, cultures, practices and languages.

In the Ryukyu archipelago, water relationships had and still are being shaped by the presence of the US military bases, that with the Japanese government designated the territory as rest band recreation tourist destination, continuing to exploit and pollute the island for military activities, actively hindering inhabitants relationships with water and self-determination through water related practices. Thus, the colonial structure boosted by militourism¹³¹, in other words the military insurance of the perpetration of the tourist industry operation, while at the same time continuing military operations on the territory, destroyed and continues to destroy Indigenous communities, disconnecting inhabitants to their ancestral land, and at the same time endangering also the non-human, as the events related to the transfer of the Futenma Air Base to Henoko demonstrates¹³². In 2017, the Japanese government initiated the transfer of the Futenma Air Base to Henoko, transfer that involved the landfill of an ocean that was the home of 5.334 different species of marine creatures, including 262 endangered species. The abundant presence of the bases on the territory continues to pose a serious threat to inhabitants' life, both human and non-human, due to the constant threat posed by pollution and accidents. Indeed, the presence of the military bases is strictly connected with the discovery of PFAS, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances that stay in the environment for a long time and are harmful to the health of people and animals, often causing cancers and problems to the growth of children. Even though the use is regulated by international and Japanese laws, in 2016 the Okinawa Prefecture announced that the level of PFAS in the Dakujaku River, Hija River and Nagata River exceeded the Japanese government safety guidelines¹³³. After investigations were conducted, the Dakujaku River, situated near the northern part of the Kadena Air Base and because of its flow on the Hija River, appeared to be the main source of contamination. Despite the importance of the rivers as the source of tap water for approximately 450.000 people, the Japanese did not acknowledge the US military as the source of contamination, but paid the Prefecture 1.6 billion yen to treat the drinking water, even though a general distrust of the inhabitants on the safeness of the water started spreading.

I argue that the unwillingness to address the main role of the US bases in the spread of PFAS in the rivers and the consequent funds employed for the purification of the contaminated water is tightly connected to the settler colonialist structure that by polluting the environment not just generates displacement from land based

¹³¹ Ginoza Ayano (2016), *R&R at the intersection of US and Japanese Dual Empire: Okinawan Women and Decolonizing militarised heterosexuality*, John Hopkins University Press, Vol.68, no.3 https://www.academia.edu/40911533/R_and_R_at_the_Intersection_of_US_and_Japanese_Dual_Empire_Okinawan_Women_and_Decolonizing_Militarized_Heterosexuality

¹³² Sakai Risako (2024), *The Role of Water in Indigenous Healing and Growth from Okinawa to the World*, *Okinawa Journal of Island Studies*, pp. 117-131 <https://u-ryukyu.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2020427>

¹³³ Nuchi Nu Miji: Okinawa's Water of Life" (2022) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiBVRAGgtsE>

knowledge and the very own source of sustainment of the communities, but also creates economic bonds and dependence of the inhabitants to the same oppressing structure that unable the possibility of self-determination. As I previously stated, water is interrelated to people existence, responsible for the very own life of the communities and for this posed as a central and sacred aspect of the spiritual life, as the practice related to the sacred water journey from Hedo to Shuri Castle denotes. The practice was one of the main events related to the sacrality sphere and was revitalised 20 years ago. The Hedo village is located at the feet of the sacred Asumui mountain, where according to recordings, it was the the place where the creation god descended for the first time. The water of this mountain is believed to carry spiritual powers, and for this reason was carried every New Year to Shuri Castle for the *ubina-dii* ceremony¹³⁴ (in which the king placed the sacred water on its forehead and prayed for prosperity). The holy water, called *yoshigomizu*, began its journey on the 20 of December and arrives on the 28 December to the Engaku-ji temple. During the journey Ryūkyū classic song to praise the dynasty called *omoro* is sang together with prayers for good harvests and chants by the spiritual leader for the prosperity of the country. After the arrival of the sacred water to temple, travellers are joined by women carrying the “water from the lucky direction” and celebrations for the combinations of the two waters take place. This combined water becomes the sacred water to be carried to the castle, where two priestesses are ready to accept it. The ritual ends with a prayer of hope for health, fertility and prosperity for the inhabitants. The understanding of water as a holy source is linked to the traditional Ryukyuan rituals that often revolved around the importance of water for the abundance of the crops, setting the pace of the crops’ cultivation. The festivals centring on the welcoming of the overseas and mountain deities that came for their annual visit to the communities which usually took place in summer and autumn, were accompanied by rituals such as the boats rowing in Yaeyama. This ritual was accompanied by songs that welcomed the overseas deities and a race to symbolise the hurry to escort the overseas deities from the open sea to the shores. It was believed that the overseas gods, coming from the bottom of the sea or the horizon, carried fertility from the holy land. The sacrality of the water is also relevant to the New Year’s Day celebrations of the lunar calendar and the ritual of the “water of rejuvenation”, picked from the nearby sacred well which people used to drink and use for baths¹³⁵. During this day, the inhabitants brought home fragments of coral reef stone to put in the parlours, because since its origin from the bottom of the sea, it was believed to be filled with fertility. The restoration of these ritual practices and the sacrality of the relationship with water not only can be framed in the resurgent space but also reflects the central importance of water and its sacrality in the shared memory of the inhabitants that consider water a symbol of life and prosperity traditionally linked to agricultural rituals and the community

¹³⁴ Holy water that journeys from Hedo to Shuri castle (2016), Smart Magazine <https://magazine.japan-jtrip.com/article/okinawa/1776/>

¹³⁵ Mabuchi Toichi (1980), Space and time in the Ryukyu Cosmology, Asian Folklore Studies, vol.39, no.1, pp.1-19 <https://pascal-francis.inist.fr/vibad/index.php?action=getRecordDetail&idt=12594123>

life. Moreover, water has the role of connecting the “sea of islands”¹³⁶ where the interrelation between communities transcend physical boundaries, connecting past and present traumas and struggles, and re-shaping the idea of *shima* (island) not just as a physical space, but also as the reflection of the imagined communal space of the inhabitants that reflects lived experiences, memories and the relationship between human and non-human. In the Amami island, the concept of *shima* refers to non-hierarchical groups that are associated by the common sharing of water. It is perceived as the giver of shelter and ground for culture, where natural space and human interactions are entangled and all the activities concerning life and death take place. In this framework, territory is strictly related to social spaces and the creation of territorial imagination, becoming a cultural space in which rituals, sentiments, myths and histories are shared¹³⁷. Thus, as I will argue in the next section the relation between the transmission of memory through storytelling and everyday practices are linked to the place of belonging.

2.5 Indigenous memory and storytelling as a countermeasure to the politics of ignorance

In the first part of this section, I will argue how ignorance is not just the absence of knowledge but a tool that serves the reproduction of imperial spacial orders, taking as an example the discourses around the Futenma Air base by the US officers. In the second part starting from political geographer Takashi Yamazaki¹³⁸ idea that “restoration of cultural heritage is an indirect act of resistance”, I will highlight the importance of land-based knowledge and its transmissions through storytelling as, not just a countermeasure against the production of ignorance but also as a tool for the re-appropriation of spaces and heritages that constitute an answer to the need for self-determination and resurgence. The production of ignorance, often referred to as “imperial ignorance” is the systematic and active creation of uncertainty and erasure of knowledge to legitimise domination and violence, distancing the public from the reality of imperial power through the manipulation of information and its distribution¹³⁹. Thus, more than often, the production of ignorance overlaps with the one of knowledge, becoming a tool for the marginalisation of particular people and at the same time normalising the presence of imperial forces in the colonies¹⁴⁰. Ignorance should not be considered just the absence of

¹³⁶ Hou’fa Epeli (1994), Our Sea of Islands, The contemporary Pacific, vol. 1, pp. 148-161 [10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/002](https://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/002)

¹³⁷ Suwa Jun’ichiro (2007), The space of Shima, *shima: the international Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, vol.1, no.1 pp.1-9 <https://www.shimajournal.org/issues/v1n1/c.-Space-of-Shima.pdf>

¹³⁸ Ibidem;

¹³⁹ Wilke Christiane, Doutaghi Helyeh, Yahya Hijaab (2025), Imperial Ignorance and beyond: mapping the production and practices of organised ignorance in *Handbook on Politics and Society*, Edward Elgar Publishing <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035301904.00028>

¹⁴⁰ Nishiyama Hidegumi (2020), Base Built in the Middle of “Rice Fields”: A politics of ignorance in Okinawa, *geopolitics*, vol. 27, issue 2, pp.546-565 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1801646>

knowledge, but as generated by apathy, disinformation, neglect and secrecy. In other words, it is an active agent that euro-American forces have employed in the imperial projects ignoring the presence of indigenous people through the ideas of discovering a new land, or something unknown. This euro-American mapping of indigenous lands as “new” and “unknown” not only legitimise erasure and genocide but also implement the creation of a geographical knowledge boosted by conquests and “un knowledge”¹⁴¹. Ignorance is a discourse that can not be just overcome by acquiring knowledge, but it is something that people passively produce through selective choice, a “strategic ploy”¹⁴², where people actively work to organise doubt and uncertainty to help maintain ignorance, disclosing the direct and bilateral connection between power and ignorance where the latter and its reproduction helps with the sustenance of certain power discourses and relations.

The discourse about the politics of ignorance can be applied to the American Pacific fantasy created to undermine the possibility of sovereignty of the people and any chance of changing the colonial status quo. A compelling example on how ignorance and selective examples are strictly entangled to the creation of knowledge, and the manipulation of memories is in the revisionism of historical textbooks. Textbooks have toned down the Japanese empire history and the horrors committed during the Pacific war such as the mass suicides incidences where Ryukyans were ordered to kill each other. In more recent times, the production of ignorance as a tool for the enforcement of colonial policies has been in the discourses around the Futenma Air Base. The base, considered dangerous for its proximity to Ginowan city densely populates area and for its permanent noises, has been criticized and a plan for its relocation has been debated among the prefectural government, Japan and the US. Moreover, in different occasions, the base administration has sparked tension between US military officers and the inhabitants regarding the question of security, related to the presence of the bases on the territory.¹⁴³ On 2nd of May 2018, the US secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson and the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Robert Neller gave a brief update regarding the base relocation delay and the security issue. In response to the concerns raised by reporters, Neller affirmed that the bases existed for the inhabitant’s security and that the base was originally built on an empty land where there were no people, referring to a picture that figured the building process of the base. It is clear that the picture did not show the dispossession of the inhabitants' lands for the construction of the base, an enormous aspect that Neller avoided to cite during his reply. Unfortunately, this display of active ignorance is not an isolated case, but the tip of the iceberg of discourses that produce ignorance that continues to harm Ryukyuan, picturing them as lazy or in need of assistance and guidance. In December 2010, Director of the Office of Japan Affairs Kevin Maher produced this kind of ignorance-based discourse during a lecture at the Department of State. During the lecture, the Director called Okinawans lazy, blaming

¹⁴¹ Nishiyama Hidegumi (2020), Base Built in the Middle of “Rice Fields”: A politics of ignorance in Okinawa, geopolitics, vol. 27, issue 2, pp.546-565 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1801646>

¹⁴² Ibidem;

¹⁴³ Ibidem;

them for the urbanisation and population growth that caused the actual conditions around the base. Beside from picturing Okinawans as lazy and masters of extortion, he affirmed that the base was built in the “middle of a rice field”¹⁴⁴. Maher lecture can be interpreted as a form of racial specialisation that aims to justify the presence of the military facilities on the territory that at the same time Okinawans are made responsible for the risks and dangers.

Often, US officials discourse concerning the military presence revolves around doubt and uncertainty rather than explicit ignorance. It is an example the inaugural conference held in September 2012 where US consul General Alfred Magleby stated the mysteriousness behind the reason of the concentrations of houses near the airport¹⁴⁵. The General, completely ignoring the requisition of the land for military purposes, neglected the US military agency in creating dangerous situations. Implementing the idea that it was the inhabitants who came to live near the bases and negating the dispossession and displacement, the military omits itself as the cause of the risks for the inhabitants. And thus, ignoring the military agency in the dispossession of people and casting the blame on the inhabitants contributes to downplay the responsibility of the empire and enforcing the oppressive system and has an active role in shaping colonial present. The coloniser creates the myth of the deserted islands which “allows outside powers to override local concerns and construct island landscapes as a marine borderland bustling with militarised fortification”¹⁴⁶. The production of ignorance and the subsequent idea of “new” and “unknown” territory employed in the creation of the bases through the active process of ignorance of manipulation of people memory and traumatic experiences have generated counternarratives concerning the history of Futenma Air Base. Among these attempts, the Aza- Ginozawan Hometown association created a DVD entitled “Pre-War Villages Image Movie”, based on existing maps, photos, graphs and oral history¹⁴⁷. This attempt and more generally the production and maintenance of indigenous people experiences, and land-based knowledge is central to the weakening of ignorance based colonial knowledges, rejecting the idea of truth created by modern imperial powers.

The indigenous decolonial storytelling as indigenous scholar Alfred states is “embedded in specific and multiple histories and cannot be collapsed in some pure monolithic and homogenised essence”¹⁴⁸. It starts from

¹⁴⁴ Nishiyama Hidegumi (2020), Base Built in the Middle of “Rice Fields”: A politics of ignorance in Okinawa, geopolitics, vol. 27, issue 2, pp.546-565 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1801646>

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem;

¹⁴⁶ Davis Sasha (2015), *The Empire’s Edge: Militarization, Resistance, and Transcending hegemony in the Pacific*, University of Georgia Press <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt175738q>

¹⁴⁷ Nishiyama Hidegumi (2020), Base Built in the Middle of “Rice Fields”: A politics of ignorance in Okinawa, geopolitics, vol. 27, issue 2, pp.546-565 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1801646>

¹⁴⁸ Alfred Taiaiake (2005), *Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism*, Government and opposition journal, vol.40, issue 4, pp. 597-614 doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2005.00166.x

familiar sites of personal dislocation, land struggle, historical erasure inflicted by global colonialism¹⁴⁹ and contains what is true about individual and community struggles, connected to the place of belonging. Storytelling connects learning and the “grounding” of the stories to the land and the earth¹⁵⁰; thus, it is not separable from the protection of the land from disposition and pollution. Hence, community and land-based storytelling not only help in restoring and rejuvenate indigenous knowledges and traditions but also give a counter narrative to the colonial knowledge and to the linked idea of scientific and objective information and for this reason, in the imperialistic order, indigenous storytelling is a threat to the colonial control of national borders and history and the way they are built. In other words, indigenous storytelling is a practice intertwined with the connection to the land and its responsibilities, the transmission of knowledges, all forming a possible counter measure to the colonial occupation of Land and discourses, considering the contemporary challenges and the transformations that indigenous communities had gone through in the recent periods, such as the process of mobilisations of the communities with other countries or the pluralities of knowledges based on the diverse experiences of the indigenous people.

When approaching storytelling in the Ryukyuan archipelago, it should be considered the exchanges and mobilisations of the communities with other communities in South-East Asia, the annexation and colonisation from Japan and the US occupation that shaped culturally and ethically the communities of the Ryukyuan archipelago. These changes comported a complexity that often results in difficulty in the ability to share indigenous memories and the subsequent decline in a sense of place and belonging in relation to other humans or non-humans. In this framework, storytellers have a crucial role in holding the past memories and renovating the communities’ future, adapting to the changes and shaping them into place-based stories, and taking into account the challenges of narrating stories in a cultural, historical and linguistic diverse context.¹⁵¹ One of the most famous contemporary examples on how the complexity of the communities and storytelling combines to find a way to communicate is exposed by Sakiyama Tami and her literary works. Starting from her very own personal struggles of being stigmatised when moving to new places due to the language she spoke both by Japanese and speakers of *uchinaaguchi* (language spoken on Okinawa’s main island), she was always aware of the difficulties of communications. Through the activity of writing, that enables the possibility to centre the narrative on marginalised places and people, she creates an invented language that becomes the vehicle of expression for the stratified communities, expressing the memories of the place. Her stories are often set in the

¹⁴⁹ Siam Aman, Ritskes Eric (2013), Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance, Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society, vol.2, no.1 file:///C:/Users/39345/Downloads/titusland,+19626-46034-1-CE%20(1).pdf

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem;

¹⁵¹ Kina Ikue (2013), Storied Islands: Imagined Indigeneity as a Strategy for Transforming the Okinawan Community, International Review of Ryukyuan and Okinawan studies, pp.1-8 <http://dx.doi.org/20.500.12000/30055>

town of Kuja, a sort of “borderland ¹⁵²”, that host a community of marginalised people and where the theme of the loss of memory and the struggle for communication are two central topics around which the narration usually revolves. A clear example of the struggle for communication and the fight against the loss of memory, is the story called “In the season of the Psuguru Breeze” where the narrator, presumably a woman, encounters a young mixed-race man that takes her to his house. In the house the narrator finds an illiterate old woman who hasn’t spoken in 30 years. The man, called Hiroshi, confesses the attempt to recuperate his grandmother language in order to be able to communicate with her and asks for the narrator’s help. Both the grandmother and the man symbolise the memories in the place and Hiroshi attempt to rediscover and understand the language shows how, according to the writer, indigeneity requires not just knowledge but also compassion and will continue, two characteristics placed in higher value than just the pure identification as indigenous. In other words, storytellers, according to what transpires from Sakiyama stories, should not be specifically indigenous people, but rather the focus should be on the understanding and respect of the survival of the stories, moving in the space of *shima*, and connecting the diversified experiences of the different communities to the place of belonging. In the space of *shima*, which refers to a political rather than geographical term (*shima* means community or island in Japanese), inhabitants can articulate their identity and relationship, moving beyond the national borders in a transnational indigenous framework where the Okinawa Prefecture figures as a dynamic space of debates on shared problematics, connecting people outside of the national borders. In this process, the water becomes a symbol of the exchanges and of the communal union and the fluidity of the process of remembrance where not just the current inhabitants of the place can recollect on their experiences but also reflections on diasporic return, ancestral memory and disconnection can become central themes of discussion. The struggle of dislocation and its subsequent loss of self and the complexity of identity are well explained by Shō Tanaka’s poem “Homecoming”, written upon his return to Okinawa in 2016. Shō Tanaka, a fourth-generation Okinawan, reflects the journey of reconnection with one’s roots, emphasizing the disconnection from his genealogy avoiding the use of its surname.

he rubs katsuo-bushi
flakes between his legs
handfuls of rancid paper
tuna fins slicing the skin
a rotten carcass dangling
high and dry he is sprawled
and spread open until high tide
ocean rushes into him
salt sending agony into his creation

¹⁵² Kina Ikue (2013), *Storied Islands: Imagined Indigeneity as a Strategy for Transforming the Okinawan Community*, International Review of Ryukyuan and Okinawan studies, pp.1-8 <http://dx.doi.org/20.500.12000/30055>

as every one of his descendants awakens¹⁵³

The poem shifts timelines and uses vivid imaginary to explore the fluidity of memory and identity in the diasporic experience, interplaying memory with lived experience that generates a feeling stuck between the ambivalence of return and the complexities of diasporic identities. Revoking the image of the *katsuobushi*, he shows his efforts on remembering cultural practices transmitted by his ancestors, at the same time “rancid paper” and “rotten carcass” symbolises the difficulty in the act of remembrance. The ocean, involved by the writer, symbolises the surge of ancestral memories and the movement from past to presence in the diasporic movement. In this poem, water plays a crucial role for the transmission of ancestral memories, and in the process of healing the holes of personal or collective stories, moving through generations and connecting past and present struggles. These concepts highlight the importance of the ocean and water as a tool for the connections in archipelagic memories¹⁵⁴

Both the case of Sakiyama Tami and Shō Tanaka reveals how memories and their diffusion are fluid processes of construction and reflection, that intertwines with issues such as identity and the processing of traumatic memories, other than the difficulty of language barriers and incommunicability. With this, it comes to a logical conclusion that the creation of community spaces through the process of memories sharing is a long and plural process that incapsulate diversified experiences and thus, must adapt to the changing of times and people, having at its foundation the shared goal of restoring land, individual and community based memories and knowledges as a counter measure to the neo-liberal and imperialistic policies that produce and nurture ignorance with the aim of continuing to exploit and pollute land and water, continuing to displace people and disconnect them from the possibility of restoring their identities as indigenous people in the Ryukyu archipelago.

2.6 Indigenous languages, land and reclamation.

In this section, I will argue how the preservation and transmission of endangered indigenous languages, not only can be framed as an act of resistance against colonial policies and the monocultural and monolingual national models but also is strictly connected to the preservation of land-based Indigenous knowledges and mental and physical well-being of the speakers. I will also delineate the situation concerning Ryukyuan languages and its transmissions’ strategies, focusing on the importance of Indigenous languages can be considered ecological encyclopaedias that not only carry knowledges about world views rooted in the land, but also traumatic memories linked to colonial occupation and displacement: losing them would also loose relational ways through which seeing the land, human and non-human relationship and the traumatic pasts

¹⁵³ Ginoza Ayano (2025), Archipelagic Memory, Indigeneity, and Transnational Belonging in Shō Tanaka’s “Homecoming, university of the Ryukyu, pp.1-17 https://kenkyushadb.lab.u-ryukyu.ac.jp/html/100001320_ronbn_1_en.html

¹⁵⁴ Ibidem;

memories about the cruelty of government agendas who sought to displace, replace or exterminate indigenous peoples and their cultures. It must be noted that, in addition to the government policies, transmission of endangered indigenous languages is also made challenging by the difficulties the communities could find due to the trauma of violence that is connected to them¹⁵⁵. Not only indigenous languages reclamation could help in increasing the use of these languages but also could serve as a tool for community cohesion, cultural restoration and claims to sovereignty, helping to redefine the self, wounded by prejudices, poverty and spiritual disconnection from heritages, cultures or family instability. In other words, this process is more than just learning a new, ancestral or heritage language, but concerns healing a traumatic past, joy to rediscover its own roots and thus, it's heavily connected to the speaker's personal well-being¹⁵⁶. Reclamation of endangered languages involves decolonisation as a practice of undoing the effects of colonisation, actively rediscovering and reclaiming the language to combat sociocultural and political problems. It is a process that enables the doing and undoing of the past, projecting the future in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the self. An individual process that is also projected in the community substrate advocate for the emergence of indigenous voices in academic spaces, creating syllabi that involve the study of indigenous languages and creating spaces where they can be practised¹⁵⁷. Creating social spaces and connections, increasing the sense of belonging and purpose while speaking the ancestral language helps in the sustenance of mental and physical health, damaged first of all by discrimination and poor life conditions.¹⁵⁸

Within this broader framework, the case of the Ryukyuan languages is particularly significant. During the Meiji restoration and the process of construction of the Japanese nation-state, the Tokyo language variety was designed as the standard language with the subsequent re-negotiation of the other language variants, including the Ryukyuan ones, as dialects. Despite their differences from Japanese, the process that led the Ryukyuan languages to be regarded as mere variants of Japanese went hand in hand with the cultural and territorial assimilation that took place between 1872 and 1879,¹⁵⁹ following the Western model of nation states that claimed the belonging to regional variety of every language within the nation's borders. Despite a strict policy of preservation of ancient customs was followed during the first eight years of Japanese rule over the territory, in 1879 the Vice minister of education Tanaka Fujimaro was sent to the Okinawa Prefecture with the aim of implementing the education system, and thus Japanese language education started to be spread more broadly,

¹⁵⁵ Chiblow Susan (2021), Language is land, land is language: the importance of Indigenous languages, *Human geography journal*, vol.15, pp.1-4 <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786211022899>

¹⁵⁶ Heinrich Patrick (2023), Ryukyuan Perspectives for Language Reclamation, *languages*, vol.8, issue 35, pp.1-6 [10.3390/languages8010000](https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010000)

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem;

¹⁵⁸ Whalen D.H (2022), Health effects of Indigenous language use and revitalisation: a realist review, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, vol.21, pp.1-14 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-022-01782-6>

¹⁵⁹ Heinrich Patrick (2005), Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands, *Asia Pacific Journal*, vol.3, issue 11, pp.1-12 <https://apjjf.org/patrick-heinrich/1596/article>

for the creation of imperial subjects. More intense attempts to frame Ryukyuans in the imperial pictures as citizens was implemented after the victory of the first Sino-Japanese war, with the Ordinance to regulate the dialect that banned the Ryukyuan languages from school. A further action that doomed Ryukyuan languages to the brick of extinction was the development, in 1931, of schemes to promulgate the use of Japanese language in public spaces through debates and presentations, deeming as unpatriotic the use of the Ryukyans languages. In 1937, the Local department of Education and the Movement for Enforcement of the Standard Language filled a policy plan called Programme for Education in Okinawan Prefecture promulgating to refuse services to people who use Ryukyuan languages in public office and severe punishments to employees caught to use one of those. Among them, the most infamously is the dialect tags that the last student had to wear around their neck, if caught not using Japanese language, with students monitoring each other, becoming active actors of the assimilation.¹⁶⁰ In this context, the standard Japanese language came to be considered the correct language to be used, in stark contrast with the Ryukyuan languages, propelling drastic effects on language ecology and multilingualism, as Japanese was promulgated as the only language to be spoken in public.

An apparent different situation was to be found during the US occupation of the Ryukyuan archipelago, where US occupation forces encouraged the use of the Ryukyuan languages, while the institutions continued to diffuse education in standard Japanese. It should be mentioned that the US government push for the inhabitants to use the indigenous languages and claim independence from Japan was a ploy to maintain control on the archipelago, due to its strategic position in the Pacific Ocean. At first, US government banned mainland Japanese teaching materials and called for the compilation of Ryukyuan textbooks, but as a response in 1950 an assembly of school directors determined the use of the Mainland Japan education in the Ryukyu archipelago. It can be said that the Japanese language and education became a tool of resistance against the US occupation. However, as a result, Ryukyuan languages were again condemned as bad languages and the natural transmissions of them was interrupted in the first years of the Occupation¹⁶¹, with older generations proficient in one of the languages and younger generations being Japanese monolingual. The 1990s saw the birth of many organisations that aimed to revitalise the languages, among them, the Society for spreading Okinawan was the most influential, advocating for the necessity of programmatic programs for Okinawan language variety in school, organisation of Okinawan teachers training, development of an Okinawan standard orthography and establishment of dialect classes at elementary and middle school¹⁶². In their declaration issued at the Naha Community Centre on 18 September 2005 during the first edition of the Community Language Day, the Society claimed the rights to use these languages in private and public domains, to have language instructions

¹⁶⁰ Heinrich Patrick (2005), Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands, *Asia Pacific Journal*, vol.3, issue 11, pp.1-12 <https://apjjf.org/patrick-heinrich/1596/article>

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*;

¹⁶² Heinrich Patrick (2005), Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands, *Asia Pacific Journal*, vol.3, issue 11, pp.1-12 <https://apjjf.org/patrick-heinrich/1596/article>

in order to develop language proficiency, and the right to receive public services in the indigenous languages. However, despite many associations attempt to advocate for the need of education in indigenous languages, a regular column in the Okinawa Times in 2001 called *Nobusaka na shimakutuba* (Let's save our community languages) reveals how stigmatisation of the languages is still persistent, as the languages were referred to as dialects. Moreover, the column revealed how the efforts for revitalisation are still focused on documentation in the form of recordings or vocaboularies, rather than actual language knowledge transmission in the communities¹⁶³. This approach reveals how the concept of languages as system is still persistent, compared to the notion of language as perspective. As a result, the vast majority of attempts were focused on recording of folktales, with no intention of transmission of the languages to the younger generations, often refusing the help of academic language specialists, because of the impossibility to understand the “essence” of the languages. The impossibility of grasping the “essence” and the fear of losing the purity of the languages are two of the main issues of communities and linguists who have the aim of revitalising an endangered language. The problem of authenticity is very commonly shared in those attempts who focus merely on preservation, and not on transmission, as the CD called “*Ginoza son no mukashibanashi*” (Folktales from Ginoza Village), a body of 21 stories produced by the Ginoza Museum.¹⁶⁴ (Revitalisation attempts) Some parts of the CD were recorded in standard Japanese, in order to make them understandable for children, generating a dilemma related to the balance between audience appeal and authenticity.

The issue of authenticity, as mentioned before, shift the focus of the process of revitalisation from the actual transmission to younger generations, the only way in which languages can escape from death. Thus, advocating for the institution of *Uchinaaguchi* classes in school should be considered the first and most important goal. However, the introduction of indigenous languages classes should be approved by the Okinawa Education Council, that still nowadays has not shown any support to the plan¹⁶⁵, as the learning of community language is not seen as a priority, stripping it from the possibility of being a tool for communication among the community. In addition to the obstacles posed by the Council, some other practical issues pose a significant stop to the concrete realisation of the project: the lack of adequate resources for teaching such as textbooks and guildelines; the non-existence of formal procedure for the provision of teachers who are able to teach the Ryukyuan languages; disagreement on which language should be taught and which variety should be used as the standard, since making one of the languages the standard would mean neglecting the others; lack of teachers’

¹⁶³ Anderson Mark, Revitalisation Attempts and Language Attitudes in the Ryukyus, chap.1, pp.1-30
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329656065_Revitalisation_Attempts_and_Language_Attitudes_in_the_Ryukyus

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem;

¹⁶⁵ Heinrich Patrick (2005), Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands, Asia Pacific Journal, vol.3, issue 11, pp.1-12 <https://apjjf.org/patrick-heinrich/1596/article>

confidence in their ability to speak authentic language that is appropriate for teaching¹⁶⁶. Besides from this issues, attempts to institute indigenous language courses were created by all of the six universities in the Okinawa Prefecture, that because they are situated in the Okinawa Island started to teach *Uchinaaguchi*, to facilitate communication with elderly residents in nursing homes. Even though this could be considered a step forward in the struggle for language reclamation, it is evident from some student's comments that little attention was posed on long term goals and shift in language attitude, as students stated that "you don't really need *Uchinaaguchi*". Indeed, it is evident that without the involvement of younger generations, but most importantly without the shift in language attitude, language reclamation attempts will not be effective, and the indigenous endangered languages will just be considered a mere tool of folkloristic appeal, confined to the realm of arts, and not a tool to create and nurture communities.

Relegating the use of Ryukyuan languages to art, radio and music, even though it can't be denied the importance due to the connection to ancient cultural practices, sway from the possibility of creating community space where the priority is given to re-establishment of intergenerational mother tongue transmission, providing the tool from change in attitude and incentives for the transmission. As Karimata Shigehina, professor at the University of the Ryukyu affirms "it should be some benefit created for *Uchinaaguchi* speakers in various industries, in order to encourage maintenance of the language, even if this provokes criticism that the motives for learning would be selfish or impure".¹⁶⁷ In other words, the creation of community spaces such as playgrounds, kindergartens, markets and shops where indigenous languages are actively used as a central mean of communication, could encourage a shift in the attitude of the speakers. Building communities that share languages, experiences and other cultural aspects, together with the active support of local activists in the proposal of grass-root activities and creation of textbooks and other study materials, could propel significant changes. As an example of the continuous activities that are constantly shaping the discourse on indigenous languages acquisition, in 2009 UNESCO recognised six Ryukyuan languages, that were still considered dialects by the majority, generating the fall out of the term *hōgen* (dialect), in favour of languages in reference to the six. The Society for Okinawan language revitalisation, after the recognition made by the UNESCO, started to advocate for *Uchinaaguchi* school education, creating a unified system to write the language in katakana and published a beginner textbook named "*Hajimiyabira Uchinaaguchi*" (let's start

¹⁶⁶ Anderson Mark, *Revitalisation Attempts and Language Attitudes in the Ryukyus*, chap.1, pp.1-30
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329656065_Revitalisation_Attempts_and_Language_Attitudes_in_the_Ryukyus

¹⁶⁷ Ibidem;

Uchinaaguchi), having as a target children who don't speak the language, with the hope that it could be useful for their process of language acquisition.¹⁶⁸

It can be said that many were and still are the attempts to reclaim and teach the Ryukyuan indigenous languages and much more must be done to spread the languages to younger generations, in a very lengthy and challenging process of undoing colonial process and reconstructing personal identity. The process of reclamation is tortuous, it is a process of individual struggles to decolonise their mind and re-connect to ancestral languages, of un-doing tides of domination that not only have been imposed by the colonial forces, but have also been replicated from inside, with the acceptance of the monolingual education. Thus, the process of learning a Ryukyuan language comes from the inside, from the necessity to see changes, restoring their own language.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, with the lack of formal programs that teach indigenous languages in school, language learning and use is placed in a third space, a community where individual efforts merge with group mobilisation, healing and transformation. In this space of negotiations of identity, elder and new speaker can group together with the aim of language transmission, deconstructing the traumatic colonial memories and the struggle of self-marginalisation, that led to consider their ancestral languages as unsophisticated, due to the historical devaluation of them at the hand of the Japanese. Thus, language acquisition for indigenous communities is strictly tied to the creation of a space where pain can be released and where they can exercise self-determination, through the engagement of place and land-based community activities.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Anderson Mark, *Revitalisation Attempts and Language Attitudes in the Ryukyus*, chap.1, pp.1-30
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329656065_Revitalisation_Attempts_and_Language_Attitudes_in_the_Ryukyus

¹⁶⁹ Heinrich Patrick (2023), *Ryukyuan Perspectives for Language Reclamation*, languages, vol.8, issue 35, pp.1-6

¹⁷⁰ Hammine Madoka (2023), *Hear our Voice: New Speakers of Ryukyuan Language Negotiation, Construction and Change of Identities*, Discourse of identity, pp.1-11
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368345182_Hear_our_Voice_New_Speakers_of_Ryukyuan_Language-Negotiation_Construction_and_Change_of_Identities

CHAPTER 3

Interviews

Introduction

The third and final chapter of the thesis will be a commentary on the answers that I received during the interviews. The conducted interviews amounted to a total of five people, where the participants answered six different questions. The interviews were conducted in English. However, I am fully aware of the limitative nature of languages and the difficulties that speaking in language that differs from the mother tongue could be found in the expression of identity related concepts. As a white Italian, I thought that giving space to Okinawan people who live in different ways their relationship to the land and their relationship was the most crucial thing to do. In other words, I did not want to fall into the mistake of erasing the voices and the struggle of the people, imposing my view and understanding of what I have studied. Regarding my methodology I approached the interview with a semi-structural layout based on a qualitative approach. Each one of the participants, whose interviews lasted on average 50 minutes, was asked the same six questions concerning identity belonging, land base knowledge, storytelling, US militarism, languages revitalisation and the importance of the transmission of indigenous knowledge to the younger generations, followed by follow-up questions in some cases to explore more in details their answers. I employed a convenience sampling since the participants were either people that I had the possibility to contact through Gesshin's Ca'Foscari university association or contacts handed by my supervisor. The interview outcomes were then organised using a thematic analysis. Following each interview, they were transcribed and categorized according to the order of the questions. All the answers were compared one to the other, highlighting similarities and differences based on the lived experiences of the participants and their understanding of the topics.

The interviews revolved around diverse topics concerning identity, land base knowledge, influence of the US bases and the importance of transmission of cultures, languages, memories to the younger generations. The focus of this work was to highlight the different and diversified understanding of matters concerning the Ryukyu archipelago through the plural experiences of the inhabitants that differ in gender, age, occupation and life experiences. What emerges from the result is the diversification of the experiences and the struggle of identity, declined in different aspects and intensities related to life experiences and upbringings, but sharing a common understanding of the different aspects discussed. The understanding of their identity as Okinawa and the importance related to it came as the result of a long and still ongoing process of de-constriction of the colonial assimilation process that tried to erase Okinawan cultures, languages and memories. The colonial and imperialistic policy promulgued by the Japanese nation-state during the Meiji Period, with the goal of assimilating the Ryukyu Kingdom to the Japanese nation both culturally and geographically, caused deep damages to the perception of the Okinawan identity, that came to be thought as a shameful trait to be hidden, with all its cultural practices, languages and traditions, as it was related to the discriminating framing of an Okinawan backwardness. In more contemporary times, with the US occupation, Okinawan belonging to Japan was weaponised in discourses to counter the presence of the US on the territory. The results of these interviews show the complicated political and social situation that influenced the construction and perception of individual and community identity.

3.0 Table of contents

Name	Gender	Occupation	Duration
Megumi Chibana	female	Professor at Kanagawa University	1:01
Masahide Ishihara	male	Retired professor University of the Ryukyus	49:26
Madoka Hammine	female	Assistant professor at Denver University	33.28 min
Akino Oshiro	female	Part-time lecturer at Manchester University	1.02 h
Shohei Toguchi	male	Owner of “Unmuting Ryukyu” Instagram page	Written

3.1. What does be Ryukyuan mean to you personally? Have you ever experienced any challenges, stigma or difficulties related to how your identity is perceive or expressed?

With regards to the answers provided by the interviewed, the results of this first question show a diversified understanding of the perception of identity, given the different ages, life experiences and upbringings. Nonetheless, what appear is that the process of understanding is not final and is always in progress, sharing the struggles of de-constructing and re-building their identity in the Japanese society or in relation to the received Japanese education. For Megumi Chibana from Kanagawa University, her process of understanding her identity as “Okinawan” has an unusual journey compared to the most commonly shared by other Okinawans. “Many of my friends who are Okinawan started having this awareness of their identity after they moved out of Okinawa, after being exposed to other different cultures they realised that they are Okinawans and not Japanese”. Same for her friends, going further with the interview, Chibana admitted having the same sort of realisation once she moved out of Okinawa. However, she admitted that she was always aware of their Okinawan identity, for her the real question was: “Am I Japanese?” Her strong sense of identity, as she continued, was related to her family upbringing, and what in her opinion made the self-identification even stronger was: “I don’t look like the typical Okinawan by my look. There is always this stereotype of being short, dark skinned or hairy”, not aligning to this image and being told that “she didn’t look Okinawan”. What it appears talking to Chibana was the importance given to “Okinawan identity”, rather the Ryukyuan one as the latter is: “not something I use that much, it is more associated with the history than with me being Okinawan”. A distinction between the two identities is also done by Akino Oshiro. For her, the process of understanding her identity is connected to the study abroad period that she had during her master's degree at Hawaii University. As she said: “I didn’t experience any challenges or discrimination in my lifetime. I think it’s because my generation has a different experience from the older one. Particularly it has a lot of things to do with pop culture representation

in Japanese context. When I was in third year of junior high there was a big popular rock band called Orange Range from Okinawa that became a mainstream music phenomenon on Japanese TV. They sang in Japanese but incorporated traditional music into rock music. This was perceived as a cool thing. So, when I tell people that I am from Okinawa, they say it is cool". In other words, she affirms she did not suffer of any discrimination due to the "Okinawa boom" that happened during the first years of the 2000s, even though retrospectively, she realised how that reactions she continues to receive are related to "an exotization of Okinawa and to internal Orientalism". Her identity of being Okinawan is perceived as something constructed in relation to Japan as she states: "I think it is a bit of a relative conception; I realise who I am in relation to others. So, whether it is a Japanese context or an international context I will be Okinawan in relation to Japan". While referring to "being Ryukyuan", the process of understanding what being Ryukyuan meant to her was a bit different, at the same time still related to her experience in Hawaii where she had the opportunity to talk with other indigenous people from Hawaii and encounter the concept of indigenous community. As she affirmed: "It is not only about being unique or being cool or different from others, but it also entails the history of oppression, discrimination and structural inequality that creates the indigenous people definition. Discrimination was based on a hierarchical situation between colonised island and coloniser. When I realised it, I learned what it means to be Ryukyuan. For me being Ryukyuan is understanding the history that made the people of Okinawa and acknowledging the historical process of oppression and how these people were perceived by others. It has a lot to do with structural inequality, oppression and colonisation". It can be said that for her Okinawan identity and Ryukyuan identity are two different aspects of who she is related to the Japanese and to the international societies and the latter to the acknowledgment and understanding of the history of oppression that the people in the Ryukyuan archipelago had to endure.

On the other hand, Ishihara and Shohei Toguchi did not highlight a distinction between the two identities. For Ishihara, his being Ryukyuan is tightly connected to the resistance to the Japanese cultural assimilation: "For me being Ryukyuan means being myself. When I was a child, when I was going to junior high school, our generation was told to be Japanese and somehow, we tried to be Japanese, but after graduating and up to high school Okinawan children did not have any chance to study about Okinawa or the Ryukyu. So, we were forced to think that we were Japanese. But after I graduated in high school, I learnt about Okinawa by myself and I perceived some differences between Japanese and Okinawans. We do have different histories, languages and cultures." This realisation of

the differences between Japan and Okinawa, led the professor to a de-construction of his personal perception of identity: “Gradually I tended to think of myself as being Okinawan and Japanese. I now think I am Okinawan first and Japanese citizen second. My nationality is Japanese, but I don’t think I am Japanese.” For Shohei Toguchi, owner of the Instagram page “Unmuting the Ryukyu, the meaning of being Ryukyuan is deeply rooted in “places, history, languages and culture that existed before Okinawa became part of Japan.” The sense of belonging is not just to be relegated to ethnicity or blood relationships, but: “it is about memory, responsibility, and the feeling that I belong to a history that has often been hidden, simplified, or treated as only a small part of Japanese history.” Even for Shohei the realisation of his identity is preceded by a long period of his life where he received a Japanese education, understanding Okinawa as merely a Japanese Prefecture. However, later in his life, as Shohei affirmed, when he started to learn more about the Ryukyuan Kingdom, language loss, the Battle of Okinawa, and the military bases issue, he realised that his identity was “much deeper than what I had been taught”. However, self realisation is not directly accompanied by the possibility to express one’s personal identity, as it is often misinterpreted for anti-Japanese sentiments, as Shohei admitted: “I also have difficulty in expressing this identity. When I say I am Ryukyuan, some people immediately misunderstand it as being anti-Japanese. But for me, it is not about hating Japan, it is about being able to love and protect the Ryukyuan identity without having to erase it.” It is evident from the outcomes of these interviews how the perception of the Okinawan or Ryukyuan identity of the speakers, taking into account the diversities, share a common pattern of realisation of some sort of differences from the standard Japanese perception of self, accompanied by a journey of self-discovery that will never end, that will influence not only their very own self-perception but even how external factors and dynamics are perceived. Regarding the outer perception of self in the Japanese and Okinawan society context, the speakers had the opportunity to go further into details with the second part of the question regarding stigmas or discrimination that they had suffered. Even though none of the speakers have registered any form of direct discrimination regarding their identity, a thread of comments that reveal misunderstandings or even shock or confusion regarding their stances is shared. For example, Chibana reveals that often when stating her provenance, it is met with some “stereotypical images that still continue nowadays, relating Okinawa to things such as being a strong drinker, being laid back and relaxed”. This kind of difficulties in the perception of identity expression is not just to be found in relation to Japanese, but also with other people from Okinawa, as Ishihara told me. “When I say I’m Okinawan and not Japanese, some of my Okinawan friends tell me are you not Japanese? They think they are Japanese, in the sense that Japanese come first and then Okinawa and to me it is the opposite.” It appears that the process of

assimilation of Okinawan cultures and languages to the Japanese nation state, had a strong impact on Ishihara's friends, leading to disputes and disagreements, influenced by the commonly shared idea that being Okinawan and talking Okinawan languages is "nothing to be proud. You don't need to know the (Okinawan) languages and they are sort of inferior to Japanese; I was taught that way. This was not just a dimension from the Japanese side, but in a bigger picture it was from a local point of view, something that Okinawan teachers taught to children because they wanted Okinawans kids to be Japanese". For Hammine, assistant professor at Denver University, her struggles are related to how Japan is still perceived as a mono-ethnic society. "There are a lot of challenges because in Japan there is this belief that it has only one ethnic group and even if some people know about the existence of indigenous people in Japan, they only know about Ainu, and I have to explain all the time. It is very difficult and sometimes I give up".

Overall, this first section of the interviews revealed how the concept of identity and the process of realising and understanding personal identities, is very personal and diversified. Even though it shares some common points given by the shared history and educational background, the perception of identity and how it is manifested highly varies. These variations are generally given by personal experiences, family upbringings and age. For example, it is generally possible that Okinawans from older generations, such as Ishihara, are more likely to develop a strong sense of Okinawan identity, as the memories of the war and the Japanese violent assimilation are still vivid in the minds. However, it does not necessarily mean that younger generations are not able to decolonise their minds and identity, as the replies to this and the other questions show. The next section will stress the importance of land and the relationship with it for all the participants.

3.2. How would you describe your relationship with the land? Do you think that strengthening or rediscovering land-based relationships could have an impact on community life? If so, in what ways?

Regarding land and relationships with the non-human world, the interviewees offered different perspectives, yet they all emphasised its central role in everyday life. Land was not described simply as something to be used, but as a relational space grounded in care, memory and identity. For Chibana, who began to rethink the concept of land while working on her master's thesis, land does not refer

only to fields, but also includes “ocean, environment, people and the community that are connected to this space as well”. This understanding of land as inseparable from community and non-human relations is closely connected to the idea of *shima*. The connection between land and community belonging is particularly present in Ishihara's response: “the land here means the community. I'm from a small community in the northern part of Okinawan Island called Oku. The population is very small and I am very proud; I tell my friends I'm from Oku and I'm very happy to be from there. We were born and raised there and I moved to Naha, the biggest city in Okinawa when I was 14, but I haven't forgotten about Oku. So, I guess that connection between myself and Oku is very important. And then I was raised and I grew up in the natural environment, there's the ocean, the river and mountains and those kinds of things. Nature was there and people were very caring about each other. That's my idea about that. I was and I am very happy to be from Oku”.

In response to this question, Other participants generally highlighted the connection between community and nature in terms that can be understood as indigenous relationality. Hammine offered a particularly insightful perspective by stressing the link between language and land: “If you study languages, you will see the connection between those and the land”. In Okinawa, she explained, there is a tree called *ganjoki* in *Uchinaaguchi*. Since *ganjo* means glasses, the name refers to a tree that can be used to make ocean-resistant glasses. As she stated, knowledge about the land is embedded in language: if one only speaks Japanese, one may not know how certain plants are used, which plants can be eaten, or how to fish. She added: “I feel like I lost all those skills, but when I learn the language, they are there”. Her answer reveals the close connection between land and language, as well as the sense of disconnection that the loss of an ancestral language can create. In this sense, language is not only a means of communication between humans, but also a way to reconnect with land and non-human relations.

For Oshiro, relationship with land is an aspect that had the chance to re-discover later in her life, during her studies at Hawai'i University, having the chance to rethink land as not just something to purchase but as a space of memory. “After I learnt about what it means to be indigenous, my relationship with land shifted. Before land was something to purchase, related to a monetary relationship. But when I went to Hawaii, I learnt that the relationship with land goes beyond that. It also entails relationships with ancestors, with natural sources or animals”. It is something that cannot be explained by capitalistic relationships.” Her experience at Hawai'i University made not just start

her journey of rethinking relationships to the land but also offered an insightful opportunity to realise how some similar aspects of relationality with the non-human can also be found in Okinawa. “In the University of Hawaii campus there is a small sacred area that is preserved. People can pay respect to the land, in the sense that this area is made for understanding history and for paying respect to the ancestors. It is a very small area, but it carries a symbolic purpose for Hawaii indigenous people and cannot be used by the university”. This aspect made her realise how land is not merely something to be used for utilitarian purposes, but a place that shares community memories and sacred spaces, related to the community, and how even Okinawa holds similar places, raising her hometown Naha as an example. “My hometown is famous for having a lot of water thanks to its streams. It is also famous for tofu production, since it is boosted by the presence of these streams. There is an area near my house which is sacred and owned by the community. People pay respect to it and kids play nearby. Once in a year on a particular day of June, people clean up the stream to pay respect to the water, and to thank them for receiving good water. Then I realised that it can also not be purchased, and it carries a different relationship from the financial or capitalistic one. It made me realise how the nature or water relationship is equally important as the conventional way of understanding. This is something that gives us a meaning of life or gives us ways to look at the earth and work on methods to protect the land and the earth”.

For Toguchi, his relationship with the land cannot transcend the past and contemporary aspects of land use and perception of Okinawa. Strengthening relationships with the land as not just a mere space to be exploited for tourism related activities can help communities to re-shape and reconnect with ancestors, food, language and local practices. “My relationship with the land is emotional, historical, and painful at the same time. Okinawa is not just a beautiful island or a tourist destination to me. It is the place where my ancestors lived. It is also the place where many civilians suffered during the war, and where military bases still occupy a large part of the land. I think strengthening land-based relationships can have a strong impact on community life. When people understand land as something connected to ancestors, food, language, local practices, and memory, they may treat it with more care. It can also help people feel that they are not isolated individuals, but part of a longer community story. At the same time, many young people are becoming disconnected from the land because of modern life, tourism, urban development, and Japanese-centred education. So, I think rediscovering the relationship with land is important for rebuilding community identity”.

Overall, participants have described land as not merely a space to be exploited, but as a relational space where people can connect with ancestors, languages, memory and the non-human world. Their answers highlight an understanding of land as grounded in reciprocity and belonging where the relationship with land cannot be separated to a sense of community and cultural belonging and wellbeing. Moreover, they emphasized how the still ongoing processes of colonialism linked to modernization, tourism industry has contributed to the disconnection from the land. Thus, it appears of vital importance reconnecting with land-based practices in a militarised and commodified region that is Okinawa. However, the sense of displacement and disconnection from their own roots is strictly connected to the presence of the US military bases, as the replies of the next session will highlight.

3.3. In what ways, if any, has the presence of military bases influenced community life in Okinawa? And has it affected your personal relationship with land or water?

The presence of the military bases all over the world has impacted not only ecosystems, causing unrepairable damages to nature, animals and water but also significantly shaped the community relationship with the land through displacement and pollution of the spaces. This section will report the answers given by the five respondents with their perspective on how their personal life was influenced by the presence of the US military bases, covering security matters other than noise pollution. Furthermore, the replies will stress how not only the bases caused, and still cause, great harm to the natural ecosystems but also established itself as the normality for Okinawans that had become inevitably economically dependent on the bases.

For Chibana, the presence of the base in her life was perceived as something normal since her childhood. “My grandpa’s community is inside the Kadena Air Base. His land was taken away, and he worked for his whole life there until he retired. So, when I was growing up, the presence of the military bases, not just as the physical space, but also the people who worked there, was close to me. For this reason, I think we were pretty americanised in terms of familiarity to the American cultures. We used to celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas, and we have a lot of US stuff at home. This did not instil any negative image about Americans or the military. It was just part of the everyday scene”. Despite the normalisation of the US presence, retrospectively speaking Chibana realised how

militarised was everyday life: “The elementary school I went to was right next to the army base, so we shared the fence. We could see the American soldiers training sessions”. Furthermore, the military presence profoundly affected in relation to her gender and overall security living in Okinawa: “According to the common perception America is considered better economically, so marrying an American guy would give you some sort of freedom”. The gendered relationship between the male American soldier and the female Okinawan civilian is reflected on the security issues related to the rape and assault cases that are very frequently registered on the Okinawan Prefecture. “I was thinking back about the 1996 rape case. I wasn’t really thinking anything at that time, however I realised that I was the same age of the girl who was raped and killed, living near a US base. This means that girl could have been me, and this shocked me. I have experienced many times that those American soldiers come and try to take me in their car or to approach me in a very sexualised way. Because I know how sexualised girls and women in Okinawa were by those American soldiers, it made me feel sick. Okinawa itself is very gendered and sexualised, shaped by the military presence. Of course it is not just a personal conduct, but a structure”. This structure in which militarism and gendered relationships between male US personnel and Okinawan women are tightly connected to create bonds based on economical and ideological freedom can be framed in what Ginoza calls militourism. In militourism spaces, Okinawan women, according to Ginoza, are pushed to seek freedom from Japanese and Okinawan patriarchal society in the idea of freedom and independence that the US soldiers say to carry. These heterosexual relationships reflect the dynamics of the dual empire where the male US soldier seeks for sexual accessibility from the native woman, while the native women seek economic freedom and auto-determination chances. However, these encounters based on the hierarchical power position transform local people into accessible and exotic counterparts, perpetrating disparities in the public and private space. Regarding the former, the sexual desire targeted to US soldiers could lead to questioning of the woman’s national belonging and loyalty; while in the intimate sphere, US military bases on the territory could become a hot topic of discussion, combined with the frequent economic dependence or disparity in salary.

While with Chibana the conversation focused mainly on the gendered perspective of Okinawa in relation to the bases, Ishihara reply concerned how the bases are still a matter of debate in the Okinawa community and how their constructions and distribution on the territory carries dissatisfaction: “Military bases in Okinawa, I believe have very strong negative influences on Okinawan people. One thing is that there are people against the bases and there are people for the bases, that don't care about

bases, and they think that we have reached it because of the bases. So, there's kind of a dispute. The presence of the base kind of divides the Okinawa community. And I am very against the base; I believe that Japan should protect itself. We do not need to rely on the US". This dissatisfaction of the people against the bases is tightly connected to the unbalanced distribution of the bases on the Japanese territory, among other reasons. "People are mad with the US, and we are much madder with the Japanese government because they don't listen to us. You may notice that the Okinawa territory is just 1% percent of the land area, but we have 70% of the US bases, so we do not like it at all". This feeling of frustration is even implemented by the constant presence of accidents related to the bases and noise pollution, matters that the Japanese government tried to tackle with compensation fees handed to the Okinawans. "There is a kind of security issue, but I think why only Okinawa should have that you know about this kind of issue? When you go to Tokyo you do not listen to the sound of the little jets. It's a big noise. But in Tokyo or Osaka, you don't listen to that kind of noise. They divided the community arbitrarily. The presence of the US military base, I do not know if I can say it is a positive thing. Okinawa people made a kind of new culture, a mixed culture, the Okinawan, Japanese and Chinese culture. And then after the US came, we kind of created the Okinawan US culture. And it's a source of identity so I'm kind of feeling that the presence of us is bad but in some way it is not. I understand why, it created a mix of things and now it's very difficult to separate and to create two different things. The space of the land where I grew up had no base. So that when I was going to school in Oku, I didn't have any accident or event or any bad things about the base. Sometimes after training the US soldiers came to our village but I did not have any bad feeling about them, it might be different depending on where in Okinawa you live. The close to base or remote and the far from bases, it differs. But now in Naha, the noise is very annoying. I read and I listen and watch the incidents and accidents. So, this kind of thing has affected people's minds. Before 1972 working in the US bases was very profitable, but now working in the base is not as convenient as before. But it is kind of stable and I guess it is above average. So, a lot of people want to work in the base. So, it is not that you just want us to be dependent on this, but it is a way of getting money, I guess". What Ishihara stated reveals one of the main issues concerning the presence of the bases on the territory, that make it difficult to polarise the matter in two distinctive factions. If on the one hand, before the reversion to Japan, working on the bases could have been a profitable way to make money and the presence of the US personal led to the creation of mixed cultures that nowadays are part of the daily life; on the other hand, the damages that the military institution carries not just for the environment but for the everyday lives of the people near them cannot be forgotten. It must also be noted that the opinion regarding the bases can vary depending on diverse factors such as the proximity

from them, but part of the dissatisfaction derives from the unfair distribution on the Japanese territory that leaves people in Okinawa dealing with the vast majority of hardships compared to the other parts of the Japanese archipelago. Even for Toguchi the presence of the military bases' lays into the inequality of the Okinawa position, justified by the existence of the "China threat" that makes the use of the Okinawan territory as a deterrence for possible attacks. "The military bases have deeply influenced Okinawan community life. They affect land use, noise, safety, politics, and the way Okinawa is seen by the rest of Japan and the world. Many people outside Okinawa talk about security, but Okinawans live with the actual burden. Personally, the bases make me feel that Okinawa is still treated as a place to be used by larger powers. During the Ryukyu Kingdom era, Okinawa existed between larger countries. During the war, it became a battlefield. After the war, it was placed under US military rule. Even today, many bases remain here. So, my relationship with land and sea is affected by this history of outside control. The land is not only a natural place. It is also political. The bases also influence identity. They remind us that Okinawa's political position is not equal. Many people in mainland Japan support the security system, but they do not live next to the bases. That creates frustration and a sense of injustice. In recent years, I also feel that more people in Okinawa have started to see the bases as important for deterrence. Some people say that the soldiers they meet are kind, or that they personally have not experienced anything bad from the bases. I understand why some people feel that way. The nature of the bases may also be changing gradually, and it would not be honest to deny that there are different personal experiences. But for me, that does not erase the larger problem. Crimes connected to the military presence still happen. Noise is still part of daily life for many communities. Accidents and fear do not disappear just because some individual soldiers are kind. I do not see this as a question of whether each soldier is a good person or a bad person. The problem is the structure. To accept the existence of military bases as normal is, in some way, to accept a condition where peace is not truly present. Many people talk about China as a threat. I understand that this argument has some logic in the current geopolitical situation. But if the bases are here, Okinawa becomes the target. The weapons may be described as deterrence, but the land carrying that deterrence is Okinawa. If conflict happens, the people who will live with the danger first are not the people discussing security from Tokyo or somewhere far away. It is the people here. There is an Okinawan phrase, *Nuchi du takara*, which means "life is the treasure". For me, this is not just a beautiful phrase. It is a political and ethical memory born from the experience of war. If life is the treasure, then we must question any system that keeps placing Okinawan lives in danger for the sake of someone else's security. That is why I think we need to keep communicating this point carefully.

The issue is not hatred toward individual Americans or Japanese people. It is about asking why one small island must carry so much risk in the name of security”.

For Hammine, the presence of the military bases carries issues related to the pollution of the ecosystems and the incapability of the communities to carry on their life. “The problems with the chemicals from the military bases are very concerning, because people drink that water every day. And if there is any chemical, it is scary to think about it because we cannot see it since they are transparent in the water. So, people who used to have crops in those areas cannot cultivate crops anymore. It also reflects on health. People say that babies in Okinawa are smaller because of that and it is scary”. In addition, according to her personal experiences, the presence of the bases has constituted a concrete obstacle for family activities such as the visit to family graves: “Going back to the family grave is very important and in some of the area of Okinawa, because they built bases, people cannot go and visit them because they are inside the US base territory. The military is disrupting the traditional culture, the way of being and of living”. Also for Oshiro, the military presence has destroyed and continued to destroy nature and the land, making her feel hopeless about the possibility of concretely doing something to contrast that destruction. However, looking back to resistance movements instil in her a spark of hope about the future: “Looking at the history of people who stood against militarism make me hopeful, there is still a way to resist”. Contrary to some of the other interviewees, Oshiro did not have any negative experience related to US personnels neither noise pollution has impacted significantly her life since she is from Naha, but she acknowledges the hardship that other Okinawans live. Even for her, similarly to Chibana experience, living in a heavily militarised region did not seem a problematic aspect until she moved away: “To be honest, because I grew up with it, I was not aware how problematic that was until I left there and lived in other places. I did not know that people can live without the noises of the airplane and how quiet it can be. I only realised how impactful it is to our life once I left. Maybe when I was not aware that it did not affect me because I was not conscious, I was not acknowledging the impact because I did not know. The military issue occupies so many areas that it has become a political problem, occupying the attention of the media, policy making process and local politics. It occupies a lot of our time and attention that we could have utilized to solve other social problems. It has not just a very tangible negative impact, but also a very symbolic or indirect impact on our life”. On her personal level she feels that the military issues regarding Okinawa have significantly impacted her work life choices: “If we did not have this problem, I could have become a specialist in other issues. And then I had the freedom to do so but when I look at other social issues in Okinawa, they cannot be separated from militarism. For example, for my master’s degree I studied employment issues in Okinawa where there are a lot of

part-time jobs or non-regular jobs compared to other prefectures. The more I study it the more I see a relation to the history of US occupation and the existence of militarism. So, I realised I cannot escape from it”.

This section’s replies highlighted how the US militarism on the territory, not only carries issues related to ecosystems damages, noise pollution and security accidents that inevitably have shaped people’s relationship with the land, but also presence of the bases throughout the decades have created a system that inevitably influenced not just economically people’s lives. While each interviewee emphasized different aspects of their experience, a common theme emerges: the bases have profoundly shaped the relationship between Okinawans, their land, and their sense of identity. For some, such as Chibana and Oshiro, the military presence had become so deeply embedded in everyday life that its effects were initially perceived as normal, only becoming visible through reflection or comparison with life elsewhere. Others, including Ishihara and Shohei Toguchi, highlighted how the concentration of military facilities in Okinawa continues to generate feelings of inequality, frustration, and political marginalization, as local communities bear a disproportionate share of the burdens associated with Japan’s security arrangements. At the same time, the interviews demonstrate the complexity of the issue. The bases have contributed to economic opportunities and cultural exchanges that have become part of contemporary Okinawan society, making it difficult to separate military influence from everyday life. Nevertheless, these perceived benefits coexist with persistent concerns regarding environmental contamination, restrictions on land use, public safety, social divisions, and the disruption of traditional cultural practices. Ultimately, the respondents’ perspectives suggest that the presence of the US military bases cannot be understood solely through strategic or economic considerations. Rather, it represents a structural condition that continues to shape Okinawan society, influencing not only the physical environment but also social relations, political consciousness, and the ways in which Okinawans imagine their past, present, and future.

3.4. Do you think storytelling can play a role in preserving or revitalizing land-based knowledge and community memory? If yes, how?

This section will report the main points regarding storytelling as a vital tool to reconstruct community-based relations to the land and a sense of collective belonging to a community, while at the same time challenging the mainstream discourses around history. Stories told by the older generations to the younger ones can be an effective tool to learn history from liminal perspectives, often silenced in the

mainstream discourses, that carries different meanings depending on the subject, as the replies will highlight.

For Chibana, her interest in storytelling stems personally from her mother that used to collect recordings of stories narrated by the elders regarding the origins of the human beings or about *hajichi* tattoos, influencing her own way of seeing storytelling. “Storytelling is very powerful, especially to announce themselves because it can tell a lot. I think its power resides in its intimate character and because it has the power to connect you to the stories you are listening to. Learning history in school or textbooks often do not really click. I did not see any of my life or many aspects that fit in the history that I learned in school. If you cannot find yourself a bit, it is kind of difficult to connect to history or to whatever I am learning. Storytelling has been a way to tell your perspective: why I am here, what you know. I think it is powerful to convey messages and memories. It is probably inaccurate; not all the stories are accurate in terms of fact. There are always some kinds of omissions and changes, however I think it tells important messages to the community”. It can be said that the idea of storytelling as a more personal way of transmitting knowledge regarding community history is a shared perspective among the interviewed, as Toguchi reply does highlight: “Many Ryukyuan and Okinawan memories were not fully preserved in official textbooks. They were carried through families, elders, local stories, songs, rituals, place names, and personal memories. Storytelling can make history human again. If we only talk about Okinawa through statistics or politics, people may understand the issue, but they may not feel it. But when we tell stories about a grandmother’s memory, a village, a lost language, a place name, or a family experience during the war, people can connect emotionally. I also think digital storytelling is important now. Many young people do not learn these things from school, but they may encounter them through videos, social media, documentaries, or personal essays. That is one reason I create content about Ryukyuan history and identity. I do not want these memories to stay only inside academic books or private family conversations. They need to be accessible to the younger generation too”. According to Hammime, oral storytelling is a traditional practice not just in Okinawa, but commonly shared by indigenous people all over the world, in Okinawa often accompanied by musical instruments such as the *sanshin*: “I’m writing something now about different methodologies in research, and I use indigenous research methodology. There are a lot of books written in English that are written by mostly indigenous people, and they write about storytelling as sharing. I think indigenous people like to share. They are very kind, if you have a visitor at home, they will give you a lot of food and will do *yuntaku* (“friendly talk”) and it is a way of sharing and that is normal for indigenous people. That is how you connect with people. Everything was oral and storytelling is also correlated to singing songs or playing music. I grew up in Okinawa,

and I used to hear a lot of *sanshin* music and if you study those relics, you will realise how much knowledge there is.” It can be said that storytelling is a practice of sharing oral histories to reconnect with the community of belonging, learning history from points of view often considered marginalised. Moreover, it is also a way to reconnect to the land, as Ishihara stated: “*Minoa* is the story of the land, through listening to it we learn about the land and what happened 100 or 200 years ago in a specific village, this story was kind of a hereditary storytelling. So, I do believe that storytelling is a very good way to keep the story or to keep the connection between the land and the people who live on the land”. Another important insight concerning the importance of storytelling as a tool to narrate stories less related to nationalistic or capitalistic views is given by Oshiro: “Storytelling helps us because it can be practised by individuals and it doesn’t have a governmental control or any regulation or limitation by capitalistic purposes”. Being less connected to the central government organization of how history is taught also gives the possibility to detach from the idea of history as a homogenous succession of events, as Oshiro says: “Within Okinawa, land-based knowledge can be different depending on the provenience. Instead of having this general formalised way of storytelling, such as in textbooks or movies, I think verbal storytelling or individual storytelling can produce a lot of diversity and more authenticity. It is important for preserving or reproducing knowledge.”

The answers to this question highlight the perception of storytelling not just as a mere tool to narrate the past, but as a crucial means to preserve and transmit Okinawan knowledge, history and identities. Compared to the institutionalised way of narrating history, storytelling is framed as a personal and communal practice that connects individuals in an emotional way to histories that are omitted to the mainstream narratives. Although it does not conform to the idea of historical accuracy, stories carry with them cultural meanings, memories and perspectives that contribute to intergenerational knowledge transmission. Moreover, the participants highlighted how storytelling is crucial to preserve and strengthen land-based relationships by embedding local histories within specific places and communities. At last, the interviewed suggested how storytelling resists the narratives imposed by governmental institutions of history as a homogenous sequence of facts, allowing diverse, localised and individual perspectives to coexist, contributing to the preservation of cultural diversity. It actively functions as a means for cultural resilience.

3.5. To what extent do you feel that language loss has influenced the way you express or understand your identity?

This paragraph will lay out the answers related to language loss that has influenced the way the interviewed perceive and understand their identity. Many of the answers are profoundly aware of the effect that colonialism had and still has on the ability of speaking their ancestral languages and a shared sense of shame given by the awareness of not being able to communicate actively in their mother tongue languages that are endangered.

This awareness and the sense of shame is easily seen in Chibana reply: "I think loss of language has influenced my identity a lot. Although I am learning, honestly, I'm kind of ashamed of how much I don't learn or how much I don't try to preserve and keep this language that is disappearing. I think I should do way more than what I'm doing now. Language is really a weird thing because speaking English is much easier than speaking in Okinawan, which is again in my head not something I should let it be. I fear really the time that I may really lose access to this completely when all these elders die and I also think how that affects my sense of being or survival as a person and also as a community, because listening or hearing the way elders speak, brings kind of nostalgic and its nostalgic feeling and also a kind of reassurance of who you are. Although I do not speak, that feeling will get lost if I do not try or if I don't put much more effort into the revitalization of those. So that is pretty scary and I do not know what that means actually and if I do not know if that is okay for myself. Is it okay? I am just kind of sad too, you know. Language is quite an interesting thing, it is a living thing, right? It always changes. And I know that speaking in a mixture of Japanese, Okinawan and English is very comfortable, mixing different languages. However, losing one of them is quite sad". For her, language loss is accompanied by the fear of losing her sense of self and community belonging. On the other hand, for Ishihara the matter concerned less language loss and more language reclamation as the possibility to rediscover his identity as Okinawan: "Language loss has a very bad effect on your identity, because who you are or what you are is expressed in your language. To me, as I told you before, we were told not to speak our language. I was told that I am Japanese and I didn't believe it. And then after I started doing this kind of research and then I came to think that I am not just Japanese. When I was studying in college, I graduated and I studied in Michigan State University and then I told my classmate or mate when I introduced myself: "I am Ishihara and I am from Okinawa, Japan". So, my Japanese friend was kind of amazed and he asked me: "Why do you put Okinawa before Japan?" And I told them, "Because I am from Okinawa." I am not from Tokyo. I am not from Hokkaido. But they said I am from Japan. But I say I am from Okinawa, Japan. So, they were very curious why I put Okinawa before Japan. Well, when I think about what I said in Michigan, it kind

of reflected my idea about who I was, but at that time I didn't have a very strong feeling about being Okinawa because I did not speak the language at all, but I could somehow understand when I listened to it. But after this happened and when I was in Arizona from 1986 to 1991, I thought that America is an English country. I mean in other words, I thought everyone speaks English. But in Arizona, there were so many people who spoke in Spanish, so I was kind of curious. This is the US. Why do they speak Spanish? I met native American people from the Navajo Nation, and they were very proud of their identity, they spoke in Navajo and those languages. I thought this is America and they are American citizens, but why do they keep their Navajo language or languages? You know I was kind of curious about that and then, in 1998 I started doing research into Okinawans in Hawaii and California. And there are some people who speak Okinawan in the US. People speak English, but those Okinawan people kept the Okinawa language. Why do they keep it? I concluded they speak the language because they think they are Okinawan. And then I looked at myself, I was born in Okinawa and I cannot speak Okinawan. Then I kind of thought that I should learn language. Learning the language kind of enhanced my perspective on this. For me it's not the language loss, because I grew up learning Japanese only. But being Okinawan and speaking Okinawan makes me more Okinawan. So, this kind of not language loss, rather language reclamation declaring your own language makes you more yourself. So, for me speaking Okinawan language promotes a sense of being Okinawan. It has become stronger and stronger.”

For Hammine, the possibility to interact with indigenous people in other part of the world provided a crucial opportunity to re-think her identity as Japanese and the education she has received and how colonialism is pregnant in every aspect including education: “I did not think that language loss was real until I went to graduate school. Until that time, I thought I was Japanese. I mean, I know that I am Japanese. But when I went to graduate school, I learned I read languages and I started because if you go to Japan, you don't have opportunities to learn about Ryukyu. They only learn about Japan and then all the language education is in Japanese. So, for me, the family language was also Japanese. My parents spoke Japanese to me. So, it definitely affected how I used to think I was Japanese until I went to Tokyo. And then I went to Europe and I met people like Gaelic speakers in Scotland and Sami people in Northern Finland and they made me realize it has a similar history. Why do I not also have opportunities to learn my language? They have their schools and the opportunity to revitalise their language and why don't I have that chance. So, language loss is really powerful. Colonialism is very powerful. It was very successful in Okinawa. That is why a lot of people still think that they are

Japanese and people think I am so radical or something. But maybe in the future, it might change because the Osaka court very recently said Okinawa people are indigenous”. Similar to Hammine, also, Toguchi admitted the drastic effect of language loss on his identity as Okinawan, an effect that was propelled by the monolingual education he has received for his whole life: “Language loss has affected me a lot. I do not speak Uchinaaguchi fluently, and that makes me feel distant from my own roots. Sometimes I feel that I am trying to understand my identity through a language that is not fully mine. Japanese became the main language of education and public life, so Ryukyuan languages were often treated as dialects, or as something old and unnecessary. Because of that, many people in my generation inherited the Ryukyuan identity, but not the language deeply connected to it. This creates a kind of sadness. I can feel Ryukyuan, but I cannot always express that feeling in the language of my ancestors. At the same time, this loss also motivates me. It makes me want to learn more, speak about it, and help other people understand that language is not just communication. It is worldview, memory, humour, emotion, and ways of relating to land and people”.

For Oshiro, language loss is connected to the loss of the possibility of expressing anger or any sort of strong feelings: “When I spent time with my grandparents, they normally spoke Japanese to me, but when they got very emotional, in the sense of getting angry, surprised or sad, I realised they tend to use Okinawan languages. I am not a linguist, so I do not know how it works, but I think it has a lot to do with your genuine emotion and the way you express yourself. I feel like I am losing a way to understand how they feel when they are emotionally aroused. When it comes to expressing myself or understanding my identity, since I do not have knowledge, I do not have the means to use Okinawan languages, and I do not know if I understand how my grandparents felt. And I feel that I am not confident enough to sympathize with them or with older generations and to understand things that I read in books in terms of wartime experiences. When it comes to older generations who can speak two languages, Japanese and Okinawan, they use Japanese for others, so I feel that learning their language is important to fully understand them or what they feel inside. But now I do not have this knowledge, so I do not know what they are thinking. That has a lot to do with understanding of Okinawa and what it means to be Okinawan and Ryukyuan and it makes me feel like maybe I cannot reach the true aspect of Okinawanness and Ryukyuness”. Moreover, she added how the perception of Okinawan languages as something deemed as “inferior” to standard Japanese and how the predominance of male Okinawan languages teachers are factors that influenced her: “I recently realised how most of the teachers are male, I have never seen professional female Okinawan teachers

on a public level but I am sure they exist on a community level. Since the way I try to learn from them is a copy of how they talk, if it is more masculine It makes me a little bit stay away from it. It makes me a little bit scary. I am trying to find more female figures that I can feel comfortable with when it comes to learning. But I think it has a lot to do with gender inequality of professionalism in the past. Moreover, regarding the expression of emotion, for me the impression of Okinawan language growing up was kind of a scary thing, because they use the language when they got angry, so the language was very strong. Also, because Okinawan languages have been discriminated through the history, they have a connotation and an impression that if you use them, you have kind of less social status, you are not educated. Because of that I think male figures who try to be masculine use it to show they are strong. It is cool to use it if you are in that kind of culture. It is like the Yankee gang culture. If you can use it, you can show that you are part of the community, that you are masculine. I have a friend from my hometown who practices traditional Okinawan music and is fluent in Okinawan. A few years ago, when I told him that I am trying to learn the language he told me: you are a woman, so you should not do it, people will see you as less feminine”. It can be said that in her case, not only the effects of colonialism and mono lingual education were visible in her answers, but a further awareness of how languages are connected to the expression of deep emotion and how language use is filtered by gender constructions, that often signify another obstacle in the possibility of language reclamation.

The interviews reveal that language loss is not perceived merely as the disappearance of a means of communication, but as a profound disruption of cultural continuity, emotional expression, and self-understanding. Across the respondents’ testimonies, the effects of colonial assimilation policies and monolingual education emerge as central factors that weakened the intergenerational transmission of Ryukyuan languages and contributed to the marginalisation of Okinawan identities. Feelings of shame, regret, sadness, and incompleteness were recurrent themes, particularly among those who recognised the growing distance between themselves and the linguistic heritage of their ancestors. For many participants, the inability to speak Okinawan languages fluently represented not only a personal loss but also a fracture in their relationship with community, family memory, and cultural belonging.

At the same time, the interviews demonstrate that language is not understood solely through the lens of loss. Several respondents described processes of language learning and reclamation as acts of

rediscovery that strengthened their sense of being Okinawan and challenged the homogenising narratives imposed by the Japanese nation-state. Encounters with Indigenous and minority language communities abroad further encouraged some interviewees to reassess their own experiences and to recognise the colonial dimensions of language suppression in Okinawa. These reflections suggest that language revitalisation is not only a linguistic project but also a political and cultural one, deeply connected to questions of historical justice, self-determination, and collective memory.

Furthermore, the testimonies highlight how language intersects with other social dimensions, including gender and emotional expression. As Oshiro's reflections illustrate, language loss can create barriers to understanding the experiences and feelings of older generations, while gendered expectations surrounding language use may constitute additional obstacles to language reclamation. Taken together, the respondents' perspectives demonstrate that Ryukyuan languages continue to occupy a crucial place in contemporary discussions of Okinawan identity. Although language loss remains one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism, the growing awareness of its consequences and the desire to reclaim linguistic heritage suggest that language revitalisation remains a powerful avenue through which Okinawans can reconnect with their history, reaffirm their distinctiveness, and imagine alternative futures for their communities.

3.6. Since the revitalization of traditions, cultures and languages passes through the transmission of knowledge (war memories, languages, spiritual traditions and farming practices) to the younger generations. In what way could it be done more effectively? In other words, do you think it can work as an incentive for the younger generations to come closer to knowledge that differs from the so-called Japanese education that they are receiving?

For the last part of the interviews, participants were asked to think about the importance of land based and community knowledge transmission to younger generations, specifically what means can be employed to make the process captivating to people used to living in a globalised society. The answers reflect a diversity of opinions ranging from the importance of dialogue with outer communities and the importance of the older generation to prepare the soil for it to the necessity to make the process of transmission of knowledge interesting to younger generations using social media communication. Even though the answers were diversified, what appears to be a common shared idea by some of the participants is the necessity to reshape the educational curricula in order to insert effectively the

possibility for children to reconnect with their ancestral language, community memory and cultural practices.

Chibana's answer stresses the importance of respecting the individual process of realisation, without forcing any step as it is an individual journey. However, in her opinion, older generations can prepare materials that could facilitate the access to knowledge: "Even in the younger generation I think that everybody has a different time or different point in their life to realize how important each of those cultures, languages and all these things are. I think everybody has a different timing of realization so I don't know if there is anyone or an effective way to transmit such knowledge because what at least I can do is to prepare that soil. Prepare the materials that when they want to learn about it or when they realize the importance of the language, the importance of the tradition then they can kind of refer to something. I can prepare that reference now, but I cannot say that this is what you should do to the younger generation or to anyone. However, one of the effective ways I think is the outside influence of non-Okinawans or the people from outside of Okinawa. They can kind of poke some people and question them about the importance and the experience, so they can make people realise the importance of languages and cultures. It's important because in Okinawa many people go outside of Okinawa so they are kind of thinking in a very small island setting and I think putting their situation in a larger context really helped them to realize the importance of that knowledge, because for example having a military right next to you was a normal thing. I thought that was kind of an everyday thing. But I realized that that is not that normal life that people should have. I noticed that after I moved out of Okinawa and started to think and look at the island in a little bit broader sense and to kind of compare with other communities, other societies helped me to realize what is going on here. What position and situation Okinawa is occupying now. So, I think that helps". While Chibana answer focalised on the importance of respecting individuals time of realisation and the importance to have discussions with people from other parts of the world in order to have the possibility to rethink critically Okinawa position, Ishihara reply focuses on the importance of reforming the educational system, that still provides a Japanese education, without giving the possibility to explore Okinawan cultural and linguistic aspects: "In Japan, education is governed by the Japanese government. So, every school in Japan learns the same things, in that sense Okinawa children don't learn about Okinawa although they learn about Osaka or Tokyo or Hokkaido or Kyushu, but we don't learn about ourselves. I think those teaching or giving the chances to learn about Okinawa should be done at home. Unfortunately, many Okinawan families don't have people who can tell the history, languages

or culture because their parents in their 30s or 40s don't know about Okinawa either. So where do Okinawan children have chances to learn about Okinawa? And how? That's one big question and, as far as I know, they do have chances to learn about Okinawan history or about war just one or two weeks before the anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa. But usually in this kind of event what they learn is about war stories. Who died, how, and where they were killing by the Japanese soldiers and US soldiers. As far as I know only, they learn just those things. So, at that time the kids should learn about the war and bad things about war, but they don't learn about the history of Okinawa. I think that we should teach more about Okinawa and what happened after 1872 and what happened in the Meiji era, but this is very difficult because it's not included in the curriculum or Japanese system. I know there's some NPO, Okinawa Hands-on and that is located in Chattan and they it's kind of a after school classes and they teach about Okinawan history culture and Okinawa language and they give chances to the younger members in their teens or lower teens to talk with elderly people and to learn from those grandparents or great grandparents and generations. So, the kids are very happy and then those other people are also happy. When you teach in school it's kind of focused on some kind of sad stories, I believe it's important but I believe it is also important to teach about what we were before the war and what we are now and what kind of languages we spoke and what kind of culture we did have you know. When you teach about war you don't teach about culture it has no help. It's a pretty similar thing to what they do in the school curriculum, they just teach the events that come one after another but without giving a more personal look to other aspects. And I will just call if you need to go to the field. And you need to go to the land, how the land is connected to the river and how the river is connected to the ocean. So that you should go out of classrooms, out of the school buildings. If possible, school should have a one week learning period in which you go out to the land or to the field to learn how to do some kind of agriculture and you go to some places where you can learn about culture. If you try to only teach in the classroom, it kind of gets boring". Similarly to Ishihara, Hammine who had the opportunity to study Sami language in Finland, stresses the importance for children to receive an outside education, less focused on merely sitting in school: "I think because I studied in Finland how they teach younger kids Sami language and they have a different system. In the Finland system, they have a law that's called Sami language Act. If you live in the traditional land of Sami people, and if you have Sami ancestry, you have the right to learn your own language. When I went to the schools to visit, I noticed that they are teaching Sami languages in a very nontraditional way, for example they bring the children outside and they teach languages in nature. So, I don't know how it is possible in Japan, but if we could do something like that that would be really cool, because now there is the Shimakutuba language centre in Naha, but how they are teaching the language in a

way that is very Japanese. So, I want to do it in a different way. Since I think Okinawa culture is different from Japanese, and school was also part of the colonial institution that came to Okinawa as a tool to brainwash people, maybe if we can combine traditional way of doing connections to the nature, to the land and the ocean in school system that would be really nice”. On the importance of new educational tools, Oshiro focuses on the necessity of creating a form of education that can be bilingual, so that the students can learn how to express themselves not just in Japanese but also in Okinawan languages, reconnecting with their community. To achieve this goal, in her opinion, a shift from cultural education is needed: “What I can say now is that a more effective way of teaching is needed, one in which you receive a second language education rather than a cultural one. Growing up, there are educational opportunities for us to learn Okinawan culture and language in Elementary school and Junior high, but it was always in the sphere of cultural education or performance education for when you had to do performances once in a year for culture day. That is where you learn music and language which is great, but when it comes to practicality or a more effective way, I think it has to go beyond because cultural education is confining you within this very small bubble of cultural things and it does not give you a way to express your opinion about it, because you learn the script of the song and the theatre play. In the future I hope there will be a way for students to learn how to express themselves through Okinawan language. It has to be done similarly to English education or other languages education. In the textbook we can learn knowledge such as agriculture, cultures and language, in a way that students can also read and make a connection with their personal life and memories of their parents or grandparents or the community. I hope there will be a way for students or the younger generation to connect what they learn in their life with their community in the classroom and learn a way to express themselves in Okinawan language, so they can become more aware of history and their surroundings. I will become different from the standard education system that is imposed by the Japanese government. I understand that each school must follow the regulations accepted by the Japanese government, so I get the limitations. I hope there will be a capacity for schools in Okinawa to create their syllabus or their modules to incorporate Okinawan language and community knowledge”.

From the position of *Unmuting Ryukyu* Instagram page owner, Shohei Toguchi stresses the importance of transmitting culture and memories as living concepts not just to be found in the past, but as experiences that shape the present and the future. From his perspective, community base education is vital to communicate memories, languages and cultures, aided by social media. Even

though often talking about this topic could result in the label of “anti-Japanese”, for him it is vital to continue talking and reframe the way of seeing Okinawa cultural aspects under a different light: “I think it has to be done in a way that feels alive, not only as old culture. If young people feel that tradition belongs only to the past, they may respect it, but they may not feel connected to it. The important thing is to show how this knowledge still relates to life today. For example, farming knowledge is not only about agriculture. It is about how people lived with the land. Language is not only vocabulary. It is a way of seeing the world. War memory is not only a tragedy. It is also a warning about what happens when a small island is used by larger powers. Spiritual traditions are not only rituals. They are connected to ancestors, land, family, and respect. In this sense, phrases like “*Nuchi du takara*” should not be treated only as slogans. They are condensed memories. They carry a way of thinking about life, war, land, and community. Passing that kind of phrase to younger generations also means passing on the question behind it: what kind of society protects life, and what kind of society sacrifices it? I think the media can help. Short videos, interviews with elders, community archives, bilingual content, podcasts, and storytelling projects can make this knowledge more accessible. Schools are important too, but I think community-led education is necessary because the Japanese education system often does not teach Ryukyuan history deeply enough. For young people, the key is not to force pride. It is to give them access to knowledge that was hidden from them. When they learn that Okinawa was once the Ryukyu Kingdom, that our languages are real languages, that our culture has connections across Asia, and that our land carries deep memory, many young people may naturally begin to feel closer to it. Another important point is the division inside Okinawan and Japanese society. People who speak about Okinawan history, the base issue, or Ryukyuan identity are often labelled as “left-wing” or “anti-Japanese.” Once that label is attached, many people stop listening before the conversation even begins. This makes it difficult to talk about identity directly, even when the issue is not about hatred, but about dignity, memory, and the right to understand our own roots. That is why I think living culture is such an important entrance. *Eisa*, food, festivals, language, music, local rituals, and everyday practices are still close to many people’s lives. They are not abstract political arguments. They are things people already love, join, dance, eat, hear, and remember. If we start from those living cultures, we can slowly show why identity matters. *Eisa* is not only a performance. Food is not only cuisine. Language is not only words. These things carry history, land, ancestors, and community memory. And this cannot be done by one person alone. It needs many people speaking from different positions: artists, elders, teachers, creators, researchers, local communities, and young people themselves. If only one person says it, it can be dismissed as a

personal opinion. But when many people tell different parts of the same story, it becomes harder to ignore”.

This final part of the chapter collected the participants' reply regarding the tools and possibilities of transmitting what can be summed up as indigenous knowledge to the younger generations. The diversity of the answers, given by each participant's positionality and life experiences, generally share the importance of reforming the educational system in a way that could enhance the children and young people's awareness of their identity as Okinawans. The central part in the answers was given to education and how a shift from monolingual and monocultural to a multicultural and multilingual community-based education in Okinawa is needed. Indeed, participants generally agree on the fact that shift in identity perception and the importance given to Okinawan communities belonging starts from the relevance that is given to these aspects in the educational spaces. If Okinawans memories, languages and cultural practices are relegated to the past as something to be revived just in the memory of specific historical or cultural events, younger generations will continue to struggle to realise how community related identity aspects are not something belonging to the past, but rather lived experiences shared by other people that continue to shape individual and community perspectives.

Conclusion

This thesis, starting from a historical layout of Okinawa regions relationship with Japan and US nation states, focuses its attention on indigenous resurgences perspectives. Having the following research question: “How the reclamation of Okinawan indigeneity could challenge the double colonial system in the archipelago, providing possibilities to achieve self-determination”, I divided the topic in two chapters. These two chapters, divided into different topics connected to indigenous self-determination, laid out how centring indigenous land-based cultural aspects such as languages, memories and agricultural practices could help to de-center the double colonial discourse. Indeed, through the revitalisation of indigenous practices, it is possible to create a community space where indigenous voices can be heard actively, with direct acts of self-determination regarding every aspect of life, distancing from the imperialistic gaze that still exploit Okinawans’ bodies and lands.

The third chapter focused on interviews regarding the different topics discussed in the second chapter. The interviews with 5 Okinawans coming from different backgrounds gave an important opportunity to discuss with the people directly involved with the matter. Through the different questions related to the languages, the presence of the military bases, the importance of memory and land-based practices, the participants offered diverse perceptions on the topics, related to their personal experiences and worldview. What seemed to connect all the replies is the necessity to centre indigenous resurgence in the discourses concerning Okinawa, starting from the transmission of land-based knowledge to the younger generations. Indeed, I firmly believe that for indigenous resurgence and self-determination actions to be taken, young generation must take an active role. The participation of young people to movements related to self-determination, revitalisation and rejuvenation of indigenous practices is a vital part for these movements to thrive. Moreover, the active presence of the younger generations could offer a concrete challenge to the American mainstream cultural movements that

work as another form of homogenising imperialistic tool, acting through social media trends, movies, tv series and fashion choices that help to normalise the militaristic US presence on the islands.

Bibliography

Akibayashi, Kozue. "Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence: An Island Feminism Reclaiming Dignity." *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* 1 (2020): 37–54.
<https://doi.org/10.24564/0002012349>.

Aldous, Christopher. "Achieving Reversion: Protest and Authority in Okinawa, 1952–70." *Modern Asian Studies* 37 (2): 485–508, 2003. [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X03001234)

Alfred, Taiaiake, and Jeff Corntassel. "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism." *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 597–614.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2005.00166.x>.

Alfred, Gerald Taiaiake. "Colonialism and State Dependency." *International Journal of Indigenous Health* 5, no. 2 (2009): 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijih.v5i2.28982>.

Anderson, Mark. "Revitalisation Attempts and Language Attitudes in the Ryukyus." In *Language Crisis in the Ryukyus*, edited by Mark Anderson and Patrick Heinrich, 1–30. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014

Arasaki, Moriteru. "The struggle against military bases in Okinawa – its history and current situation". *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 101–108, 2001.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370120039506>

Arasaki, Moriteru. "Okinawa gendaishi [Contemporary history of Okinawa]". Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005

Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Chen, Bixia. "Utaki and Ashagi Sacred Forests in the Ryukyu Islands: Vegetation Structure and Conservation Management Challenges." In *Sacred Forests of Asia: Spiritual Ecology and the Politics of Nature Conservation*, edited by Chris Coggins and Bixia Chen, 150–68. New York: Routledge, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143680-15>.

- Buckner, Simon Bolivar, Jr. "Tenth Army Commander: The World War II Diary of Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr". Edited by Christopher L. Kolakowski. Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2023
- Chen, Bixia. "Utaki and Ashagi Sacred Forests in the Ryukyu Islands: Vegetation Structure and Conservation Management Challenges." In *Sacred Forests of Asia: Spiritual Ecology and the Politics of Nature Conservation*, edited by Chris Coggins and Bixia Chen, 150–68. New York: Routledge, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143680-15>.
- Chibana, Megumi. "Till the Soil and Fill the Soul: Indigenous Resurgence and Everyday Practices of Farming in Okinawa." PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2018.
- Chibana, Megumi. "Resurgents Create a Moral Landscape: Indigenous Resurgence and Everyday Practices of Farming in Okinawa." *Humanities* 9, no. 4 (2020): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9040135>.
- Christy, Alan S. "The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1, no. 3 (1993): 607–639. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1-3-607>.
- Corntassel, Jeff J. "Who Is Indigenous? 'Peoplehood' and Ethnonationalist Approaches to Rearticulating Indigenous Identity." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, no. 1 (2003): 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110412331301365>.
- Corntassel, Jeff. "Toward Sustainable Self-Determination: Rethinking the Contemporary Indigenous-Rights Discourse." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 33, no. 1 (2008): 105–132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540803300106>.
- Corntassel, Jeff. "Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 86–101.
- Coulthard, Glen. "Place against Empire: Understanding Indigenous Anti-Colonialism." *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4, no. 2 (2010): 79–83
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Davis, Sasha. *The Empires' Edge: Militarization, Resistance, and Transcending Hegemony in the Pacific*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015.
- Eldridge, Robert D. "Okinawa and U.S.-Japan Relations in the 21st Century: Bilateral and Trilateral Approaches to a Sounder Okinawa Policy". Occasional Paper, no. 10. Tokyo: Research Institute for Peace and Security, 2002
- Eldridge, Robert D. "Post-Reversion Okinawa and US-Japan Relations: A Preliminary Survey of Local Politics and the Bases, 1972-2002," 2004.
- Elliott, Michael. "Indigenous Resurgence: The Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2018): 61–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917001032>.
- Fúnez-Flores, Jairo I. "Anibal Quijano: (Dis)entangling the Geopolitics and Coloniality of Curriculum." *The Curriculum Journal* 35, no. 2 (2024): 288–306. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.219>.

- Ginoza, Ayano. "Space of 'Militourism': Intimacies of U.S. and Japanese Empires and Indigenous Sovereignty in Okinawa." *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 7–23.
- Ginoza, Ayano. "R&R at the Intersection of U.S. and Japanese Dual Empire: Okinawan Women and Decolonizing Militarized Heterosexuality." *American Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2016): 583–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0054>.
- Ginoza, Ayano. "Archipelagic Feminisms: Critical Interventions into the Gendered Coloniality of Okinawa." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021)
- Ginoza, Ayano. "Archipelagic Memory, Indigeneity, and Transnational Belonging in Shō Tanaka's 'Homecoming.'" *Immigration Studies*, no. 21 (2025): 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.24564/0002021386>.
- Ginoza, Ayano, and Francesc Fusté-Forné. "Every day Gendered Spaces of Memory, Community, and Resistance in Sakaemachi Market (Okinawa)." *Island Studies Journal* 21, no. 1 (2026): 114–137. <https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.159141>.
- Hammime, Madoka. "Hear Our Voice: New Speakers of Ryukyuan Language—Negotiation, Construction, and Change of Identities." In *Discourses of Identity: Language Learning, Teaching, and Reclamation Perspectives in Japan*, edited by Martin Mielick, Ryuko Kubota, and Luke Lawrence, 117–38. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11988-0_7.
- Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.
- Haw, Jim. "Okinawa and the US military post 1945", *Scientific American*, 2013 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/expeditions/okinawa-and-the-u-s-military-post-1945/>
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands." In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa, 2–16. Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993.
- Heinrich, Patrick. "Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands." *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 3, no. 11 (2005): e3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466005003402>.
- Heinrich, Patrick. "Ryukyuan Perspectives for Language Reclamation." *Languages* 8, no. 1 (2023): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8010035>.
- Kerr, George H. "Okinawa: The History of an Island People". Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle Company, 1958.
- Kina, Ikue. "Storied Islands: Imagined Indigeneity as a Strategy for Transforming the Okinawan Community." *International Review of Ryukyuan and Okinawan Studies*, no. 2 (2013): 77–84.
- Ishigaki, Naoki. "Indigenous Movement in Contemporary Okinawa: Its History and Present Situation." Paper presented at the IUAES 2014 Inter-Congress, "The Future with/of Anthropologies," Chiba City, Japan, May 14–18, 2014
- Lebra, William P., and Thomas W. Maretzki. "The Community Cooperative in Northern Okinawa." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 11, no. 3 (1963): 225–238. <https://doi.org/10.1086/450007>.

- Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478021445>.
- Mabuchi, Toichi. "Space and Time in Ryukyuan Cosmology." *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, no. 1 (1980): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1177514>.
- Meyer, Stanislaw. "Okinawa: A Different Japan? A Historian's Perspective." *MINIKOMI: Austrian Journal of Japanese Studies*, no. 3 (2012): 5–10.
- Mitchell, Jon. "Okinawa: The Junk Heap of the Pacific." *The Japan Times*, November 11, 2013.
- Mitchell, Jon. *Poisoning the Pacific: The US Military's Secret Dumping of Plutonium, Chemical Weapons, and Agent Orange*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.
- Naylor, Lindsay, Michelle Daigle, Sofia Zaragocin, Marisa M. Ramírez, and Mary Gilmartin. "Interventions: Bringing the Decolonial to Political Geography." *Political Geography* 66 (2018): 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.11.002>
- Nishiyama, Hidefumi. "Decolonial Encounter with Neo-Nationalism: The Politics of Indigeneity and Land Rights Struggles in Okinawa." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48, no. 2 (2023): 290–303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582>.
- Nomura, Kōya. "Undying Colonialism: A Case Study of the Japanese Colonizer." Translated by Annmaria Shimabuku. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 12, no. 1 (2012): 93–116. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2012.0024>
- Mizoguchi, So. "Narratives of the Early Stage of American Occupation in Okinawa," *Japan Studies Review* 22 (2018)
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Nishiyama, Hidefumi. "Base Built in the Middle of 'Rice Fields': A Politics of Ignorance in Okinawa." *Geopolitics* 27, no. 2 (2022): 546–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1801646>.
- Oshiro, Akino. "From 'Footprint' to Relationships: Impacts of US Military Base on Okinawa." *Sociology Compass* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13099>.
- Ota, Masahide. "Essays on Okinawa Problems". Gushikawa City: Yui Shuppan Co., 2000.
- Pulido, Laura. "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 12–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00182>
- Rots, Aike P. "Strangers in the Sacred Grove: The Changing Meanings of Okinawan Utaki." *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 298. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050298>.
- Rots, Aike P. "'This Is Not a Powerspot': Heritage Tourism, Sacred Space, and Conflicts of Authority at Sēfa Utaki." *Asian Ethnology* 78, no. 1 (2019): 155–180.
- Sakai, Risako. "The Role of Water in Indigenous Healing and Growth from Okinawa to the World." *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* 5 (2024): 117–31. <https://doi.org/10.24564/0002020427>.

Sarantakes, Nicholas Evan. *Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000.

Sakanaka, Tomohisa. "The Present Status of the Okinawa Reversion Movement." *Japan Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1968): 30–41.

Sium, Aman, and Eric Ritskes. "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): i–x.

Spencer, Caroline. "Meeting of the Dugongs and the Cooking Pots: Anti-Military Base Citizens' Groups on Okinawa." *Japanese Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003)

Suwa, Jun'ichiro. "The Space of Shima." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2007): 6–14.

TallBear, Kim. "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming." *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 24–41.
<https://doi.org/10.15367/kf.v6i1.228>.

Tanji, Miyume. "Okinawa Screaming: Anti-globalisation Protest in the American Empire." *Arena Magazine*, no. 54 (August–September 2001).

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. "The Concept of Indigenous Peoples." Background paper prepared for the *Workshop on Data Collection and Disaggregation for Indigenous Peoples*, New York, January 19–21, 2004. PFII/2004/WS.1/3.

Whalen, D. H., Melissa E. Lewis, Stefanie Gillson, Brittany McBeath, Bri Alexander, and Kate Nyhan. "Health Effects of Indigenous Language Use and Revitalization: A Realist Review." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 21, no. 1 (2022): 169. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-022-01782-6>.

Wilke, Christiane, Helyeh Doutaghi, and Hijaab Yahya. "Imperial Ignorance and Beyond: Mapping the Production and Practices of Organized Ignorance." In *Handbook on Politics and Society*, edited by Shireen Hassim and Anna C. Korteweg, 308–25. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035301904.00028>.