The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan: Crossing the Borders Within
by Steve Rabson (review)

Gabriele Vogt

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scholars not just of Japan but also of ethnographic theory, history, and anthropology more generally. In a section devoted to the way minzokugaku engaged with Western scholarship but did not necessarily buy into it, Christy mentions Gyan Prakash’s notion of “asymmetric ignorance,” in which Asian scholars are expected to be familiar with Western works but not the other way around (p. 173).2 For scholars of cultures outside Asia, such as most of the students in my folkloristics seminar, Christy’s own book helps address this imbalance. Not only does it present a perceptive introduction to the specific Japanese case, but it also translates the voices of early minzokugaku scholars into the language of contemporary ethnographic theory. Moreover, it concerns the intellectual, bureaucratic, and personal challenges integral to creating a new academic discipline—a subject of relevance to scholars in almost any field.

A Discipline on Foot is a significant achievement. By introducing a number of important (and interesting) thinkers, it will, I hope, inspire future research on scholars other than Yanagita. More broadly, it helps bring early minzokugaku into a global discourse on questions of representation, epistemology, and discipline creation. It should become standard reading in graduate courses on modern Japanese history, folkloristics, anthropology, and, hopefully, ethnographic theory more generally. Personally, I look forward to my next chance to teach a seminar on Japanese folkloristics.


Reviewed by
GABRIELE VOGT
University of Hamburg

Steve Rabson’s new book, The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan, could not have been published at a better time: the year 2012 marked the fortieth anniversary of the so-called reversion of Okinawa to Japan. In May 1972, 27 years of U.S. military and later civilian administration of the island groups of Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama came to an end. Since then, the islands have constituted Okinawa Prefecture as an administrative district of the Japanese state. In light of this anniversary, the strategic and symbolic role that Okinawa has played and continues to play within the Japanese

nation-state has once again reemerged as an issue of contentious public and political debate in Okinawa and in Japan. This highly emotionalized debate centers on how to understand Okinawan and Japanese history, whether as a history of shared paths and mutual interdependencies or as a history of oppression of the once independent and wealthy Ryūkyū Kingdom by a militarist Japanese state. Conflict in interpreting Okinawan history and identity is prevalent to this day and continues to shape Okinawan politics, in particular Okinawa’s positioning as a partner to or opponent of Japan’s national government.

On this puzzle of Okinawa’s quest for identity and its positioning within Japan, Rabson’s book contributes much insight into contemporary Okinawan and Japanese studies. It tells the story of Okinawans living in mainland Japan and highlights their networks within the community itself and with those who remained in Okinawa despite a bleak economic outlook in comparison to opportunities in the new hometowns on the mainland. Other scholars before Rabson have addressed this puzzle but have either focused on Okinawa’s continuing role as a victim of Japanese and U.S. geopolitical strategy1 or have highlighted aspects of Okinawan culture as a means of identity formation.2 Those who study mainland Japan have come to address Okinawans as a minority group along with the Ainu, burakumin, and foreigners in order to make an argument for the existence of a multi-ethnic Japan.3 Rabson’s book manages to bring together all three story lines. He shows how Okinawa’s geopolitical value works to its detriment and how a people’s identity is constantly challenged by struggles over the islands’ history and by despair with its economic hardships and day-to-day politics. Finally, and above all, he shows how Okinawans on the mainland have emerged as actors in shaping Okinawa-Japan relations despite the distress diaspora communities often face—most prominently discrimination—and which often leads to withdrawal from public life altogether.

The Okinawan diaspora community on mainland Japan, however, did not withdraw from public life. This community dates from the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It emerged, as many migrant communities do, in the wake of economic developments, such as intensifying trade relations and increasing mobility of workers, oftentimes triggered by a dour labor market situation. In 1879, when the Meiji state abolished the Ryūkyū Kingdom and established Okinawa as a prefecture of Japan, ship

service began between the Okinawan port of Naha and mainland Japan. These ships transported agricultural products, such as sugar and cabbages, from Okinawa to mostly Osaka and carried manufactured goods back to Okinawa. In order to expand this trade, more Okinawans began to settle in Osaka and operate their businesses on the mainland. In 1903, the year of the Fifth World Trade and Industrial Exhibition held in Osaka, the owner of the Naha-based Senaga Clothing Store opened a store selling Okinawan products in Osaka. Unsold merchandise was later brought to Tokyo where he opened another store. Not only did Okinawan trade expand geographically on the mainland, the growing economy was attractive to many trading companies in Osaka that took control of the market and soon had Okinawan merchants working as subcontractors for them. Okinawan businessmen lost their autonomy, and trade profits increasingly accumulated on mainland traders’ accounts. As Rabson quite correctly remarks: “This asymmetrical economic paradigm persists to this day in business relations between Okinawa and the mainland” (p. 44).

Similarly, the story of laborers moving to the mainland in search of work is one of unequal power relations and exploitation. While in the early days recruiters for mainland textile mills could still promise “easy work sitting down making kimono” (p. 45) to the daughters of Okinawa’s upper class, it soon became clear that the work life that awaited them was a far cry from their dreams, namely, “experiencing cosmopolitan urban life before returning [to Okinawa] to marry and raise children” (p. 45). Many of the girls were sexually assaulted on the ships even before they reached the mainland and—once on the job—struggled with long working hours, dingy dormitories, poor food, and a lack of medical care. General maltreatment and discrimination by employers and by coworkers from other regions of Japan were often reported.

Rabson paints an impressive picture of these gloomy days by skillfully weaving together quotes from his interviewees’ family stories and carefully selected examples from the world of literature, including, for example, lyrics of so-called factory songs composed by Okinawans, such as the famous “Ballad of the Factory Girl”: “It’s one or two a.m. when even the grass is sleeping. / But if I happen to doze off, / the foreman will get angry, / though he was sleeping, too. / When I’m homesick, I go down to the port. / But my parents live in poverty, / so I can only watch the ships and weep” (p. 55). Of course, when it comes to literary examples, Rabson, a translator of many works of Okinawan literature, can draw on plentiful resources. In addition, this book is based on evidence drawn from over 100 in-depth interviews and

4. See, for example, Steve Rabson, Okinawa: Two Postwar Novellas (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1989); Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, eds., Southern Exposure. Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000).
from participant observation conducted during two years in residence and numerous follow-up research trips between 1999 and 2008 in Taishō Ward of Osaka City, a former and present hub of the Okinawan diaspora community on mainland Japan. Facts and numbers were carefully selected and adroitly blended into the narrative, and it becomes a pleasant and almost easy read. The book is organized chronologically; its chapters divide the history of the Okinawan diaspora in Japan into five different phases, starting with the early days sketched out above, followed by “Moving for a Better Life,” “The Wartime,” “An Occupied Homeland,” and a chapter titled “Being Okinawan in Japan Today.”

The strongest chapter is on the U.S. occupation of Okinawa and the struggle for reversion. This story has often been told either from the perspective of Okinawan social movements or from that of Japan-U.S. bilateral negotiations. Only sometimes has it been told from a viewpoint combining both perspectives; examples for this approach can mostly be found in scholarly works in Japanese. Never before, however, has the story of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan been told—in English, as Rabson notes (p. 4)—from the perspective of the Okinawan diaspora in mainland Japan. Rabson provides numerous valuable insights into the role this community played as a collective political actor in bringing about reversion.

Rabson clearly states that in the early days of the reversion movement (fukki undo¯), the diaspora community did not stand united behind the policy goal of reversion, which had been poignantly formulated by Prime Minister Satō Eisaku (in office 1964–72) as a necessary precondition for Japan’s postwar period to finally come to an end. While the majority of Okinawan individuals supported reversion, only some of their prefectural associations did, such as the Hyōgo Okinawa Association, which in a symbolic act as early as in 1962 changed its name to the Okinawa Prefectural Association of Hyōgo. The highly influential Osaka League of Okinawa Prefectural Associations remained a largely passive actor within the reversion movement, largely due, as Rabson points out (p. 175), to fear of members’ disadvantage in business and punitive measures by state forces. Only once the reversion movement had become mainstream did the Osaka League join in, becoming a passionate advocate for Okinawa’s reversion on the grounds of “a racially based nationalism” (p. 184). In 1966, for example, the Osaka League “claimed that ‘the 1 million people of Okinawa are also members of the same Yamato race’” (p. 184).

Ultimately, however, it was not tabloid-like statements that paved the

5. Few other books on Okinawa are as rich as Rabson’s when it comes to interview data. One other is: Ruth Ann Keyso, Women of Okinawa. Nine Voices from a Garrison Island (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
way to reversion but the activism of single citizens, much of which is hardly known even today. For example, students and progressive politicians, such as Uezu Hisashi and Toguchi Seiji, initiated and led a movement called “struggle against immigration procedures” (nyūkoku tetsuzuki kyohi tōsō). They insisted on traveling freely between Okinawa and the mainland without having to use passports; some members of the group even burnt their passports on board the ships. Rabson notes that a Japanese immigration officer explained to him in an interview that these “protests had resulted in the Japanese government dropping the requirement for passengers to show immigration documents and beginning to accept student identification cards or commuter passes” (p. 187) instead. Citizens thus successfully shaped a reality of abolished border control between the territories long before politics eventually followed suit.

As Rabson points out in his concluding chapter, “The Minority Experience in Japan,” “Okinawans traveling or living on the mainland . . . have to cross Japan’s internal borders” (p. 255). Crossing borders remains an important topic in Okinawa-Japan relations, even today. Rabson blames the Japanese government for this lack of progress in integrating Okinawans into Japanese society, politics, and last but not least the economy, since it places “Okinawa in a separate status vis-à-vis the ‘imagined community’ of nation” (p. 255). In other words, only when the unequal and hence discriminatory distribution of burdens caused by the U.S. military presence in Japan is solved and the burden on Okinawa significantly eased will Okinawa stand a chance of becoming a truly integral part of the Japanese nation-state. Forty years after reversion, it seems high time to do just that.


Reviewed by
DAVINDER L. BHOWMIK
University of Washington

This volume joins a body of English-language scholarship on Okinawa that has markedly increased in the last 20 years. Following Alan Christy’s 1993 article “The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa,”1 monographs on Okinawa have been published in disciplines such as history, literature, and anthropology. Also now available are multiple anthologies of translations