

Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics



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Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), 529-531.

Stable URL:

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BOOK REVIEWS

Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics. By Gregory Smits. University of Hawai'i Press, 1999. 213 pages. Hardback \$47.00.

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In recent years scholars have put the writing of national history under close scrutiny. One key trend, led by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and others, has been to emphasize the essential historicity and modernity of nations: nations are not as old as history despite their claim to be so. Like all other political communities, nations are the product of a complex process of intellectual and social interaction, and the demarcation of any particular nation is subject to ongoing debate and redefinition. Indeed, defining the "nation" is a political struggle involving both rhetoric and violence.

There is an easy and a difficult side to trying to historicize nationalism. The easy part is that people of the past have left us language relating their visions of polity from which we may learn. The difficult part is making this understandable and of more than passing interest to the present. We are all nationals, and our language, interests, and desires are imbued with our imagined political present. Any translation of the past into a story for the present is thus affected by nationalizing tendencies. Our stories about events on a certain set of islands in the northwest Pacific are published and find readers because they purport to tell us something about "Japan."

Working from this perspective on the historiography of nationalism, Gregory Smits has provided us with an excellent and challenging book. The subject is the Ryukyu islands of the early modern period, with an emphasis on the writings of Ryukyuan literati of the eighteenth century. Smits's primary interest lies in exploring the differing notions of Ryukyuan identity that these scholars held and the political implications of their visions.

Chapter 1 relates the politics of the early modern Ryukyus, a subject ideally suited to an exploration of multiple and contested national identities. It was a realm of many faces. The Ryukyus were a multi-island polity under the kingship of the Shō house. The king received investiture by the emperor of China, and many Ryukyans participated in trading missions with China. At any one time four Ryukyans were studying at the Chinese national academy at Chinese government expense. The Ryukyus were also subject to the Shimazu house that governed the domainal country of Satsuma. The Shimazu had conquered the Ryukyus in 1609 and maintained an indirect form of rule aimed at gaining profit from the China trade and from Ryukyuan products. To insure the smooth conduct of the China trade, Satsuma had to appear not to control the Ryukyuan kingdom. This appearance meant in reality relative Ryukyuan autonomy in internal affairs. The Shimazu were the only daimyo in Japan who could claim authority over a king. They used this to bolster their prestige in Japan and with

their Tokugawa overlords. At the same time the king of the Ryukyus sent embassies to Edo to celebrate the Tokugawa succession and to offer thanks for Tokugawa approval of the succession of Ryukyuan kings. The Tokugawa used these foreign embassies to strengthen their own prestige.

Smits explores in subsequent chapters how early modern Ryukyuan elites defined Ryukyu identity with reference to these militarily powerful neighbors. Chapter 2 highlights two figures. It begins with Shō Shōken (1617–1675), a bureaucrat and later prime minister of the realm who looked to Satsuma as a model. Shō Shōken wrote the first official history of the Ryukyus, and Smits persuasively argues that he framed the history to make Satsuma's overlordship seem historically right and natural, and that he was concerned to reform the government along lines acceptable to Satsuma. Smits contrasts Shōken with Tei Junsoku (1673–1734), a scholar-diplomat who looked to China as a model. Junsoku came from Kumemura, a village of scholars of Chinese studies who were supported by the king and given responsibility for managing Sino-Ryukyuan relations. Through publishing and educational activities he attempted to enlarge Ryukyuan knowledge of Chinese culture and learning.

Chapters 3–4 introduce the thought and politics of the central character of the book, the scholar/official Sai On (1682–1761), as well as the forms of resistance mounted by people who did not like his policies. Sai On, Smits holds, gave the Ryukyuan greater agency by arguing that although the kingdom was a small country subject to Japan and China, it could achieve moral parity through the implementation of Confucian standards of good government. Sai On had studied in China and served as a diplomat, but it was through his role as instructor to the king, Shō Kei, that he obtained an enlarged role in government. His policies were highly Confucian: he worked effectively at agricultural and forestry development; pursued social policies suppressing corruption, luxury, and “ignorant” religious beliefs; and encouraged a tight control of sexuality—all familiar stances of many reformers in governments in eighteenth-century Japan. Small wonder he was not liked by the flourishing poets, entertainers, and writers of Ryukyu whose “Japan” was a floating world. Ryukyu's most renowned writer of fiction, Heshikiya Chōbin (1700–1734), wrote a veiled fictional critique of Sai On and his repressive politics. He also participated in a suit directly to Satsuma officials, the contents of which are unknown and about which theories abound. He and a cosigner were executed. As Smits makes clear, the suppression of alternate visions of Ryukyu reveals that it was defined in relation to narratives of Japan and China, but with political agendas close to home.

Chapter 5 is a brief description of the politics of two late-eighteenth-century Ryukyuan kings. They generally followed Sai On's Confucianizing policies, thereby increasing their authority and threatening many vested interests. Expansion of sugar exports to Osaka stimulated economic growth. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, many southern domains of Japan began producing vast quantities for sale as well, bringing an end to the Satsuma-Ryukyuan monopoly of sugar production. The nineteenth-century economic decline helped set the stage for easy annexation of the Ryukyus by Japan in the 1870s.

The epilogue continues the story from the annexation, focusing particularly on contesting views of Ryukyuan/Okinawan identity within a context of assimilation into modern definitions of Japan. Smits writes, “Even after the former kingdom had become part of Japan in the eyes of the international community, its *de facto* colonial treatment helped produce discourses on Ryukyu/Okinawa's relationship with the

broader entity of Japan. Gone were the *tentō* thought, Buddhist, and Confucian ideologies, of course, their place taken by talk of culture, ancestry, 'race,' and modernity" (p. 161).

Owing partly to its early modern history as a subject kingdom and partly to the effects of Cold War politics, Ryukyuan identity is still highly contested. This makes a history of constructions of Ryukyuan identity particularly accessible to moderns. Smits's cogent formulation of his argument in the introduction and conclusion makes the modern relevance of this exploration of eighteenth-century intellectuals readily apparent. The book should certainly be read by anyone interested in recent theories of nationalism, as well as by those interested in the Ryukyus.

Let me mention one issue Smits touches on lightly, that if considered more fully would further deepen the analysis of constructed nationalism. It would be worthwhile to compare Shō and Ryukyu political identities with those of the Shimazu and Satsuma in the early modern period. Satsuma was a *kokka* and *kuni* like the Ryukyus, and its intellectuals and officials contested Satsuma identity and policy with many of the same intellectual resources employed by the Ryukyus. Satsuma also had an oral language unintelligible in Edo, and its people were regarded there as strange country bumpkins. Its ruler had been conquered by the Tokugawa in the same decade as it invaded Ryukyu, and like the Ryukyu king the Shimazu house was reinvested with a rule subject to indirect forms of control and forced to make tribute and labor payments to the Tokugawa. The similarities between the Ryukyus and many large domainal countries abound. There were clear differences as well: large domains were regarded as *takoku* (other countries) while the Ryukyus were regarded as *ikoku* (different/foreign country), and, unlike any domain, the Ryukyus had official relations with China. A close analysis of the similarities and differences unobscured by modern nationalizing anachronisms (such as the notion of han popularized in the Meiji period), would bring into greater relief the what and when of factors that are crucial to membership in the modern imagined community of Japan.

The Spirit of Japanese Law. By John Owen Haley. The University of Georgia Press, 1998. 251 pages. Hardback \$50.00.

Der deutsche Anteil an der Gestaltung des modernen japanischen Rechts- und Verfassungswesens: Deutsche Rechtsberater im Japan der Meiji-Zeit. By Paul-Christian Schenck. Beiträge zur Kolonial- und Überseegegeschichte, vol. 68. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997. 396 pages. Hardback DM 148.

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Shortly after Japan had been forced, in 1854, to open some of its ports to foreign trade and to allow foreigners to settle in the country, the bakufu concluded treaties with several of the Western powers that would form the basis for relations with them until the end of the century. As all contained clauses that were highly unfavorable to Japan, they would, in time, become known as the "unequal treaties." Japan had to cede tariff autonomy and consent to allowing foreigners to come under the jurisdiction of the consuls of their own countries. The rationale behind this last clause was, of course,