

Romantic Ryukyu in Okinawan Politics: The Myth of Ryukyuan Pacifism

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Contemporary Manifestations of the Myth

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Searching the Web using combinations of terms such as “Okinawa,” “Ryukyu,” “peace,” “weapons,” and “rape” reveals a large number of sites, whose main topics include the problem of U.S. military bases, the infamous 1995 rape of a twelve-year-old girl, Okinawan martial arts, other Okinawan arts and crafts, and Okinawan history. The content of these sites ranges widely in quality, though some contain essays by scholars familiar with some aspect of Okinawan history or culture. What nearly all of these sites have in common, however, is the perpetuation of a romantic myth of Okinawan pacifism, typically in the service of a contemporary political agenda. This paper has three goals. First I survey the contemporary myth of Okinawan pacifism and its common rhetorical and political uses. Second, I survey the structure, weapons, and select battles of the Ryukyu Kingdom’s military forces to make it absolutely clear that the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism is without a factual basis. Finally, I examine the nineteenth and early twentieth-century origins of this myth.

Uncritical acceptance of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism is common even among scholars. In an essay entitled “The ‘Peaceable Kingdom’ Reasserts its Identity,” Okinawan music specialist Robin Thompson writes:

Okinawa’s modern history has an ironic twist, since Ryukyu was one of the few nations ever to have maintained its independence for several centuries without

the capacity to resort to arms. This legacy of pacifism remains evident today: whereas the family heirloom in many Japanese households is a sword, in Okinawa it is more likely to be that symbol of Okinawan culture, the three-stringed lute known as the sanshin.

The “ironic twist” results from the fact that “as much as 11 per cent of the prefectural territory is still occupied by military bases, which are the root cause of most of Okinawa’s social and economic problems.”¹ In other words, the ongoing quasi-occupation of Okinawa by U.S. and Japanese military forces is all the more unjust, or at least more poignant, because of the alleged historical legacy of pacifism.

This juxtaposition of an alleged pacifistic past with a militarized present is the most common rhetorical use of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism. When deployed skillfully, this juxtaposition can be used to claim that, in addition to the obvious problems associated with them, the military bases violate the very spirit or soul of the peaceful Okinawan people. The image of Okinawans as victims is thereby enhanced. Of course, such rhetoric also relies on questionable assumptions that Okinawa’s people are a singular entity in terms of culture and viewpoint and that conditions obtaining in the rather distant past (the Ryukyu Kingdom ended in 1879) necessarily apply—or somehow *should* apply—in the present.

Perhaps the most prominent figure who regularly uses this approach in addressing the base problem is former governor and Ryūdai professor Ōta Masahide. In a speech delivered in 1997, while he was still governor, he asserted that:

¹ Robin Thompson, “The ‘peaceable kingdom’ reasserts its identity,” in <http://www.insightjapan.com/peacable%20kingdom.html>, as of 3-20-2006.

The [Ryukyu] kingdom's predominant features were devotion to peace and an absence of weapons. The people's wide recognition as an unarmed land of courtesy was stressed by the late Professor William Lebra of the University of Hawaii, whose *Okinawan Religion: Belief, Ritual and Social Structure* (1966) argues that the cultures of Japan and Okinawa differ fundamentally. In contrast to Japan's "warrior culture," Okinawa's is notable for an "absence of militarism."²

This claim sets up a lengthy discussion of the militarization of Okinawa from 1945 to the present. Notice that Ōta cites the authority of William Lebra, most likely in this case because his audience was a U.S. congressional study group.

Although Lebra did not take up the topic as an issue for serious investigation, in presenting background information about Okinawa, he perpetuated the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism. For example, in the context of comparing Okinawa with the mainland of Japan and pointing out the relatively more prominent status of women in Okinawa society, he stated that one reason may be:

. . . the absence of militarism during the past five hundred years . . . Nearly all Western visitors since the time of Captain Hall have commented on the mildness and lack of overt aggression in Okinawan behavior. The absence of any martial spirit save where infrequently inculcated by the Japanese was particularly apparent in the battle for Okinawa during World War II, when virtually every

² Ōta Masahide, "Okinawa Calls for a Just Peace: Speech to the U.S. Congressional Study Group on Japan," in <http://www.iwanami.co.jp/jpworld/text/okinawa01.html>, as of 3-20-2006.

Japanese fought until killed or committed suicide while Okinawans were not averse to surrender when they could.³

Although Lebra is incorrect regarding the absence of militarism for 500 years and lack of battle-related suicides in Okinawa, this passage does point to the apparent source of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism: Captain Basil Hall and other British sailors who visited Naha in 1816 and wrote at length about the peaceful and hospitable kingdom they had encountered. We will return to Captain Hall, but here it is interesting to note that although Ōta appropriated Lebra's authority in general, it is unlikely that Ōta or most other contemporary advocates of Okinawan suffering would actually quote the passage above. We now have overwhelming evidence that Japanese soldiers often did surrender in connection with the Battle of Okinawa, whereas many Okinawan civilians killed themselves and their families, often in especially gruesome ways.⁴ Indeed, these group suicides have become a major grievance in the contemporary narrative of Okinawan suffering.

The juxtaposition of an allegedly idyllic land without weapons or violence and the militarized islands of today, leads almost inevitably to the metaphor of rape. In an essay entitled "The Rape of Okinawa," George Feifer takes the usual rhetorical approach, setting the stage as follows:

Throughout the centuries when Japan was almost hermetically sealed against foreigners, Okinawans welcomed their ships with a graciousness that startled

³ William P. Lebra, *Okinawan Religion: Belief, Ritual, and Social Structure* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1966, 1985), p. 13. Incidentally, Lebra's Japanese translator, the late Mitsugu Sakihara, himself a Battle of Okinawa veteran, found this passage so contrary to everything he had observed, that he convinced Lebra to have it omitted in the Japanese version of the book (personal communication).

⁴ See, for example, the chapter "The War Comes Home to Okinawa" in Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1992), pp. 354-372.

passengers and crews. Although fear may have prompted it, the callers did not think so. Another eighteenth-century Englishman spoke for almost all such travelers when he reported Okinawans' most prominent characteristics as "their gentleness of spirit and manner, their yielding and disposition, their hospitality and kindness, their aversion to violence and crime." "For gentle dignity of manners, superior advancement in the arts and general intelligence," another sailor maintained, "the inhabitants . . . are by far the most interesting, enlightened nation in the Pacific Ocean." The Russian writer Ivan Goncharov was skeptical of such praise when he arrived in 1853. But "What a place, what people!" he found. "All exuded such a feeling of peace, simplicity, honest labor and plenty that it seemed to me . . . a longed-for haven."⁵

The paragraphs that follow this passage describe the U.S. military bases and the suffering they inflict on Okinawa's inhabitants. The title of Feifer's essay was undoubtedly prompted by an actual incident, which he mentions in the preliminary paragraphs: the 1995 rape of twelve-year-old schoolgirl by three U.S. soldiers. Although sexual assault had long been a scourge connected with the bases, this particular incident became a *cause célèbre* among women's advocacy groups and the anti-base movement. The victimization of this young, innocent girl quickly came to symbolize the larger-scale rape of the former "peaceful kingdom."⁶

⁵ George Feifer, "The Rape of Okinawa," *World Policy Journal*, XVII, No 3 (Fall, 2000) in <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/feifer.html> as of 3-20-2006.

⁶ For a scholarly analysis of the significance of the 1995 rape, see Linda Isako Angst. "The Sacrifice of a Schoolgirl: The 1995 Rape Case, Discourses of Power, and Women's Lives in Okinawa," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2.

While there are many good arguments to be made for eliminating or reducing the U.S. military presence on Okinawa, the rhetorical strategy of invoking contrast with an allegedly peaceful kingdom of centuries past is based on dubious assumptions about the normative force of history and the social and cultural coherency of “Okinawa” across time. More fundamentally, it is simply incorrect. The Ryukyuan state, like all states, relied ultimately on coercive force—or the threat of it—to maintain order. The Ryukyu Kingdom was created by military force, first to unite Okinawa under one ruler and then to subjugate the other Ryukyu Islands and bring them under Shuri’s control. In consolidating its empire and maintaining it, the Okinawa polity in Shuri sometimes clashed militarily with southward-expanding polities based in the province of Satsuma. Shuri relied heavily on tribute trade with China, and its ships were often attacked by pirates, as was the port of Naha. In short, the Ryukyu kingdom did not lack police and military forces or occasions to use them.

Military Affairs in the Ryukyu Kingdom

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For most of the fourteenth century, the island of Okinawa was home to three competing principalities, each consisting of a confederation of semi-autonomous local warlords (*aji*). These principalities frequently fought one another, and in 1406 Shō Hashi, a local warlord, overthrew the ruler of the principality of Chūzan, putting his father on the throne. In 1429, Shō Hashi succeeded in uniting all of Okinawa by military force, thereby establishing the first Shō dynasty of Okinawan kings. Soon the conquest of the

other Ryukyu Islands began. Let us consider just one example, Amami-Ōshima and nearby Kikaijima.

In 1450 (1451 in some accounts), six shipwrecked Koreans drifted to Gajashima, a small island in the Satsunan chain. They reported that the island was half under the control of Satsuma and half under the control of Okinawa. Later, four of the Koreans were taken to Sasari at the northern end of Amami-Ōshima. The local Okinawan military commander there sent the Koreans on to Shuri, where they met with the king and other officials. From their account we know that Amami-Ōshima was under Okinawan military control by that time but that the fight to control Kikaijima was still in progress. Several Korean accounts point to the 1440s as the time Okinawan forces conquered Amami-Ōshima. The residents of Kikaijima resisted the Okinawan invaders vigorously, finally causing King Shō Toku personally to lead an invasion of the island in 1466.⁷

The observations of the Koreans in 1450 are significant in several respects. Notice, for example, that at this time Okinawans controlled half of Gajashima, an island very close to Satsuma. The many islands between Satsuma and Okinawa served as potential objects of conflict between a northward-expanding Ryukyu Kingdom and the southward-expanding ambitions of some of the warlords who controlled Satsuma. Gajashima seems to have been the all-time northernmost limit of Shuri's military control. The Chikama family, retainers of the Hōjō, controlled Satsuma at the turn of the fourteenth century, and they forged a network of trade routes throughout the northern Ryukyu Islands. Later, in 1493, a force from Satsuma invaded Amami-Ōshima and

⁷ Ishigami Eiichi, "Ryūkyū no Amami shotō tōchi no ahodankai," *Rekishi hyōron*, No. 603 (2000), pp. 5-9; and Uezato Takashi, "Ryūkyū no kaki ni tsuite," *Okinawa bunka*, Vol. 36, No. 91 (2000), p. 76. The Korean source on which these authors rely is the Joseon Wangjo Sillok 朝鮮王朝實錄.

clashed with an army under Shuri's command. In a bloody battle, the Ryukyans drove off the Satsuma invaders.⁸ In 1537, King Shō Shin (r. 1477-1527), often credited by modern mythmakers with creating the "peaceful kingdom" by confiscating and locking up all weapons, led an invasion of Okinawan soldiers to quell a rebellious Amami-Ōshima. Many accounts record King Shō Gen as doing the same in 1571, though there is some debate among historians of Ryukyu regarding the veracity of the 1571 campaign owing to inconsistencies in the sources reporting it.⁹ Invasions of Miyako Yaeyama, and other islands also took place during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In short, the Ryukyu Kingdom was a small-scale empire, created, expanded, sustained, and defended by the vigorous use of military force.

Shipwrecked Korean sailors passing through Ryukyu made many valuable observations. For example, from the Koreans who drifted to Gajashima in 1450 we know that Ryukyuan firearms (hand cannon) at this time were of advanced design, "similar to those of our own country." The Koreans reported that they studied these weapons with the aid of a royal official charged with oversight of firearms. Such weapons almost certainly came from China. Ming court records include a 1452 decree by the Board of Justice forbidding the practice by residents of the Fujian coast of conveying military hardware to Ryukyans in private trade deals. The inhabitants of coastal areas of Fujian had stockpiled such weapons to repel *wakō* pirate attacks.¹⁰

⁸ Ishigami, "Amami," pp. 3-4, 9; and Uezato Takashi, "Ko-Ryūkyū no guntai to sono rekishiteki tenkai," *Ryūkyū Ajia shakai bunka kenkyūkai kiyō*, No. 5 (October, 2002), pp. 113-114.

⁹ Uezato, "Guntai," p. 114.

¹⁰ Uezato, "Ryūkyū no kaki," pp. 76-78.

Other shipwrecked Koreans described military affairs in and around Shuri castle in detail in a 1462 account. The soldiers guarding the perimeter of the castle served yearly tours of duty, with a member of the royal family appointed to train and oversee each year's new conscripts. The basic unit of the army was a 100-man group, several of which guarded the castle. When the king ventured out, a 300-man contingent of mounted soldiers accompanied him. Within the castle, about 100 people serving in 5-day rotations administered the military forces and made logistical arrangements. Outside of Shuri, each district contained a stone castle administered by a local warlord. The Korean account did not specify the number of these castles, but other sources list sixteen of them in addition to Shuri.¹¹

This early system of military organization was almost certainly the direct predecessor of the *hiki* system established by King Shō Shin. Shō Shin (r. 1477 – 1527) was a pivotal figure in Ryukyuan history. Throughout his long reign, he strove, with considerable success, to strengthen the power of the king vis-à-vis the hereditary warlords (*aji*), to enhance the ideological and symbolic authority of the king, and to build a centralized, efficient military system. It is especially ironic, therefore, that Shō Shin figures prominently in one strand of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism: the story of karate. Because the king confiscated weapons and forbade their use, the basic story line goes, Okinawans became adept at fighting with their empty hands or by using farm implements as weapons.¹² Modern mythmaking notwithstanding, Shō Shin pursued two

¹¹ Uezato, "Guntai," pp. 108-109.

¹² Perhaps the most prominent example of this narrative is Nagamine Shoshin, "Okinawan Karate and World Peace," found at many web sites (one example: <http://www.furyu.com/archives/issue8/NagSpeec.html> as of 3-21-2006). Although rare, some martial arts writers acknowledge a more realistic interpretation of Shō Shin's actions. For example: "Although it is documented that King Shoshin ordered his provincial lords, or *aji*, to live near his castle in Shuri, many

basic strategies with respect to military affairs. On the one hand, he sought to place all Ryukyuan military power under direct royal command. On the other, he sought to strengthen Ryukyu's military by implementing a more efficient organization and by improving infrastructure.

Shō Shin required the local warlords to reside in Shuri, bestowing great social prestige on them while eliminating all of their military power. To fill the local power gap thus created, the king implemented the so-called *magiri-shima* system. "*Magiri*" were local administrative districts, and the term "*shima*" refers to villages within the districts (perhaps relying on the metaphor of villages as "islands" within districts). Shō Shin and his successors appointed non-warlord officials to oversee the districts, and the former warlords involved themselves with the aristocratic society of the capital and central government politics. Significantly, references to local military forces in monuments erected between 1522 and 1554 used the term "*magiri gun*" (district forces) instead of *aji gun* (warlord forces). Although we do not know the details of the composition of these forces, the significant change is that, after Shō Shin's reign, they were all under Shuri's direct command.¹³

The *hiki* system was the core of Shō Shin's new military organization. Perhaps the easiest way to grasp the logic of this system is to regard "*hiki*" as meaning "to pull

historians no longer believe that he totally disarmed his ruling class. Although a famous stone monument, the Momo Urasoe Ran Kan No Mei, which is inscribed with the highlights of King Shoshin's reign, tells of the King seizing the *aji*'s swords and how he amassed a supply of weapons in a warehouse near Shuri castle, some Okinawan historians believe that King Shoshin was actually building an armory to protect his ports and prepare for any potential invasion by *wako*, or pirates, not that he was stripping the Okinawan samurai or the general population of their weaponry" (at <http://tkdtutor.com/16Weapons/Offensive/Offensive.htm> as of 3-21-2006).

¹³ These events are well documented in any general history of Okinawa. Uezato explains their significance in the context of military affairs with great clarity. See "Guntai," pp. 110-112.

together.” Each *hiki* pulled together various officials and military forces into networks capable of dealing with emergencies. The *hiki* combined into one organization military and police functions, including guard duty, administration of government, and administration of trade. Ryukyuan ships were the governing metaphor of the *hiki*. The *hiki* were led by officials with the title *sedo* (O. *shiidu*), a variant of *sentō*, ship’s captain. The names of the *hiki* all ended with *–tomi*, which was also the suffix for the names of large ships (like *–maru* for Japanese vessels). This terminology is indicative of the central importance of oceanic trade, a royal monopoly, for Ryukyu’s prosperity. Takara Kurayoshi has characterized the *hiki* as “overland ships” (*chijō no kaisen*) and ocean-going vessels as “floating *hiki*” (*umi ni ukanda hiki*). Not surprisingly, the *hiki* also provided shipboard military forces for Ryukyuan trade vessels, all of which were armed from 1421 onward. The *hiki* were grouped into three watches (*ban*), each of which contained four *hiki*. It is likely that the heads of these three watches evolved into the Sanshikan (O. Yoasutabe), the highest organ of government in Ryukyu from the sixteenth century until the end of the kingdom.¹⁴ In modern military terminology, one might characterize the *hiki* as rapid deployment forces.

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In conjunction with these rapid deployment networks, Shō Shin sought to strengthen the underlying infrastructure of the military, a policy continued by his immediate successors. A famous 1509 monument inscription at Urasoe tells of the king’s storing weapons there to reduce the need to obtain them from outlying areas. It is this inscription that is typically cited in connection with claims that Ryukyu became a

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the *hiki*, see Takara Kurayoshi, *Ryūkyū ōkoku no kōzō* (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1987), pp. 103-119. See also Uezato, “Guntai,” p. 112, 118-119.

society without weapons as a result of Shō Shin's policies. The king also walled in the northern face of Shuri castle and in 1522 built a road for military use between Shuri and Naha. In 1546, Shō Sei extended the network of defensive walls around Shuri Castle and constructed Yarazamori Castle to defend the entrance into Naha Harbor. Shō Shin also established an official to oversee artillery deployment and technology.¹⁵ As we will see, the combination of the Yarazamori Castle and effective cannon served the kingdom very well when an invasion force from Satsuma attempted to enter Naha Harbor in 1609. It also helped repel major attacks by pirates (*wakō*) in 1556 and 1606.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, Ryukyu's military had reached its full development. Uezato has presented the basic structure in diagrammatic form, which I include here with basic English translation added. One general point reflected in this diagram is that Shō Shin's military reforms were in part designed to focus the kingdom's resources on guarding the central organs of state, namely the port of Naha and Shuri Castle. <<Slide 4>> This organizational structure was supported by a network of castles and roads throughout the Shuri-Naha area. Yarazamori Castle and Mie Castle were on opposite sides of the narrow entrance to Naha Harbor. An Iron chain boom could be drawn between the two castles to close off the entrance to ships. Large-bore artillery pieces were concentrated in this area as well. Iō Castle, nearby but further into the harbor, functioned as the main arsenal, distributing weapons to the *hiki* soldiers as they assembled at their defensive positions. Tomi Castle, deep inside the harbor, was

¹⁵ Uezato, "Guntai," p. 113; and Uezato "Ryūkyū no kaki," p. 78.

the command and control center. The Pearl Road, designed explicitly for military purposes, connected these castles to each other and to Shuri Castle.¹⁶

In terms of the size of Ryukyuan armies, documents connected with Okinawan invasions of other Ryukyu Islands, mobilizations to defend against pirates, and the mobilization to defend against the Satsuma invasion of 1609 indicate a range of between 1000 and 3000 soldiers, with naval flotillas ranging in size from 46 to 100 ships.¹⁷ Ryukyu manufactured some of its own weapons and acquired others from China and Japan. There is abundant evidence that Ryukyuan traded in weapons between these places, most commonly bringing Japanese swords to Ming China, where they were in great demand.¹⁸ Ryukyuan often made adaptations to foreign weapons. For example, many sword blades came from Japan, but the handles were of Ryukyuan design to facilitate wielding the swords with one hand.¹⁹ On the eve of the Satsuma invasion, the kingdom's major port was well fortified and defended with large-bore artillery pieces (shot with a diameter of 7-9 cm was most common). The *hiki* in Okinawa were able to muster an army of about 3,000 soldiers on relatively short notice. Ryukyuan swords and bows were of effective design. Small-bore personal firearms, however, while abundant, were not on a par with Satsuma's muskets. Superior muskets, and the concentration of Ryukyuan defense resources in the port of Naha contributed to

¹⁶ Uezato, "Guntai," pp. 117-119; and Uezato "Ryūkyū no kaki," pp. 82-87.

¹⁷ Uezato, "Guntai," pp. 120-121; and Uezato, "Ryūkyū no kaki," p. 84.

¹⁸ Uezato, "Guntai," p. 124; and Uezato, "Ryūkyū no kaki," pp. 82-83.

¹⁹ Uezato, "Guntai," p. 123.

the kingdom's eventual defeat, as did the battle-hardened quality of the Satsuma invaders.²⁰

Although Ryukyu's defeat by Satsuma is well known, there are surprisingly few details on battle statistics. We do know, however, that Satsuma's attempt to enter Naha Harbor was a failure. The 3,000 defenders, the two castles, the boom across the harbor, and the Ryukyuan artillery inflicted heavy casualties on the invaders and caused them to retreat. The Naha port defenses were highly effective. Unfortunately for the kingdom, the various overland approaches to Shuri castle were much less defensible. After a Satsuma force broke through Ryukyuan defenses at Urasoe, it quickly surrounded Shuri Castle, cutting it off from the vast defense network that extended around Naha Harbor.²¹

After 1609, Ryukyu came under Satsuma's domination. The new political order undoubtedly resulted in changes to its military affairs, but the details of this period await further research. Overall, however, it is important to stress that post 1609 Ryukyu was not without armed military and police forces. Pirate attacks on Ryukyuan shipping were a common problem, and Satsuma frequently complained that Ryukyuan sailors did not defend their ships vigorously enough (Satsuma typically put up most of the capital for Ryukyu's tribute trade after 1609). Regardless of whether Satsuma's complaints were reasonable, Ryukyuan ships sailing to China continued to be armed for their voyages and to need those arms. Seventeenth-century bureaucratic reforms reduced the status of the *hiki* but did not eliminate them. One document points out that in response to the appearance of a foreign ship at Yaeyama in 1640, "soldiers from Satsuma and several

²⁰ Uezato, "Guntai," pp. 115-116, 121-124; and Uezato, "Ryūkyū no kaki," pp. 82-88.

²¹ Uezato, "Guntai," pp. 115-116; and Uezato, "Ryūkyū no kaki," pp. 82-88.

hundred Ryukyuan soldiers” were dispatched.²² Frequent accounts of Ryukyuan tribute ships battling pirates are found in the *Kyūyō*, an official history. In one typical incident during the reign of Shō On (r. 1795-1803), two Ryukyuan ships on their way to China fought a pitched overnight battle with three pirate ships. The Ryukyuan crew members brandished weapons (*heiki*) and used “a new type of cannon” (*ifū no teppō*) in their successful defense, which was ultimately successful—at least according to the official version of events.²³

In short, even after 1609, the Ryukyuan state, like any other state, was ultimately based on coercive force. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ryukyu became a small-scale empire owing to the military power of the Okinawan kings. This military power was sufficient even to defeat armies from Satsuma, for example in 1493 at Amami-Ōshima and in 1609 in the battle over Naha Harbor. The importance of trade and diplomacy for the kingdom’s prosperity both before and after 1609 required it to maintain naval forces capable of repelling the pirate attacks that were endemic to the South China seas. Official histories such as the *Kyūyō* are full of entries describing police actions to restore order in various parts of the country, before and after 1609. Ryukyu was a normal country, and, though it may be lamentable, this normalcy included state deployment of coercive force for political and economic ends.

Origins of the Myth of Ryukyuan Pacifism

²² Uezato, “Guntai,” pp. 116-117.

²³ Entry #1465. Kyūyō kenkyūkai, eds., *Kyūyō* (Yomikudashi edition) (Kadokawa shoten, 1974), pp. 439-440.

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Starting in the early nineteenth century, European ships made their way to Naha with increasing frequency. These visits produced a variety of reports about the inhabitants of Okinawa or other Ryukyu Islands, some of which were published and reached a fairly large audience of armchair travelers. The relative obscurity of Ryukyu added to its exotic appeal in such contexts. George H. Kerr summarizes the content of these accounts in part as “The visitor was invariably struck by the absence of arms or incidents of violence, by the unflinching courtesy and friendliness of all classes, by the intelligence of the gentry, and by the absence of thievery among the common people.”²⁴ Kerr’s general history of Ryukyu, the only such work available in English, quotes these European writings at great length, without any serious critique of their contents. Kerr did not read Japanese, and he depended on assistants to translate or summarize Japanese materials into English. His book, though well-written and intelligent, is not only badly out of date, but it did not even reflect the state of Japanese scholarship on Ryukyu circa the 1950s. The *hiki* system, for example, a foundational institution in premodern Ryukyu, is not even mentioned, even though Iha Fuyū had already published a widely-known analysis on this topic some two decades earlier. In short, Kerr seems to have had little or no knowledge of Ryukyuan military affairs, and he seems to have taken the nineteenth-century European reports of a pacifist society at face value. I make these points not to criticize Kerr. He did a superb job given his difficult circumstances. His

²⁴ George H. Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1958), pp. 250-251.

book, however, has been, and continues to be, a prominent vehicle for perpetuating the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism.²⁵

The main origin of the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism was the visit to Naha in 1816 of two British ships, the *Lyra* and *Alceste*. The ships were on a mission to survey parts of the Korean coast and the Ryukyu Islands, and they stayed at Naha from September 15 through October 27. Several members of the crew noted their observations of Okinawa, but Basil Hall, captain of the *Lyra*, and John M'Leod, physician on board the *Alceste* wrote lengthy accounts that were later published and widely read. These accounts gushed with praise over the kindness, gentleness, and intelligence of the Okinawans, whose behavior compared especially well with the alleged boorishness and arrogance of "the Chinese." Okinawa was a land of peace and serenity. Its residents bore no weapons and its people committed no crimes. According to Hall: "We never saw any punishment inflicted at Loo-choo; a tap with a fan, or an angry look, was the severest chastisement ever resorted to, as far as we could discover."²⁶ Hall's account of social order enforced by fan taps was destined to be repeated many times and remains a potent image to this day.

Of course, it is perfectly likely that Hall's account is quite accurate as far as it goes. Why would Hall and the other crew members, whose movements were restricted to a small area, ever have had occasion to observe police and judicial activities during their short stay? Obviously Hall was unaware of the kingdom's law court, the *hirajo* or

²⁵ Personal note: I am well aware of the need for a general history of Ryukyu in English, and I feel some obligation to write one. At this time, however, I am busy with research on the social history of earthquakes in Japan and will be for several more years. I have a general outline in place for a history of Ryukyu and am assembling the needed elements, albeit at a slow pace.

²⁶ Kerr, *Okinawa*, p. 255. For extensive excerpts from the crew members of these two ships, see pp. 249-260.

with the Ryukyu's two detailed law codes. He was clearly unaware of the various offenders against these laws, who had been arrested, tortured, fined, exiled, had their property confiscated, or faced the death penalty.²⁷ It is hardly surprising that the accounts of Hall and M'Leod describing an idyllic Oriental land of peace and tranquility, free of the scourges of war, weapons and animosity, would have appealed to Europeans in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. Interestingly, Hall discussed Okinawa with Napoleon himself when the *Lyra* put in at St. Helena, and reported in his account that:

Several circumstances . . . respecting the Loo-Choo people surprised even him a good deal; and I had the satisfaction of seeing him more than once completely perplexed, and unable to account for the phenomena I related. Nothing struck him so much as their having no arms. "Point d'armes!" he exclaimed; . . . "Mais, sans armes, comment se bat-on?"

I could only reply, that as far as we had been able to discover, they had never had any war, but remained in a state of internal and external peace. "No wars!" cried he, with a scornful and incredulous expression, as if the existence of any people under the sun without wars was a monstrous anomaly.²⁸

This passage is quite telling, for it implies superior moral virtue for those who hold to a belief in Ryukyuan pacifism, unlike Napoleon who scoffed at it—as, of course, he would.

²⁷ There are many accounts of Ryukyuan judicial proceedings and law codes. One excellent source is *Okinawa no hankachō*, which details criminal cases before the Hirajo in the 1860s and 70s. One case, for example, involves the investigation into the actions of police officials who tortured a suspect excessively, thus causing his death. See Higa Shunchō and Sakihama Shūmei, eds., trans., *Okinawa no hankachō* (Tōyō bunko 41) (Heibonsha, 1965), pp. 85-94. See also "Satsuma-han shihaika no saibanken," Chapter 3 of Tomiyama Kazuyuki, *Ryūkyū ōkoku no gaikō to ōken* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2004), pp. 170-197.

²⁸ Kerr, *Okinawa*, p. 259.

One suspects that scholars like Ōta, who should know full well that the myth is unfounded, are of like mind. In any case, given the degree of ignorance of Ryukyu and other parts of East Asia that prevailed in 1816, it is conceivable that even thoughtful or worldly people might have believed Hall's tale. Certainly many of them would have wanted to do so.

At the end of the nineteenth century Basil Hall Chamberlain, a relative of Captain Hall and noted authority on Japan, visited Okinawa Prefecture briefly and published a lengthy analysis in *The Geographic Journal*. His account vigorously endorsed the myth of Ryukyuan pacifism. Part of Chamberlain's account of Ryukyuan history reads:

In some important respects the country really deserved the title bestowed upon it by a Chinese emperor in 1579, and is still proudly inscribed on the gate of its capital city, the title of "The Land of Propriety." There were no lethal weapons in Luchu, no feudal factions, few if any crimes of violence. . . . Confucius' ideal was carried out—a government purely civil, at once absolute and patriarchal, resting not on any armed force, but on the theory that subjects owe unqualified obedience to their rulers . . . ²⁹

Here, of course, Chamberlain takes the descriptions of Hall and M'Leod and explains them in terms of classical Confucianism. In Chamberlain's version, Ryukyu was not only a rare or singular example of a society without war, weapons or aggression, but also a rare or singular case of a Confucian paradise.

²⁹ Basil Hall Chamberlain, "The Luchu Islands and Their Inhabitants: I. Introductory Remarks," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April, 1895), pp. 310-311.

Later in his account, Chamberlain restates the matter in terms of the prevailing tenets of racial science. After discussing the physical qualities of Ryukyans in some detail and comparing them with the qualities of Japanese, Chamberlain states:

The most prominent race-characteristic of the Luchuans is not a physical, but a moral one. It is their gentleness of spirit, their yielding and submissive disposition, their hospitality and kindness, their aversion to violence and crime. Every visitor has come away with the same favourable impression—Captain Broughton, whom they treated so hospitably on the occasion of his shipwreck in 1797; Captain Basil Hall, Dr McLeod, Dr, Guillemard—even the missionaries, poor as was their success, and all the Japanese. For myself, I met with nothing but kindness from high and low alike.³⁰

Thompson enthusiastically quotes the first two sentences of this passage in his essay on the “peaceable kingdom,” apparently finding nothing amiss about essentializing “the” Ryukyans in this manner or in Chamberlain’s sources.

The famous scholar of Ryukyu Iha Fuyu (1876-1947) is the final link between more recent conveyors of the pacifist myth like Kerr, Lebra, and Ōta and the original nineteenth century European mythmakers. Iha is a more ambivalent figure in this respect because some of his writing does acknowledge Ryukyu’s military past. For example, in the 1930s he analyzed accounts of military affairs in the *Omoro sōshi*, discussing weapons, defense works, the military character of the *hiki*, and related topics.³¹ Elsewhere, however, Iha argued that Shō Shin enforced a policy of pacifism

³⁰ Chamberlain, “The Luchu Islands,” pp. 318-319.

³¹ Iha Fuyū, “Ko-Ryūkyū no bubi o kōsatsushite “karate” no hattatsu ni oyobu.” Hattori Shirō, Nakasone Masayoshi, Hokama Shuzen, eds., *Iha Fuyū zenshū*, Vol 5 (Heibonsha, 1974), pp. 196-215 (originally

(*hisen shugi*) by confiscating weapons and prohibiting their use. He did acknowledge, though, that these moves were also aimed at suppressing internal rebellions and defending against pirates. As Uezato points out, in part owing to an imprecise conception of key concepts such as “defense” or pacifism” Iha’s exact stance is hard to discern.³²

Among scholars of Ryukyuan history in the early twentieth century, there were explicit critics of the notion of a pacifist Ryukyu kingdom. Yokoyama Shigeru, for example, vigorously criticized Basil Hall’s assertion of a land without weapons. Among postwar scholars, Nakahara Zenchū criticized Iha’s portrayal of a pacifist Shō Shin, arguing that Shō Shin’s policies were moves intended to strengthen the kingdom’s military capabilities. Nakahara also argued that it was not the case the Shimazu confiscated the kingdom’s weapons after 1609. In recent decades, scholars such as Takara Kurayoshi, Maehira Fusaaki, Teruya Masayoshi, Tomiyama Kazuyuki, and Uezato Takashi have confirmed and further developed the arguments of Yokoyama and Nakahara, shedding much light on the details of Ryukyuan military organization, equipment, and tactics.³³ Abundant evidence of the Ryukyu Kingdom’s military and police structures and capabilities is available for anyone who cares to take a close look the academic literature. Even a casual glance at the headlines of the entries in the

published 1932); and “Ko-Ryūkyū no “hiki seido” ni tsuite—Ryūkyū bunka no ranjukuki ni kansuru ichi kōsatsu,” *Zenshū*, Vol. 9, pp. 279-322 (originally published in 1935). See also Uezato, “Guntai,” p. 105.

³² Uezato, “Guntai,” p. 105; and Iha Fuyū, “Ko-Ryūkyū no seiji,” *Zenshū*, Vol. 1, pp. 419-495, esp. pp. 431-440.

³³ For a concise summary of these arguments and a listing of the key essays, see Uezato, “Guntai,” pp. 105-106.

Kyūyō should be sufficient to dispel the notion that Ryukyu was a land without weapons or military conflict.

The myth of Ryukyuan pacifism undoubtedly resonates with the desire to believe that genuinely peaceful human societies are possible. So powerful is this desire that it seems capable of anesthetizing the critical thinking function that should be part of any scholarly endeavor. It also reinforces and adds poignancy to the narrative of modern Okinawa victimization. This fairy tale version of Ryukyu, however, is not simply wrong. I doubt that the romantic Ryukyu has a legitimate role to play in modern Okinawan politics. Insofar as the large U.S. military presence in Okinawa has been a corrosive force in society (a view with which I generally agree), then the relevant arguments should be made in the context of the present and recent past without recourse to emotional, essentializing fantasies. More broadly, the reality of Ryukyu suggests that our efforts at building better societies might be more effective if we acknowledge that a certain degree of violence is inherent in social institutions and then deal with that fact in a straightforward manner.