

Reading Reflection 2

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A (identity) battlefield once again?

A reading reflection on Okinawa, ambivalence, identity and Japan

When it comes to discussing the role of identity in certain situations and its influence on policymaking I would like to keep in mind that the notion of identity and the concept of importance of personal and communal identity are controversial and that there are multiple interpretations of what identity exactly is. Furthermore, we have to ask the question to which extent we should discuss the concept of each person possessing multiple identities that fluently change over time, which ergo leads to the destabilizing of many ideas in identity politics. (Bilgrami 2006) The current discussion about identity in Okinawa has the potential to give us an insight into how identity might be understood, given that this notion is generally discussed in a fairly abstract and theoretical way.

Allen argues in his paper that the local people living on the Okinawa Island chain have contested territory for decades and have been influenced by numerous countries and cultures, particularly focusing on Japan and the United States. In general, the Author puts a strong focus on various historical events and current situations like the Battle of Okinawa or the military base problem, and how these resulted in the current situation. By this creation of an entangled identity, with which Okinawan people until today, have to bear the burden of a colonized past and a feeling of unfair treatment toward the rest of Japan. Furthermore, the author claims that by intertwining many of the mentioned historical events, an image is created which is likely to be used by political and socio-cultural groups but ultimately creates a rather unbeneficial situation in the quest for a better understanding of Okinawan identity. (Barclay 2006). Allen strengthens his arguments by laying off what could be described as a general understanding of identity (the idea that qualities or traits make an individual unique) and rather tries to distinguish, what he describes as “many overlapping and contradictory identities in operation at any one time”. However, in his conclusion, he bounces back and is seduced by the romanticized generalization of culture and describes Okinawa as a “highly complex, diverse, historically, culturally and linguistically rich society”. In my opinion, these points apply to every society in this world and take the wind out of the discussion when trying to understand Okinawan identity.

One aspect I noticed in the reading intrigued my interest and opened up a new perspective for me. Even just shortly mentioned, Allen describes how political leaders on Okinawa use the creation of identity and an imagined community to challenge the inappropriate US-military presence and argue that Okinawa has been a peaceful culture for a long time. Unarguably, peacefulness is a noble trait, but also it is unarguable that the political and military situation in the area surrounding Okinawa can be

described as rather tense. Looking at very recent events such as the Russian Invasion in Ukraine and rising missile launches by North Korea and practice flights by Chinese aircraft over Taiwan, the question arises if and how the perspective of Okinawa's considering their history, changes considering their security. Where Japan's National government has difficulties positioning itself when it comes to the Taiwan-China question, also in Okinawa, diverse approaches can be found. Recently, Okinawa's Gov. Denny Tamaki urged for a tension reduction and focuses on peaceful diplomacy between the Japanese and Chinese Governments. (Yamaguchi 2022). However, a view away from the main island presents us with the Kita-Daitojima island which pushes towards SDF presence amid its close location to Taiwan and therefore potential danger from a Chinese attack. (Kuniyoshi and Narisawa n.d.) Contradictions like this show again how important it is not to generalize when talking about the "Okinawan opinion." Understandably, the fear of becoming a battleground once again is more present in Okinawa than in other parts of Japan. Nevertheless, the situation in Ukraine shows that in a world where economy, politics, and moral values are on an international scale so deeply connected, it is almost impossible for a country to play an entirely neutral role when a military conflict breaks out. One might argue that embedded peacefulness, as it is claimed by various Okinawan leaders, paradoxically also leads to the responsibility of defending these values.

My general assumption of Okinawa before reading this paper was very close to what Allen describes in his work as the Hawaiian like paradise Island image and how it is portrayed in drama series and movies. Missing some of the historical and cultural context, the debate about Okinawan identity (アイデンティティ) was something new to me. This entire debate is challenging for me, especially as an "outsider", it puts me in a difficult place where I am drawn between the fact of people's right to live their identity and its usage for policymaking. I would argue that identity is built by fractures consisting of our roots, history, and past and present choices, but what it does not include are future occurrences, which, while speculative, must be considered.

References

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