



Uniquely Okinawan: Determining Identity during the U.S. Wartime Occupation by Courtney A. Short.

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The concept of an Okinawan identity has been the subject of countless works on the prefecture. These have concentrated on Okinawa's relationship with the Japanese mainland and its history as an independent Kingdom (of the Ryukyus) with its own unique culture and traditions. Despite efforts to assimilate Okinawans into the Japanese national polity, they continue to be seen as ethnically distinct from the Japanese. Many of them still feel consigned to an inferior status owing to their experience of the Battle of Okinawa and the continuing presence of the US military in their prefecture.

In *Uniquely Okinawan*, historian Courtney Short, a serving member of the US military and specialist in the role of ethnicity, shows how various American actors—Army, Marines, and Navy—used race to carry out the Occupation of the prefecture beginning immediately after the Second World War. She states in her acknowledgements that the idea for the book materialized in 2006, when her husband was stationed in Okinawa. Their sojourn in the prefecture made her aware of the nature of US-Okinawan relations. Her meticulous research into the subject extended to archival documents and oral history accounts from both sides. She stresses the malleability of ethnicity and race as social and political constructs, challenging the ingrained notions of those categories as applied to Japanese and Okinawans.

Most accounts of them portray Okinawans as victims of the Battle of Okinawa and the subsequent US Occupation. Short attributes greater agency to the Okinawan people, claiming they themselves played a part in their experience of the Occupation. She finds that they took an active role vis-à-vis the Japanese and the Americans, as they sought “safety and fair treatment” (15). Since their annexation and eventual consolidation into the national polity as a prefecture in 1879, Okinawans have been relegated to a second-class status. Their ambivalent sense of not quite belonging may be observed to this day.

While admitting that US Occupation Forces harbored racist attitudes toward Okinawans, Short believes these did not “translate into unorthodox and unnecessarily cruel policies or behavior” (88). The Occupying Forces’ “actual interaction” with Okinawans enabled them to evaluate these people of a different ethnicity and thus to transform military policy at the time. Nonetheless, Americans, like the Japanese, perceived Okinawans as dirty and uncivilized. But, as Short herself mentions, it would be interesting to know how US Army, Marine, and Navy personnel differed in their views of Okinawans. She notes, for instance, that some Marines did not participate in the rape of Okinawan women, because they considered them “subhuman and inferior” and “represent[ing] filth” (112-13; cf. 187n50).

The attempts US Forces did make to understand Okinawan culture were not benevolent efforts to treat Asians as their equals; rather they reflected a need to understand the enemy “Other”

during wartime.¹ That said, they also paved the way for placing Okinawans in leadership roles. This not only “eased the burden” of the Occupation Forces in running the military government but created a governing structure based on “culturally familiar practices” (15–16) that showed the actual capabilities of the Okinawan people.

Uniquely Okinawan is a sensitive, salutary study of the ethnic hierarchies that influence how one group of people has viewed another, perpetuating racist biases that persist to this day. (This makes one wish the author had considered as well the place of gender at the intersection of ethnicity and race.) Courtney Short has added to the voluminous literature on occupied Japan a perceptive analysis of the historical, political, and socio-cultural landscapes of Okinawa and the mainland. It will be an invaluable resource for students and scholars interested in Okinawan and Japanese Studies, Asian Studies, and Ethnic and Racial Studies.

1. Cf. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (NY: Houghton-Mifflin, 1946).