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Rethinking Early Ryukyuan History

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Abstract

My recent book, *Maritime Ryukyu, 1050-1650,* is a revisionist history of the Ryukyu islands. Adopting the interdisciplinary approaches of recent Japanese scholarship, *Maritime Ryukyu* presents a new history of the region, treating the Ryukyu islands not as a unitary, natural political community but as locations within a maritime network that extended northward as far as the southern coastal regions of Korea. This article briefly explains my trajectory in writing the book and then summarizes some of the major arguments in *Maritime Ryukyu.*

Keywords

Ryukyu, Shimazu, Shō Shin, Shuri, official histories, *wakō, Maritime Ryukyu, Omoro*

I have been researching the history of the Ryukyu islands ("Ryukyu" in the paragraphs below) since the 1980s. My first book, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (1999, 2017), focused on the ideas, conflicts, and policies of eighteenth century political actors. All of the major figures in *Visions* were urban Okinawan elites residing in the Shuri-Naha area. Although the story of competing visions among elites and the Confucian-inspired program that eventually prevailed is important and compelling, pragmatic reasons also guided my choice of topic. Primary sources are abundant for the early modern era.

Moving backward in time, written sources of the kind historians typically use rapidly become sparse in the case of the Ryukyu islands. For example, it was only during the sixteenth century that the regime in Shuri began to use written records for domestic governance, and only a very small number of those records are extant. Records connected with trade between Naha and other parts of Asia are abundant and useful for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but they shed little light on domestic life or on parts of the Ryukyu islands other than the area around Naha. Accounts by Koreans who found themselves in the Ryukyu islands as a result of shipwreck or human trafficking during the late fifteenth century and accounts by Chinese investiture envoys from the 1530s onward are the only sources that discuss topics such as agriculture, laws, building style, local customs, and other matters connected with domestic society in Okinawa or other islands.

I had long been interested in early Ryukyuan history and mildly dissatisfied with the accounts of it found in survey histories and even many specialized works. Modern versions of early Ryukyuan history tend to adopt the narrative framework of the official histories of the Ryukyu kingdom, written between approximately 1650-1750 (explained in more detail below). The basic narrative, in which lineages of kings arose in Okinawa as early as the thirteenth century, ruled the entire island, and expanded their reach to other Ryukyu islands, had long struck me as unconvincing.

In 2015, I discovered that several scholars in Japan had been finding useful new ways to approach Ryukyu's early past. Using multidisciplinary approaches that include insights from anthropology, archaeology, and

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linguistics, they advanced new arguments about Ryukyu's past and provided methodologies that others might use and extend. I read this work with great interest as well as scholarship on *Omoro sōshi* おもろさうし, a collection of songs first written down during the 1530s. Especially helpful has been work over the past fifteen or so years by Yoshinari Naoki 吉成直樹 and Fuku Hiromi 福寛美, who interrogate the *Omoro* songs for what they reveal about early Ryukyuan history and societies.[1] Benefitting from this and other innovative work, I turned my attention to early Ryukyuan history, and my book *Maritime Ryukyu, 1050-1650* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019) has recently been published.

Maritime Ryukyu is a revisionist history. The Ryukyu depicted in its pages looks significantly different from the Ryukyu portrayed by George H. Kerr,[2] the Ryukyu in typical Japanese survey histories, or the Ryukyu of the official histories. In *Maritime Ryukyu,* for example, *wakō* 倭寇 (armed mariners prone to marauding) are the major actors in most previous work on early Ryukyuan history. In that connection, the formal tribute relationship that developed during the late fourteenth century between the Ming court and Okinawan rulers who controlled the port of Naha was an attempt by Chinese authorities to control piracy and smuggling. Also in *Maritime Ryukyu* I push forward to around 1500 the time when Ryukyu became a centralized state, and I characterize that state as a maritime empire. Military force was crucial in creating and maintaining that empire, and *Maritime Ryukyu* pays close attention to warfare, including the 1609 war between Shuri and Satsuma.

Maritime Ryukyu situates the Ryukyu islands within nautical networks extending northward through the Tokara islands, the Satsunan Islands 薩南諸島, coastal Kyushu, the islands of Iki 壱岐 and Tsushima 対馬, and the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. Ryukyuan culture and people did not spring from the soil of Okinawa. They came from northern locations, and *Maritime Ryukyu* highlights the deep Japonic roots of the Ryukyu islands. It also advances other new arguments about early Ryukyuan history.

The rest of this article introduces some of those arguments in question-and-answer format. I do not cite specific page ranges or chapters in *Maritime Ryukyu* because most arguments are interconnected and develop over the course of multiple chapters and contexts.

Who dwelled in the Ryukyu islands and from where did these people come?

This question became urgent during the late nineteenth century as anthropologists, archaeologists, linguists, and others sought to discover the roots of various national or ethnic groups in and around Japan. Much of that earlier scholarship and the assumptions behind it appear problematic in hindsight. Nevertheless, in recent decades, significant agreement among different academic disciplines has emerged regarding the big picture.

Although once part of the Eurasian continent, the Ryukyu islands have existed for at least 400,000 years, well before the advent of modern humans. We cannot be certain who first set foot in them. Going back to about the ninth century of the Common Era, the Ryukyu islands were sparsely populated. People related to Jōmon-era Japanese were the main population from Okinawa northward. Across the Kerama Gap, Austronesian peoples related to the indigenous peoples of Taiwan lived in the Miyako and Yaeyama island groups. Although I find the concept of indigeneity problematic, if we had to identify the islands' indigenous people, these two groups would be a reasonable choice. They vanished relatively quickly, eliminated or absorbed by waves of seafaring people from the north. These

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northerners swept into the Ryukyu islands during the eleventh and twelfth centuries and established stone fortresses (*gusuku*) and castles at harbors. They were mainly Japanese, but people, culture, and technology from the Korean peninsula also found its way into the Ryukyu islands during the *gusuku* era (ca. 11th-14th centuries).[3]

During this time, the Ryukyu islands were part of maritime networks extending from southern Korea to Tsushima, Iki, and Hakata, moving south along the western coast of Kyushu, and then through the Satsunan and Tokara islands 吐噶喇列島. In other words, the *gusuku* era Ryukyu islands were not isolated. They were part of a much larger network of people, goods, and cultures.

Writing in 1924, linguist Miyanaga Masamori 宮良當壯 repeated a hypothesis already in circulation regarding the Ryukyuan word for north, *nishi*. The argument is that this term comes from ancient Japanese *inishi* 過去, meaning "the past." In other words, the north (Kyushu and vicinity) was Ryukyu's past.[4]

As recently as five years ago, I tended to regard this kind of argumentation, whether by Miyanaga or by more famous intellectuals like Iha Fuyū 伊波普猷, as reflecting assimilationist pressure and therefore unreliable. To be sure, assimilationist pressure was intense during the early twentieth century, and it contributed to conclusions that subsequent scholarship has rejected. However, the general point that scholars like Miyanaga and Iha made during the early twentieth century, based mainly on linguistic evidence, now has strong support from other disciplines, especially archaeology, physical and cultural anthropology, and newer studies in linguistics. "Impact of northern culture" is one term anthropologist Tanigawa Ken'ichi 谷川健一 used for the strong north-to-south flow of people and culture into the Ryukyu islands during the *gusuku* age.[5] In short, the origin of the cultures and peoples of the Ryukyu islands is mainly coastal Japan, with some connections to the Korean peninsula.

When, if ever, did "Ryukyu" become a country, or kingdom, or some other kind of unitary entity?

Geopolitically, the Ryukyu islands came under at least the nominal rule of Shuri by the end of the long reign of Shō Shin 尚真 (r. 1477-1527). Specifically, Shō Shin subdued power centers within Okinawa, conquered the island of Kumejima 久米島 in the 1490s and/or in 1506, conquered the Yaeyama islands 八重山列島 in 1500, conquered Yonaguni 与那国 around 1513 or 1522, and may also have conquered Kasari 笠利in northern Amami-Ōshima 奄美大島around the same time. During the 1520s, local rulers serving as Shuri's agents begin to appear in the various northern Ryukyu islands. The empire that Shō Shin forged, however, was restive. Uprisings and re-conquests occurred occasionally throughout the sixteenth century. After 1609, the northern Ryukyu islands came under the direct control of the Shimazu lords, and today they are part of Kagoshima Prefecture. Prior to Shō Shin's reign, not even Okinawa, much less the entire Ryukyu islands, were a unitary political entity in the sense of being under the control of a single ruler.

Culturally, the question is similarly complex. One reason is that the Ryukyu islands were not isolated until the seventeenth century, a point reinforced by DNA studies. People flowed through the islands in all directions, although the dominant direction was north-to-south. Perhaps the clearest cultural marker is language. All Ryukyuan languages are related to Japanese and its dialects. The Ryukyu islands constitute a distinct group of languages within the larger Japonic family, and the boundaries between different Ryukyuan languages or groups of languages tend to correspond to physical barriers such as the Kuroshio current flowing between Amami-Ōshima and the Tokara

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islands or the Kerama Gap between Okinawa and the southern Ryukyu islands. However, linguistic boundaries do not necessarily correspond to other cultural boundaries. For example, there are close connections between the religious culture of the Tokara islands and the Ryukyu islands. Similarly, certain deities funeral customs, and other aspects of culture can be found throughout the entire maritime region described above.

In short, defining "Ryukyu" as a unitary entity with clear boundaries is difficult in any realm. It is interesting that today, mainly because of the promotion of the Ryukyu kingdom as a tourist attraction, one often encounters the term "Ryukyu" in Okinawa. In Amami-Ōshima and other northern Ryukyu islands, by contrast, the R-word is typically applied only to certain species of plants and animals. There is considerable interest in local culture and ecology within the northern Ryukyu islands. However, I am not aware of any popular nostalgia for or interest in the Ryukyu kingdom in today's Amami-Ōshima or Tokunoshima 徳之島. Insofar as there is any popular memory of the "Naha-yu" 那覇世 (era of rule by Naha) in the northern Ryukyu islands today, the dominant image is one of oppression by Okinawa.

Where did Ryukyuan history start?

Thanks to the discovery of the Gusuku site group (*Gusuku isekigun* 城久遺跡群) in 2006, this question is relatively easy to answer: the island of Kikai 喜界. During the tenth through twelfth centuries, Kikai was the administrative center of the three northernmost Ryukyu islands. It was a regional trade hub and technology center. During the thirteenth century, Okinawa gradually surpassed Kikai and the northern Ryukyu islands in wealth and power for reasons that I explain in *Maritime Ryukyu*. Even as late as the fifteenth century, however, Kikai retained considerable power. Repeated military attacks by forces from the Shuri-Naha area during the 1450s and 1460s eventually ended Kikai's long tenure as a regional power center.

Why did Okinawa give rise to so many "kings" starting in the 1370s?

One reason that Okinawa rose to prominence vis-à-vis Kikai is that the harbor at Naha could accommodate ships of any size because fresh water from rivers flowing into the harbor suppressed the growth of coral. Naha was the only harbor in the Ryukyu islands that could accommodate large Chinese-made ships.

The story that "king" Satto 察度 (ruler of the Urasoe-Naha area) initiated formal tributary relations in 1372 with the newly-created Ming dynasty is well known. Moreover, the Ming dynasty soon granted favorable trade terms to the port of Naha including unlimited tribute shipments (the usual limit was once every three years) and gifts of Chinese-made ships. Such actions suggest that the Ming dynasty looked favorably upon Okinawa, but superficial appearances can be deceiving. Ming policy had two interrelated goals. One was to channel piracy and smuggling into the lawful framework of tribute trade. (Ryukyuans were pirates and smugglers in Chinese eyes.) The other was to use Naha as a conduit for international trade, thereby reducing the economic pain within China of the Ming dynasty's own Maritime Prohibitions. These regulations prohibited private trade with foreign countries. The tribute trade via Naha, therefore, functioned partially to mitigate the adverse impact of this restriction. Stated simply, the Ming court made trade through Naha highly profitable to provide an incentive to the *wakō* (pirates) who controlled local power centers in the Ryukyu islands to interact with China lawfully.

In this context, by 1374, two other kings

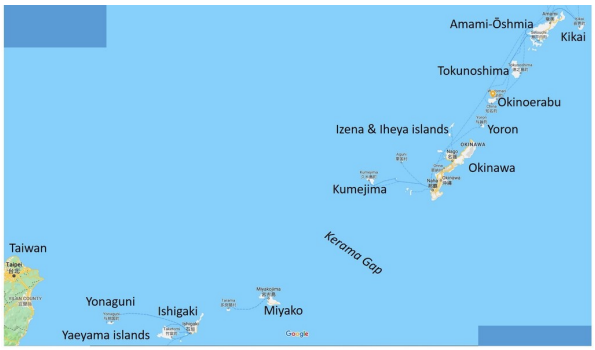
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appeared in Okinawa, one ostensibly in the north and another ostensibly in the south. The southern kings also had various uncles and other royal relatives eager to trade with China. Suddenly Okinawa was awash in royalty. Interestingly, three kings (east, central, and west) also appeared in the tiny Sultanate of Sulu soon after it established formal ties with the Ming court.[6]

It is important to keep the term "king" (王 wáng) in perspective. In the context of Ryukyu, Sulu, or any other state with ties to the Ming dynasty the title "king" was, in effect, a license to conduct trade and diplomacy granted by the Ming court. The Ming court formally invested kings as rulers of territories, and holders of the title typically commanded significant local power. In and of itself, however, the title king did not say anything about the actual extent of its holder's power or the prevailing governing structure. Okinawa in the 1370s was an island in which one or more kings (recognized by the Chinese court) resided. However, neither the island of Okinawa nor the Ryukyu islands as a whole were kingdoms at that time, in the sense of being a state under the control of a monarch exercising territorial control.

Okinawa's three kings, and even some relatives of the southern king, all conducted trade through the port of Naha, using the services of the same group of resident Chinese to take care of the paperwork and other details. Usually shipments from different Okinawan kings arrived in Fuzhou from Naha at the same time aboard the same ships. Moreover, sometimes the same Okinawans appeared in Chinese records as envoys of one king, and then envoys of another. What was going on? We cannot know the details, but it appears that trade under the auspices of multiple kings was a way to accommodate numerous Okinawan warlords who sought to participate in the profitable tribute trade.

By the end of the 1420s, this accommodation either came to an end or narrowed insofar as only one king conducted trade with China, albeit with no reduction in total trade volume. The explanation in Ryukyu's official histories was that one king conquered the others, but we have no strong evidence for this claim. The recognition of a single king in Okinawa was probably an administrative reorganization by resident Chinese merchants in connection with complex events that led to the rise to prominence around 1405 of Shō Hashi 尚把志 (r. 1422-1439). This change led to an upsurge in warfare because ambitious local rulers sought to seize control of Naha, make themselves king, and profit from the lucrative trade with China.



The Ryukyu islands (adapted from Google Maps)

Ryukyu Kingdom or Shuri Empire?

One of those ambitious local rulers, Shō Shin, eventually succeeded in eliminating or neutralizing potential opponents both within Okinawa and in other islands. In addition to military conquest, Shō Shin made Shuri into the strong center as the capital of these territories. This process included the creation of a new religious hierarchy, with the Shuri chief priestess at its head, the creation of new official rites, the formal division of Okinawa and other islands into administrative districts, large-scale construction of temples and

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monuments, and the use of written documents in domestic administration and tax collection.

Today it is common to call this state the Ryukyu kingdom, and it is common to imagine this kingdom as having existed one or more centuries before Shō Shin's time. However, I generally avoid the term kingdom in *Maritime Ryukyu*. "Ryukyu kingdom" is not absolutely incorrect. From about 1500 onward there was a strong monarch who ruled from Shuri and held the title king. The term kingdom, however, suggests that Shō Shin's territory was an organic political community. Instead, I characterize Shō Shin's Ryukyu as a maritime empire. It was the product of military conquest and agents dispatched from Shuri governed places like Amami-Ōshima in the north or Ishigaki in the south. Even though these agents typically developed local roots, their male children returned to the center, leaving their parents to grow up in Shuri as servants in noble households there. Moreover, parts of the empire occasionally rebelled against Shuri, resulting in warfare. I do not use the term empire lightly, and *Maritime Ryukyu* contains a detailed discussion of the matter.

This point is especially clear when we look at the situation from the standpoint of islands other than Okinawa. This lack of an outside perspective is a serious problem in the existing English-language literature, my own past work included. *Maritime Ryukyu* represents an initial attempt at recalibration, one that I plan to follow up in future projects.

Why are the tombs of the kings and major warlords of the First Shō "dynasty" widely dispersed?

The royal remains of the Second Shō dynasty are relatively orderly. The bones of most of the kings and major royal relatives reside in the Tamaudun mausoleum in Shuri. (Those buried elsewhere are significant as problematic members of the lineage.) By contrast, the tombs of the kings of the first Shō dynasty, and the other major warlords of that era, are dispersed all over central and southern Okinawa. In the paragraphs below, letters in brackets indicate the approximate location on the map. Clicking on letters that are links brings up a photograph of the relevant tomb.



(Adapted from Google Maps)

Shō Shishō 尚思紹 (r. 1406-1421) was technically the first king. However, except that he was probably born in Kyushu near Sashiki 佐敷 (modern Ashikita 葦北 in Kumamoto Prefecture), we know nothing about him. He is buried at Sashiki Yōdore 佐敷ようどれ **[A]** in Sashiki 佐敷, Nanjō City 南城市, in southeast Okinawa. This area is the power center from which his son Shō Hashi emerged. However, Shō Hashi and the next two kings, Shō Chū 尚忠 (r. 1440-1444) and Shō Shitatsu 尚思達 (r.

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1445-1449) are buried far away in Yomitan 読谷 **[B]** in central Okinawa.



The tomb of Oni-Ōgusuku lies beyond the sign warning of falling tree danger



Path to the tomb of Shō Hashi in Yomitan

Shō Kinpuku's 尚金福 (r. 1450-1453) tomb is in Urasoe 浦添, north of Naha **[C]**, but the remains of his younger brother, Shō Furi 尚布里 (dates uncertain) are in Fusato 富里 **[D]** near the Chinen Peninsula in southeast Okinawa. Shō Furi went to war with Kinpuku's son, Shō Shiro 尚志魯 (d. 1453 or 1454). This uncle-nephew war resulted in the destruction by fire of much of Shuri castle and the deaths of both parties, at least according to the official story. Archaeological evidence confirms severe castle damage, but the details of who was at war with whom and what exactly happened are

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murky. In any case, Shō Taikyū 尚泰久 (r. 1454-1460), whose precise relationship within the lineage not even the official histories agree upon, emerged to take the throne in the wake of the Furi-Shiro war.

Taikyū was almost certainly born in Goeku 越来 in central Okinawa, a son of the local warlord, and initially he was entombed in that area. However, his bones were moved several times, and in 1910 ended up far away, in Fusato **[E]** near Furi's tomb. Taikyū's daughter Momoto-fumiagari 百十踏揚 (d. ca. 1469-70), acclaimed in *Omoro* songs as a potent shamanic dancer, resides slightly north of Fusato, in Tamagusuku **[F]**. However, the remains of her husband, the powerful warrior Oni-Ōgusuku 鬼大城 (d. ca. 1469) are at Chibana Castle 知花城 **[G]** in the Goegku area, the homeland of Shō Taikyū. The last king of the dynasty, Shō Toku 尚徳 (r. 1461-1469), is portrayed in the official histories as both evil and fond of warfare. Such is the reputation of last kings in Confucian histories. His tomb is in the Uema 上間 district **[H]** on the outskirts of Naha, commanding a splendid view of the city below.



View of Naha from near the tomb of Shō Toku

There are reasons specific to each case that explain the location of the present tomb, and for some kings, past intermediate burials. Zooming out to the big picture, the dispersed tombs suggest that the era of the first Shō dynasty, and the transition to the second (roughly the fifteenth century), was a time of upheaval and warfare. Moreover, the dispersal of remains also suggests that not all of the members of the First Shō "dynasty" were biological relatives. Careful examination of other evidence including *Omoro* songs, a famous temple bell inscription, and the actions of several kings points to the same conclusion.

What were the origins of the second Shō dynasty?

The origin of the Second Shō dynasty is relatively obscure by comparison with the first. Its founder was Kanemaru 金丸 (also Kanamaru or Kanimaru), who seems to have been a close associate of Shō Taikyū. The official histories claim that Kanemaru came from the village of Shomi 諸見 on the tiny Island of Izena 伊是名, just to the north of Okinawa. More likely his immediate roots were in Nakijin 今帰仁, a power center in northern Okinawa. However, we know nothing of Kanemaru's family line even one generation before him.

Kanemaru apparently went into hiding in central Okinawa during Shō Toku's reign, but he re-emerged after his death, took the throne as Shō En 尚円 (r. 1469-1476), and killed the surviving members of Shō Toku's immediate family. Kanemaru's younger brother took the throne as Shō Sen'i 尚宣威 (r. 1477), but was soon killed in a coup that brought Kanemaru's son, Shō Shin, to the throne.

What are Ryukyu's official histories, and why are they problematic, especially for events prior to the sixteenth century?

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Ryukyu's official histories are *Chūzan seikan* 中山世鑑 (1650), *Sai Taku bon Chūzan seifu* 蔡鐸本中山世譜 (1701), *Sai On bon Chūzan seifu* 蔡温本中山世譜 (1725), and *Kyūyō* 球陽 (1745 and updated thereafter). *Chūzan seikan* (Mirror of Chūzan or Reflections on Chūzan) is written mostly in Japanese. *Sai Taku bon Chūzan seifu* is ostensibly a Chinese translation of *Chūzan seikan,* but it contains additional content. *Sai On bon Chūzan seifu* was a significant revision of the 1701 work, in part because Sai On had access to official Ming records that previous authors lacked. All of these works are organized with royal reigns as the major sections. *Kyūyō,* by contrast, although dated according to royal reigns, is a collection of articles about political, cultural, and technological matters.

The official histories functioned in part to present Ryukyu to the rest of East Asia. Although the individual works often differ in content, and the 1725 *Chūzan seifu* is relatively more skillful at dealing with problematic or complex matters, all of these works are based on a classical Chinese conception of history. This conception assumes that human affairs play out within a morally-attuned cosmos. The cosmos tends to reward morally correct behavior and punish evil behavior, even if not always immediately. History, therefore, becomes a morality play. Last kings of a line, for example, are always morally deficient and often depraved. Their moral deficiency is the reason that they were last kings, not because they were victims of circumstances beyond their control. King Shō Toku, for example, could not have been anything but evil in this view. Similarly, the official histories portray Kanemaru's seizure of power and enthronement as Shō En as a morally upright deed, not victory in a power struggle. First kings are almost always successful in taking the throne mainly because of their virtue, which makes military success possible.

In addition to inherent biases, the official histories reflect the paucity of sources that I described toward the start of this article. *Chūzan seikan* compiler Shō Shōken 向象賢 (1615-1675) was part of the first generation of elite Okinawans able to engage both Chinese and Japanese literary culture with sophistication. In the introduction, Shō Shōken explains that he created the work after interviewing elderly officials. In other words, the first official history relies on legendary material for most domestic events prior to the sixteenth century, and later histories built on the framework *Chūzan seikan* established.

For these reasons and others, I wrote *Maritime Ryukyu* without relying on the official histories for material prior to the sixteenth century. Moreover, my approach was to be suspicious of any claim made in the official histories that could not be corroborated by some kind of external evidence. From the sixteenth century onward, such evidence becomes more plentiful. Within this skeptical context, I also read the official histories comparatively and against the grain.

Why did the Ryukyu empire and the Shimazu domain go to war in 1609?

Broad historical trends played a part in engendering the conflict. To mention one of them, early Ryukyuan rulers (known in Japan as *yononushi* 世の主; recall that "king" was a Chinese title) developed cordial relations with the Ashikaga shoguns and Sakai merchants throughout the fifteenth century. The Ashikaga shoguns valued Ryukyu as a conduit for exotic goods and expected little in the way of formal diplomacy from Ryukyuans who traveled to the Kyoto area. As the shogunate faded into obscurity circa the 1550s, under pressure, Ryukyu initiated formal diplomatic relations with the Shimazu lords of southern Kyushu. Prior experience dealing with the Ashikaga shogunate had not prepared Ryukyuans for the much more demanding world of Sengoku era

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samurai diplomacy. Ryukyu, in effect, had stumbled into the major leagues of Japanese diplomacy at the same time that its wealth was sharply diminishing in the wake of Ming dynasty relaxation of the Maritime Prohibitions. The result was a series of tense and difficult embassies from Ryukyu to Shimazu. There were many other background factors, including severe factional struggles within Okinawa and even an armed revolt during the 1590s.

In addition to these broad trends, specific decisions and pressures also propelled each side toward war. For example, soon after the Tokugawa bakufu came to power, the Shimazu lords came under pressure to enlist Ryukyu as a diplomatic go-between to facilitate a possible trade agreement between the Ming court and the bakufu. During the first decade of the seventeenth century, King Shō Nei repeatedly refused requests, which became demands, that he use his good offices in this way. Why? The reasons are connected with the complex events connected with warfare in Kyushu, the rise to power of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Ryukyu's roles in Hideyoshi's invasion of the continent.

Did Ryukyu become part of Japan following the 1609 warfare?

The war ended badly for Ryukyu. Although it took a few years after 1609 for the details to get sorted out, the Ryukyu empire became a de facto part of the Shimazu domain. Under Shimazu auspices, Ryukyu's court sent 18 official missions to the Shogun's court in Edo between 1634, and 1850. Occasionally, recent and contemporary accounts of modern Okinawan history claim that Ryukyu was an "independent kingdom" prior to 1879. Ryukyu possessed limited autonomy after 1609, but it was not independent.

Notice my wording: soon after 1609, Ryukyu became part of the Shimazu domain. For that very reason, Ryukyu became cut off from the rest of Japan. Specifically, the Shimazu rulers incorporated the northern Ryukyu islands into their direct holdings. They took the islands from Okinawa southward and created the *appearance* of an independent kingdom for the purposes of creating a conduit to China. Initially, Ming officials were highly suspicious of post 1609 Ryukyu. Although they were not aware of the details of Shimazu-Ryukyu relations, they knew that Ryukyu was under "Japanese" control. Ming officials therefore resisted the resumption of China-Ryukyu tributary relations. Gradually, however, a regular tribute schedule resumed. During the Qing dynasty, some Chinese officials and envoys were aware of Ryukyu's status as subordinate to Japan, but they chose to look the other way. Anxious about endangering ties with China, Ryukyuan officials became vigilant about Ryukyu appearing independent in the eyes of the Qing court. It was because of the need to appear interdependent to maintain ties with China that early modern Ryukyu was able to carve out some autonomy.[7]

This process of creating the appearance of an independent kingdom included de-Japanification policies imposed by the Shimazu overlords and enforced by Ryukyuan officials. (As a simple example, the common component "Yamato" disappeared from male childhood names early in the seventeenth century.) One important point to keep in mind is that prior to 1609, although Ryukyu was not part of any Japanese state, culturally and economically it was closely tied to Japan and had long been so. The combination of de-Japanification policies and, more importantly, Shimazu's closing off of Ryukyu to the rest of Japan except under limited and highly controlled conditions, accelerated the creation of a distinctive Ryukyuan cultural identity. The many *wajin* 倭人 (Japanese and hybrid Japanese people) residing in Ryukyu became Ryukyuans from the 1620s onward.

Notice that this question is quite complex. In

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terms of people and culture, it would make sense to say that Ryukyu was a frontier region of Japan until 1609. Soon thereafter, free travel between the reconfigured "Ryukyu kingdom" and other parts of Japan came to an end. The small number of Ryukyuans who visited Japan during the early modern era did so in highly orchestrated official settings. This period of relative isolation vis-à-vis Japan helped set the stage for the painful process of Okinawan assimilation into Japan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What are some potentially fruitful directions for future research?

Maritime Ryukyu covers the period 1050-1650, albeit with some excursions into later history for perspective. What would the history of this same period, or perhaps shifted a few centuries closer to the present, look like from the standpoint of, for example, the harbor of Yamatohama 大和浜 in Amami-Ōshima? Although the village of Yamatohama is small today, it was sufficiently prominent in 1609 to be one of three landing places of the Shimazu fleet in its conquest of the island. "Ryukyuan" history would look much different from Yamatohama, or any other port outside of Okinawa, compared with the view from Shuri-Naha. I am not recommending narrow histories of small localities. Instead, what I am suggesting is histories of larger regions from local, non-Shuri perspectives. The power of Shuri would, of course, still be felt in each locality, but our understanding of the region would benefit from changes in perspective.

Technology plays an important role in the pages of *Maritime Ryukyu*. Shipbuilding and navigation are obvious examples, but perhaps even more important was metalworking. Blacksmiths play crucial roles in the legendary biographies of early Ryukyuan rulers. Many Ryukyuan deities originated as legendary blacksmiths from Yamato who enriched some locality by bringing tools (weapons or hoes and other agricultural implements) and knowhow. Metalworking in southern Okinawa and the iron industry in Kumejima were major factors in both warfare and in economic prosperity. Moreover, in part a legacy of Ryukyu's *wakō* roots and in part because of water resource constraints in many parts of the Ryukuyu islands, control of water resources was the classic mark of a potent ruler Ryukyu. These and other technologies became especially crucial after 1609, when Ryukyu increasingly had to rely on its own resources. Another useful direction for research, therefore, would be studies that combine environmental history with the history of technology.

Maritime Ryukyu attempts to answer many questions, but it also highlights areas for future inquiry. It is my hope that the book will suggest new approaches and topics for future research.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Yoshinari Naoki and Fuku Hiromi, *Ryūkyū ōkoku tanjō: Amami shotō shi kara* 琉球王国誕生：奄美諸島史から (Birth of the Ryukyu kingdom: from the history of the Amami islands), Shinwasha, 2007.
[2] George H. Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People,* Rev. ed. (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2000).
[3] For a thorough summary of recent findings in Ryukyuan archaeology, see Richard Pearson, *Ancient Ryukyu: An Archaeological Study of Island Communities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).
[4] Miyanaga Masamori, "Waga kodaigo to Ryūkyūgo to no hikaku" 我が古代語と琉球語との比較, in *Shigaku* 史学, vol. 3, no. 3 (September, 1924): 64. It is possible that *nishi* meaning north indeed derived from *inishi* meaning the past, but this point is not certain.
[5] Tanigawa Ken'ichi, *Yomigaeru kaijō no michi, Nihon to Ryūkyū* 甦る海上の道・日本と琉球 (Bungei shunjū, 2007), section title "Kita no bunka no shōgeki" 北の文化の衝撃, pp. 222–225.
[6] Founded in 1405, the Sultanate of Sulu included islands in the Sulu Archipelago, parts of Mindanao, and portions of Palawan and NE Borneo.
[7] For a close examination of the complexities of Ryukyuan diplomacy within East Asia and the world during the nineteenth century, see Marco Tinello, "A New Interpretation of the Bakufu's Refusal to Open the Ryukyus to Commodore Perry," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus,* Volume 16, Issue 17, Number 3 (September 1, 2018).

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