

The critical limits of the national community: The ryukyuan subject

Tomiyama, author

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Abstrak

This paper re-examines the concept of 'the Japanese' as a national community by investigating the development of the thinking of native Okinawan anthropologist Ifa Fuyu in his lifelong attempt to answer the question 'Who are the Ryukyuan?' With the launching of anthropological field surveys as part and parcel of Japanese territorial expansion, which began in the late-nineteenth century, Japanese anthropologists began to engage in their task of emphasizing the uniformity or the comprehensibility of the concept, 'the Japanese'. Deeply sceptical about this trend, Ifa continued to search for the 'self-identity' of the Ryukyuanans, while collaborating with the visiting anthropologist Torii Ruyuzo as his assistant/informant. The inquiry led Ifa to insist upon the 'uniqueness' of the Ryukyuanans, on the one hand, while proposing, on the other, the concept of 'a common ancestor, a great nation', one that transcends academic typology about the commonalities or differences between the Japanese and Ryukyuanans. Subsequently, in the 1910s, Ifa moved on to explicate the uniqueness of Ryukyuan history. In the wake of the sagoyashi (sago palm) crisis of the 1920s, however, Ifa switched to a standpoint that regards the Ryukyuanans as the 'Southern Islanders', and based on this new perspective he began to assert, on the one hand, that the Ryukyuanans are a branch line of Japanese descendants, while emphasizing, on the other, the exoticism, primitiveness, and 'Seiban' elements characteristic of the Ryukyuanans as against the Japanese. What motivated these changes in Ifa's viewpoint? The paper probes for an answer by drawing insights from the controversy between Franz Fanon and Octave Mannoni on the psychological relations between the colonizer and the colonized, and, moreover, by trying to peer inside the pondering Ifa, a Ryukyuan, fixed on the psychologically puzzling question of 'Who am I?' And through these inquiries, the paper attempts to put the concept of 'the Japanese' as a national community in a fresh perspective.