Media Constructions of Okinawa as a 'Different Japan': A Postcolonial Struggle about Representation

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Introduction

Okinawa—Japan's southernmost prefecture—for a long time has had a very negative image in Japan. In the 1990s, though, a downright Okinawa boom took hold of Japanese popular culture and mass media, and more positive images of Okinawa began to spread on a large scale. These, however, are being increasingly criticized for heavily relying on exoticism and stereotypes, thus commodifying Okinawa as an exotic, peaceful island paradise bringing *iyashi*, or a healing experience, to its Japanese visitors—while, at the same time, ignoring Okinawa's conflictual relation to the Japanese main islands and the problematic living conditions in the Prefecture (which first and foremost derive from the Pacific War and the subsequent U.S. occupation). On the other hand, representations of a specific 'Okinawan-ness' by *Okinawan* intellectuals, writers, filmmakers etc. have increased since the mid-1990s; these tend to criticize and subvert Japanese conceptions of Okinawa which primarily focus on a soft sell. Today, I would like to take a closer look at four examples of such counter-discourses: the film "Untama Girû" by independent Okinawan filmmaker Takamine Gô, the television comedy series "Okinawa obâ retsuden", the horror movie "Akôkurô" (2007) and the television superhero series "Ryûjin mabuyâ" (2008). In doing so, I will

1) focus on the themes and narrative modes in these media productions,

2) ask how they can be explained within the theoretical frame of postcolonialism and

3) show how they are part of an ongoing struggle about representation in which unequal power relations between the (ex?) colonizer (Japan) and the (ex?) colonized (Okinawa) are reflected.

The central questions will thus be: What kind of narrative strategies are employed to express resistance against Japanese mainstream media images of Okinawa—and, is it possible to tell 'different stories' in 'different ways' at all (as is the main impetus of most postcolonial expression)?

1. Background: The relation between Okinawa and Japan

Strictly speaking, Okinawa has only been part of the Japanese nation-state for about 100 years altogether: In 1879, the then Ryûkyû Kingdom was annexed by Japan and integrated into the modern Japanese state as Okinawa Prefecture. In 1945, the Battle of Okinawa[1] divided the islands from Japan again: After the end of the Pacific War, Okinawa was put under U.S. occupation 20 years longer than the Japanese main islands and reverted to Japan as late as 1972.

The process in which the Ryûkyû Kingdom was turned into a part of Japan is referred to as "annexation" or as "colonization" by critical Japanese scholars like, for example, Taira Kôji (1997), Uemura Hideaki (2003) or Oguma Eiji (2006 [1998]). Even though the Okinawan population by the turn of the 20th century had turned into Japanese citizens, they were *not* being acknowledged as being 'real Japanese': While Japan constructed itself as a modern and civilized state, the Okinawans were perceived as being backward, poor, uncultivated, lazy, uneducated, and hedonistic. The cultural differences which were ascribed to the Okinawan population were clearly interpreted as "marks of inferiority" (Hein and Selden 2003, 10).

However, the negative image of Okinawa has undergone a massive change in the past decades (especially since the first tourism campaigns were launched in the 1970s, shortly after Okinawa's reversion to Japan). At present, Okinawan 'difference' is being conceived positively and marketed (and consumed) accordingly. Okinawan music and food have come into vogue; and from the 1990s onwards, Okinawa has served as an exotic setting in a continuously growing number of films, literary works, and, since the year 2000, even television series.[2]

2. Images of Okinawa in Japanese mainstream media

Popular Japanese media productions as well as popular literature usually employ a certain set of elements from Okinawan everyday culture (e.g. the exotic food) and folklore to visualize its 'otherness'. Often, a light dose of so-called *uchinâguchi* (the Okinawan local language)—accompanied by explanations for a Japanese audience—is used to distinguish Okinawa from Japan. Okinawa is constructed as a place where spirituality and 'traditions' are kept alive, like, for example, special forms of ancestor worship or certain rituals performed by female shamans called *yuta*.

Moreover, Okinawa seems to be characterized by constant musical and festive activities; it is represented as a place inhabited by "cheerful and nice Okinawan people who enjoy singing, dancing and drinking" (Kô 2006, 156). The Okinawan characters are frequently depicted as relaxed, natural, informal, simple-hearted, and innocent. Communal structures (the village, the family) are still intact. In these recent media productions and literary works,

life in Okinawa seems to proceed snugly and unhurriedly. Okinawa is constructed as a peaceful island paradise consisting of exotic vegetation, blue seas and white beaches—the fact that the landscape is largely dominated by military bases and endangered by Japanese construction projects is completely ignored. Okinawa is thus depicted as an "'eternally festive place' from which the people of mainland Japan seek comfort and onto which they project their nostalgia for a utopian vision of Japan's pre-modernity" (Kô 2006, 157).

Okinawa is thus being functionalized for Japan's interests, whereas the basic tenor is one of nostalgia (*natsukashisa*): Japan, which usually is equated with the Tôkyô metropolitan area, stands for modernity and symbolizes coldness—including the aspect of interpersonal relationships—whereas in Okinawa (and in the Okinawan characters) something that Japan has assumedly lost is preserved. Okinawa obviously is conceptualized as counter-image of a Japan which has been distorted by hyper-modernization.

Interestingly, in some examples Okinawan culture is also constructed as a mix of Okinawan, Japanese, other Asian and even Western (U.S. American) elements. At first glance this seems to hint towards the concept of hybridity, if understood as "everything which owes its existence to the mixing of traditions […] everything that results from the techniques of *collage* and *sampling*" (Bronfen and Marius 1997, 14, my translation). However, the Okinawan cultural mix as expressed for example in Nakae Yūji's films such as *Nabbi no koi* (Nabbi's love, 1999) or *Hotel Hibiscus* (2003) hardly seems to be more than a trendy accessory. After all, Okinawa's quasi-colonial past and the present consequences are kept as a blind spot. Kô Mika therefore draws the following conclusion: "In his [Nakae Yûki's] films, Okinawa is enjoyed and consumed—offering comfort and reassurance rather than disturbance" (Kô 2010, 88).

3. Change of perspective: Media productions from Okinawa as part of postcolonial counter discourse

On the other hand, media representations of Okinawa which happen to be produced by *Okinawan* intellectuals, writers and filmmakers, seem to be much more complicated to grasp in their meaning.

(1) "Untama Girû" (1989) by Takamine Gô

One very good example are the independent films of Takamine Gô—who was born in 1948 on Ishigaki, a small Okinawan island, and has been living and working in Kyôto since the 1970s.[3] Takamine is well-known for his radical use of the Okinawan language which he does *not* accommodate for a Japanese audience. The dialogues in his films are completely kept in *uchinâguchi* and, consequently, have to be subtitled throughout. Often languages also change between Japanese, *uchinâguchi* and English, sometimes even Taiwanese.

The title of his 1989 film "Untama Girû" refers to a famous Okinawan folk hero who, like Robin Hood, was robbing from the Rich and giving to the Poor. Takamine's film is set shortly before Okinawa's reversion to Japan. The protagonist Girû works in a sugar cane refinery and, in the course of events, has to hide in the Untama forest where he is turned into Untama Girû and equipped with supernatural powers. Subsequently, he starts to support the Okinawan independence party in their fight against the US occupation, and he also steals weapons from the US base in Kadena and hands them over to a local resistance group. In the end, though, Untama Girû is hit by a spear through his forehead and subsequently wanders about numbly; the Okinawan population wonders whether he is dead or alive. The protagonist thus can be seen as an allegory for the power of resistance and, at the same time, its loss.

In his films, Takamine addresses the possibility of political independence for Okinawa (in "Untama Girû", but also in "Mugen Ryûkyû Tsuru Henry", 1999). He puts into question the necessity of Okinawa's 'reversion' to Japan after the occupation period (in "Untama Girû" or "Paradise View", 1985) and lets some of his characters take part in active, sometimes even armed resistance against American as well as Japanese dominance (e.g. in "Untama Girû"). In doing so, he does not only reflect on unequal power relations between Okinawa and Japan or the USA; he also addresses differences, prejudice and discrimination within Okinawan society itself.

According to Takamine, Okinawan experience cannot be represented within linear structures. That is why he expresses his versions of Okinawan reality as collages and networks of intertwined storylines, languages, media texts, perspectives, pictures and sounds (cf. Kô 2010, 107). In his films, he often adopts the technique of "film in film", "theater play in film" or "dreams in film". By mixing and weaving together different narrative levels—he equals this narrative style to the Okinawan *gajumaru* (banyan) tree with its intertwined branches and twigs—boundaries begin to blur: between reality and fiction, subject and object, center and periphery, offender and victim (cf. Koshikawa 2008, 120). Thus, Takamine seems to deny the idea that something like an "authentic, singular Okina-wan-ness" does exist (Kô 2010, 91). He very deliberately avoids making Okinawa understand- and consumable. Instead, his film-experiments become spaces in which many different perspectives from Okinawa and possible ways to look at Okinawa can unfold. This technique is very much in line with postcolonial literature and film, which is all about reviving the voices that got lost and suppressed by colonization—and thus aims at giving room to *the colonized themselves* to express *their* points of view. It is about telling '*other/different* stories' (than the ones passed down by the dominant groups) in '*other/different* ways'. By writing from a different position—that of the colonized—the marginal starts to move towards the center. Takamine shows, moreover, that different realities can actually exist

side by side. He uncovers inner conflicts, ruptures and contradictions; ambivalences persist until the end and do not get resolved.

The narrative strategy Takamine employs can be identified as magical realism: The past is part of the present, stories are always parts of other stories, myth and reality permeate each other, and the fantastic is just a very normal part of everyday life. According to literary theory, magical realism opposes dominant systems by challenging established notions of a rationally (or, scientifically) comprehensible reality, *one* truth and a stable, unchanging identity, which defines itself through the differentiation from an 'other'. The magical-realist narrative mode can thus be understood as an attack of minority groups (or formerly colonized people, in this case the Okinawans) against the self-conceptions of the dominant culture (here Japan). By creating Okinawa as a 'different space', Takamine turns against the dominant notion of a culturally homogeneous Japan—and, in addition, his magical realism can be understood as a strategy by which he tries to permeate the dominant Okinawa discourse in Japan in order to change it from the inside.

(2) "Okinawa obâ retsuden" (2005): The comical and the deconstruction of Okinawa stereotypes

A very different strategy of deconstructing dominant Okinawa stereotypes can be detected in the television comedy series *Okinawa obâ retsuden* ("Serialized stories of Okinawan grannies") which is based upon an essay collection by Nakamura Kiyoshi.[4] The TV series was broadcast in 30 minutes sequels from May to December 2005—at first by Yomiuri Terebi's night program in the Kansai region and only later in Okinawa as well.[5] The series was produced by Tamaki Mitsuru, actor and leader of an Okinawan comedy-group.[6]

The protagonist of *Okinawa obâ retsuden*, 79 year old grandmother Kinjô Kamadô (who is played by the very poorly disguised male comedian Yamada Rikiya) guides the viewer through the series, giving all kinds of different explanations about Okinawa. She is an unreliable informant, though, who exaggerates, tells lies, makes fun of the Japanese characters she encounters in several episodes and does *not* fulfill the expectations directed towards her as a 'typical' and 'authentic' representative of Okinawa. She, for example, refuses to eat *goya* (or bittermelon) *chanpurû*, a national dish in Okinawa, which, in nearly all documentary films about Okinawa, is made responsible for the high life expectancy on the islands. In the episode „Obâryûgi no Okinawa ryôri" ("Okinawan dishes obâ style"; disc 3, episode 4), a cooking show very much in line with this very popular format in Japanese television, the *obâ* uses only convenience food and ready-made products from the supermarket. Asked by her Japanese assistant she explains that this is much more comfortable than using fresh products and much safer than having to use a potentially

dangerous kitchen knife. Here it is made clear that not all Okinawans behave according to 'traditions', and 'Okinawa-ness' is being unmasked as a Japanese projection.

The strategy to scatter false information among the many different explanations of "things Okinawan" plays with the Japanese characters' exoticising attitudes and their expectations that everything in Okinawa is supposed to have a special (and maybe even mystic) meaning. The fact that the *obâ* is joking and telling a bunch of lies makes the other characters (as well as the audience) become doubtful and, at the same time, it demonstrates that not everything about Okinawa can and needs to be explained.

Another means frequently used in this production is that of exaggeration. The episode "Obâ no yuntaku hantaku shô" ("Granny's chat show") can serve as a good example here. It imitates the most popular Japanese TV formats such as news and variety shows, cooking shows, language programs, etc. This is interrupted several times by always the same TV commercial, advertising three 'typical Okinawan' products: *sâtâ andâgî* (a kind of doughnut), *kurozato* (brown sugar) and *sanpincha* (jasmine tea). As the episode proceeds, this commercial appears again and again with ever increasing frequency, it is sampled, played back- and forward, fast forwarded etc. Thus, the stereotypical and essentializing character of these elements of 'Okinawan-ness' is being unmasked drastically, but at the same time in a highly entertaining way. Ultimately, it is made clear that trying to grasp Okinawa in terms of such one-dimensional stereotypes is downright nonsense.

Last but not least, the series operates with the technique of reversing perspectives. The episode "Ushi mo yagi mo obâ tomodachi" ("Cows and goats are granny's friends"; disc 1, episode 4) begins at the city hall, where a young man from the Japanese main islands wants to register as a new resident in Okinawa. The clerk, one after another, calls the names of the waiting elderly people: Henna Ushi and Yagi Nabe. To the ears of the Japanese character, this sounds like *hen na ushi* ("strange cow") and *yaginabe* ("goat soup"), and he is shocked by these 'odd' names. The *obâ* who's sitting next to him now explains that these are just regular, traditional Okinawan names. Next, the Japanese himself is getting called to the counter. The second the waiting crowd hears his name—Suzuki Gonzaemon—, they start roaring with laughter, because this sounds so strangely Japanese and old-fashioned to them. So, in the beginning of this episode, Okinawa is presented as 'other' from the point of view of the Japanese character; in the end, though, this 'otherness' is being mirrored back to himself by demonstrating that the 'Japanese', from an Okinawan point of view, does not appear less strange, or exotic, than vice versa.

One very dominant part of everyday life in Okinawa is the massive presence of the many US military bases which also keep memories of the Battle of Okinawa alive. It is exactly this fact which is being kept a blind spot in popular Japanese media productions. In *Okinawa obâ retsuden*, though, the war is addressed several times, and the huge enclosed military base

areas are show again and again. Is is clearly no coincidence that the series is set in Okinawa-City, the former Koza, where Kadena is located—which, with its almost 20,000 personnel is the biggest US airbase in the whole Asia-Pacific region. Actually, the *obâ* guides a Japanese tourist through the streets along the base, by which it gets the same significance as other '*traditional* Okinawan' sights.

The comical elements in *Okinawa obâ retsuden* are used to raise awareness that the dominant Okinawa discourse is nothing more than a set of stereotypes. The production has a chaotic, anarchic tinge to it and thus might be interpreted as carnivalesque—as a means to point at problems and inequalities from a non-privileged perspective, from within a fixed, agreed-upon frame, and to temporarily turn established hierarchies upside-down.

The series makes use of well-known narrative patterns (such as popular Japanese television show formats), but puts them into new (comical) contexts and thus changes their meaning. Here, a kind of postcolonial mimicry might be at work, which imitates the cultural forms of the center of power (in this case the Japanese main islands), but, in doing so, highlights the ambivalence of colonial discourse and thus subverts its authority.

(3) Examples for postcolonial mimicry

Similar strategies of mimicry can be found in several other recent productions by Okinawan filmmakers as well. Only two very interesting examples are the film "Akôkurô" (2007), directed by Kishimoto Tsukasa, and the very successful television series "Ryûjin mabuyâ" (2008). "Akôkurô"[7] is a horror movie which takes up and reverts the omnipresent motif of *iyashi*. The female Japanese protagonist tries to overcome a trauma in Okinawa— but in the course of events, the peacefulness of Okinawa dissolves and is replaced by loneliness, fear, violence and death. Katô thus states that the film is an "*iyashi no shippai monogatari*"—the story of a failed search for *iyashi* (Katô 2009, 104). The character of the *kijimunâ* (a spirit of the forest), which in many media productions serves as a stereotype which is used to highlight the distinctness of Okinawan culture, is treated in a similar way: Step by step, it turns from a friendly and helping existence into a vengeful monster. The common picture of Okinawa as a slow-life island paradise gets utterly destroyed. It was in fact the declared intention of film director Kishimoto to break with the stereotypical bright and merry image of Okinawa and replace it with something radically different. He states in an interview that he didn't want to stage an artificial Okinawa; he rather aimed at constructing Okinawa without exoticizing it, without defining it as 'culturally different' (Kishimoto 2007). The narrating strategy can be interpreted as postcolonial mimicry because the established cultural form of the horror movie is taken up while, at the same time, it is used to thwart the usual stereotypical depictions of Okinawa.

The television series "Ryûjin mabuyâ" was first broadcast from October to December 2008

by the Okinawan regional TV channel Ryûkyû Hôsô, before it could also be watched on the Japanese main islands: In 2009 it was aired by BS 11, and in 2011 by Yomiuri terebi, TOKYO MX and Sapporo terebi hôsô. Since 2011 a *manga* version by Maruyama Tetsuhiro is being published in the magazine *Shûkan shônen chanpion*, and a film version directed by Sano Tomoki was realized the same year. In 2010 and 2011, two more seasons of the series were produced and immediately aired nationwide.

The production formally imitates the *tokusatsu* or "superhero" genre which can be traced back to the prototypical "Ultraman" (1966). It follows a formulaic structure which is repeated in every episode: In "Ultraman", Japanese society is threatened by the forces of evil (usually in the shape of different extra-terrestrial life forms). Ultraman (and his combatants) fights for Japan, and ultimately the enemies are defeated and social order is restored. "Ryûjin Mabuyâ" makes slight changes to this pattern: What is threatened here is Okinawan society—or, to be more precise, 'typical' Okinawan characteristics and values. The series also adds a love story between the hero and a young woman to this formula and, at the same time, takes up the stereotypical elements of conventional Okinawa constructions—like the blue sky, the sea, scenic sunsets and popular characters such as the *obâ*. The story is very simple: The antagonists' leader, Habu Dêbiru, plans to obtain nine so-called *mabui stones* in order to destroy Okinawa. Each of these stones symbolizes a certain characteristic of Okinawa (and, at the same time, a stereotype), like, for example, the regional language, the population's peacefulness, a long and healthy life, or respect for one's ancestors. Shortly before the group around Habu Dêbiru appears for the first time, the series' protagonist Kanai is being seized by the ghost of Ryûjin Mabuyâ, the guardian of the nine stones. He subsequently transmutes into a green superhero every time Habu Dêbiru and his followers manage to acquire another *mabui stone*. In the ensuing fights, Kanai/Ryûjin Mabuyâ wins them back one after the other. When the final crisis occurs—Habu Dêbiru's group is in possession of all nine *mabui stones*, and consequently all Okinawans are turned into mind- and spiritless creatures—, Ryûjin Mabuyâ fights for a last time and manages to restore 'normality' in Okinawa; the 'bad' characters either disappear or are being assimilated by 'Okinawanness'.

In the original superhero productions, the threat to society usually comes from outside:

> … society is presented as healthy and stable, but threatened by inhuman, usually outside forces. In *Ultraman*, the aim of the invaders is not simply to control and alter society, but to destroy it. […] When Ultraman ultimately succeeds in defeating the monster-of-the-week, society is not advanced or improved or moved in some new direction, but is returned to stasis, the status quo preserved. (Siegel 1985, 259)

The message which is being transported here is a very conservative one: "foreign influence must be neutralized" (Siegel 1985, 259), and social values have to be preserved (Siegel 1985, 260). In "Ryûjin Mabuyâ", though, the enemies do not come from outside but actually are visualized as parts of Okinawan nature: The group of antagonists consists of a poisonous *habu* snake, two spiders, a mungo and a crown-of-thorns starfish. Moreover, even though Ryûjin Mabuyâ fights again and again for 'typical' things Okinawan, he often does not even know their meaning—and sometimes the characters ask themselves whether the respective characteristic is even worth being saved.

Interestingly, Japan is not mentioned at all throughout the whole series. Okinawa is thus not constructed against Japan, as is the case in more conventional media productions. The struggle between Ryûjin Mabuyâ and his antagonists seems to be about conflicts within Okinawa itself, a clash between different sets of values: the keeping up of traditions (whose meanings ironically are unclear to their defenders) and the notion of a peaceful, harmonious Okinawa as opposed to a rougher, more aggressive Okinawa, which nevertheless is not unsympathetic and by no means a real threat.

Conclusion

What kinds of conclusions can be drawn from this? From a Japanese point of view, Okinawa is represented as exotic other. Popular media constructions of Okinawa express a nostalgic longing for assumedly lost values. They have to be understood within the broader context of a more general search for *iyashi*—"emotional healing"—from the negative effects of Japanese hyper-modernity. These media productions neither touch upon the past colonialism, nor do they reveal today's (post-) colonial, unequal power relations between Japan and Okinawa.

Constructions of Okinawa by Okinawan intellectuals, artists and filmmakers, on the other hand, are more complicated to grasp in their meaning, since they experiment with representing Okinawa multi-dimensionally and from multiple perspectives. Here, controversial topics are taken up, which are ignored in the dominant discourse—such as the effects the Pacific War and the Battle of Okinawa still have onto the present.

The hegemonic discourse on Okinawa as an exotic, 'different Japan' seems to be monopolized by Japanese mass media. On the other hand, counter-discourses—the expression of minor voices—can mostly be found in *different* kinds of media such as independent film or, if one looks at the realm of literature, in smaller literary works by less known Okinawan authors. These images of Okinawa do *not* have access to the popular market and thus are much less present than Japanese mainstream media productions. Critical voices still seem to be ignored and their expression continues to be limited to certain sectors of the media which are only able to reach a small audience. The case of "Ryûjin

Mabuyâ", though, might hint towards a new direction: Here we have an Okinawan production which is playfully experimenting with established Okinawan stereotypes but, at the same time, was able to enter Japanese popular culture on a large scale. This might anticipate a possible future development, in the course of which Okinawan media texts might actually become part of the Japanese cultural canon.

Notes

1 The Battle of Okinawa (April - June 1945) left dead 237.318 civilians and soldiers on both sides.

2 Examples are the morning series *Churasan* (produced by NHK, 2001) as well as the TV series *Dr. Kotô shinryōjo* [Dr. Kotô's clinic] (Fuji 2004 and 2006), *Ruri no shima* [Ruri's island] (NTV, 2005), and *Honjitsumo hare. Ijônashi* [Nice weather again today. No special incidents] (TBS, 2009).

3 Takamine went to Kyôto with a government scholarship in 1968 and since then hasn't lived in Okinawa anymore.

4 The essay collection was published in the year 2000 under the same title.

5 Meanwhile, a DVD box can also be purchased.

6 The group is called "Tamaki Mitsuru Shôchiku Kagekidan" ("Tamaki Mitsuru's radical laughter-production"). Tamaki, by the way, was elected member of the Okinawan prefectural assembly in 2008 and, since then, is also active as a politician.

7 In the regional Okinawan language, the term "*akôkurô*" means "dusk" or "twilight". According to Okinawan popular belief, this is the time of day when the *majimun* (ghosts or demons) make their appearance (cf. Kishimoto 2007).

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