

The view from the islands

This article aims to present an alternative way to see the borderland beyond national boundaries.¹ Through the case of the Ogasawara Islands, it explicates 'the view from the islands' that contests with the concept of the border defined by the nation-state. Just like many places in so-called borderland regions, the Ogasawara Islands have been marginalized and militarized for many years, and a major military base of Japan Self-Defense Forces still remains there. From the point of view of the state, it is crucial to militarily secure these islands, which lie on the edge of Japanese territory, for reasons of defense. However, in the islanders' view, Ogasawara has never been located at the periphery of one single nation, preserving its own expanding locus towards many others. To clarify this view from the islands, the article suggests utilizing music and dance, vital media to illustrate human bonds that transcend national borders. Ogasawara musical culture exemplifies multiple connections of the islands with other places and peoples, and suggests an alternative vision of the borderland that celebrates crossing, mobility, and trans-border networks.

Masaya Shishikura

Below:
Students' hula
performance at the
annual Ogasawara
hula festival 'Ohana
2011. Photo by
the author.



Musical crossings of the Ogasawara Islands

Military history

Located in the Pacific Ocean south of Japan, the Ogasawara Islands (or 'Bonin Islands' in English) have been continuously marginalized by different political regimes. Five Westerners and some 20 people from Hawai'i first settled in the uninhabited islands of Ogasawara in 1830, and were later followed by more migrants from Western countries as well as Micronesia. Since then, the island people have suffered various political manipulations and militarization. For instance, when the Japanese government began its colonial scheme of Ogasawara, the Westerner/Pacific Islander residents were forced to be Japanese *shinmin* ('obedient citizens'), and yet were labeled and marginalized as *ijin* (literally meaning 'different people,' but has connotation of 'aliens'). During the Pacific War (1941-45), the islands were fortified against the impending US military campaign; one of the islands Iwo Tō ('Iwo Jima' in English) became the place for the fierce Battle of Iwo Jima (19 February-26 March 1945). All the civilians were forced to evacuate to the unfamiliar land of mainland Japan, and to live desperate hand to mouth existences. Then, after the war, the US Navy took control of Ogasawara, together with Okinawa, Amami, Tokara, and other islands in Micronesia, and allowed only Western descendants to return to the islands.² The Japanese settlers of the islands were excluded from their home and became refugees in mainland Japan. During this period, against the Japanese non-nuclear policy, the US Navy deployed nuclear weapons on the islands of Chichi Jima and Iwo Tō.³ In 1968, the islands were returned to Japanese administration. The reversion again troubled the Western descendants, who experienced difficulties and discrimination with the newly introduced social system. Today, the Ogasawara Islands are basically safe and at peace, but some social problems due to the fringed locality still remain unresolved. For instance, after the reversion, the Japanese government maintained the island of Iwo Tō for military and other strategic purposes. So, the former Iwo Tō residents are still unable to return to the island even after 70 years; many who remained in exile died amidst nostalgia for home.

Militarization and marginalization of Ogasawara also appear in the politics of memory. Again, the island of Iwo Tō is a good example. Since the Pacific War, a substantial number of records about the Battle of Iwo Jima has been collected, including detailed statistics of the battle and strategies against the US military campaign. Yet little is known today about daily life on the island before the war; it is acknowledged, however, that the unique lifestyle and cultural activities were closely associated with the locality and landscape. For instance, as there was no stream or pond for fresh water on the island of Iwo Tō, the people collected rainwater in huge tanks, in which goldfish were released to remove wigglers. Interestingly, there was little need to provide water for farms, which obtained enough moisture from the morning dew caused by the temperature differences between day and night. There were also rich and diverse cultural activities, including *bon* dance conventions during summertime, *sumō* wrestling tournaments dedicated to the Iwo Tō shrine, film viewing in the elementary school's courtyard, and dance events derived from Micronesia where many Iwo Tō islanders worked before the Pacific War. Former Iwo Tō residents, who currently live in Chichi Jima, Ogasawara, revealed these facts during interviews.⁴ Interestingly, they all confessed to finding it difficult to recollect past stories without friends and family with whom to share memories

of pre-war Iwo Tō life, and who constitute the missing link in their narratives. Today, the airbase of the Japan Self-Defense Forces occupies most of the past Motoyama district, which was previously the largest residential area, in ironic representation of how the politics of memory acts.

Dynamic 'frontier'

The case of Iwo Tō is an extreme example, but the Ogasawara Islands too remain on the periphery of Japan within the conventional nation-state gaze. Within broader national discourses, the borderland is often located in a subordinate position, which is manipulated and militarized to accommodate a national ideology and security policy. To overcome this unequal status in politics, historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki proposes the "view from the frontier" that contests with the concept of national border.⁵ The national border is the line that must be protected by the law and forces, otherwise it could be overrun. As appears in this Focus of the Newsletter, the borderland is often secured and militarized, regardless of the crossing and mobility of people, their life and culture. In contrast to the national border, Morris-Suzuki conceptualizes the 'frontier' as a spatial designation that retains its own dynamic locus with living and moving people. The frontier is not a definite space enclosed by a line and forces, and connects places and peoples beyond imagined boundaries. The frontier is, thus, a more productive and fruitful space. In reality, as in the other articles of this section, the borderland remains under the control of national security policy and strategies. Nevertheless, it is still important to have the transposed view from the frontier, because it frees us from the confined discourses and suggests a recognition of the complicated webs of peoples crossing the borderlands.

In the case of Ogasawara, it is true that the islands are like many other borderlands. For instance, public access to this remote place is limited; a boat trip of 25.5 hours from Tokyo metropolitan is the only way to the islands, which is available only once a week. The major armed forces that have remained on the islands of Chichi Jima and Iwo Tō change the look of the landscape with their warships, helicopters, and military personnel. However, in their own view, Ogasawara people are never located in a marginalized border, and see themselves connected to many others.

Musical culture

The consciousness of Ogasawara's expanding locus typically appears in their musical activities. For instance, the islanders perform *taiko* drumming, *bon* dance, and shrine festival music with respect to the Japanese immigrants who began various cultural activities in this place of isolation and solitude. They also enjoy songs and dance derived from Micronesia (currently recognized as Ogasawara cultural heritage), and extend their sentiments towards past islanders who travelled around the Pacific, subject to the politics of different nation-states.⁶ The summer rock music festival Jammin' is a legacy of the American period; the so-called Western descendants islanders played rock 'n' roll and country music during the US Navy era, and these activities continued and expanded on the islands after the reversion. The current Ogasawara residents even practice hula, in which they embrace nostalgia for the early Hawaiian migrants and their cultural practices that still remain on the islands today.⁷

In their variety of musical activities, the Ogasawara Islanders preserve gratitude and affinity to many peoples: the early

settlers who created a community in the middle of nowhere; Japanese immigrants who enriched the islands with music and dance; anonymous Micronesians who inherited the cultural heritage of Ogasawara; and numerous other migrants who crossed boundaries to bring a wide diversity of musical culture to this small and remote community. Without these multiple narratives of crossing, the variety of musical activities would never appear as it does today on the Ogasawara Islands.⁸ In the plurality of history and culture, Ogasawara people find sympathy and rapport with many others and identify themselves beyond the border or boundaries of a single nation-state.

The border imagined through the nation and international politics creates tangible boundaries: fences, walls, and security gates with soldiers and militarized equipment. Even though national borders are imaginary and imagined constructs, they eventually regulate people's crossing and mobility, and further confine our mentality to see the borderlands within one-sided nation-based discourses. However, as shown in the case of Ogasawara, people living in the borderlands indeed live beyond these boundaries. They may not be able to escape appropriation by the wider discourses and ideology of nation-states; nevertheless, we still recognize local collective politics that attempt to overcome the conventional gaze towards the borderlands. The view from the islands allows us to realize the borderlands in an alternative way in which music helps us to see crossing and multiple interactions of people beyond boundaries.

Masaya Shishikura is an ethnomusicologist, who conducts research on 'music, travel and translation towards trans-border humanity'. A former IIAS fellow, he now holds a research fellowship at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India (shishikuramasaya@gmail.com).

References

- 1 This article is revised from a paper presented at an IIAS Lunch Lecture on 18 November 2014.
- 2 They are called 'Western descendants' (*Ōbei-kei Tōmin*, or literally 'European/American lineage islanders'), but many of them also have Japanese lineage, as well as ancestors from the Pacific Islands. So, the term is not precise and includes discriminatory overtones.
- 3 Norris, R.S., W.M. Arkin & W. Burr. 2000. 'How Much Did Japan Know?', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 56/1: 11-13, 78-79.
- 4 The interviews were conducted during my fieldwork in Ogasawara in 2009.
- 5 Morris-Suzuki, T. 2000. *Henkyōkara Nagameru: Ainu ga Keiken Suru Kindai [The View from the Frontier: The Modern Experiences of Ainu]*, trans. Okawa Masahiko, Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō.
- 6 Before the war when Japan established its mandate in Micronesia (1919-47), many Ogasawara Islanders travelled around the Pacific, seeking better job opportunities and quality of life. After the Pacific War, the US Navy controlled this area, where some Ogasawara Islanders also worked temporarily.
- 7 For instance, the islanders use *ti* leaves for *lei* making; it is believed that *ti* tree is not indigenous in Ogasawara and was brought by the early Hawaiian migrants.
- 8 See more about Ogasawara musical culture in: Shishikura, M. 2014. *Wanting Memories: Histories, Remembrances and Sentiments Inscribed in Music and Dance of the Ogasawara Islands*, PhD thesis, available online at <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/11185>

Below:
Map showing the remote location of the Ogasawara Islands.
(Google maps)

