Between modernity and primitivity: Okinawan identity in relation to Japan and the South Pacific

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ABSTRACT. This article proposes that contemporary ethnic subjectivities are shaped by modernist discourses. Ethnographic material about a group of Okinawan fishermen who worked with Solomon Islanders from 1971 to 2000 is used to explore the effect on national identities of being perceived as modern, or primitive. Okinawa is an island group to the south of Japan that became part of the Japanese Empire in the 1870s. Since then Okinawa has been defined as primitive against modern Japan. Modernist discourse was one of the range of influences on relations between Okinawan fishermen and Solomon Islanders. Symbolically violent identifications of Okinawans as more modern than Solomon Islanders stymied efforts at grassroots cosmopolitanism. Insofar as perceptions of relative levels of modernness of ethnic groups act to rank them, modernism is therefore one of the factors at stake in competition between nationalisms and friction between ethnic groups.

Introduction

Scholars such as Michael Billig have convincingly argued that nation is the most important communal identity in today’s world (Billig 1995). Billig and others have also convincingly argued that nationalism may be conceptualised as a discourse, and that different nationalisms ‘compete for conceptual hegemony’ as part of the political struggles of different groups within society (Sutherland 2005). This article proposes that nationalist discourses are in turn influenced by another set of discourses; those of modernism.

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Marshall Berman has shown that the aesthetic and literary movements most usually associated with modernism may be grouped with more materialist movements such as Marxism and modernisation theory as an overall world-view ordered by a teleological striving for modernity (Berman 1982). Marianne Torgovnick’s work on the appreciation of primitive art demonstrates that modernity requires as its flipside the creation of a primitive against which it can be defined (1990), in much the same way as Europe required the Orient in Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). For their part, critical development theorists have asserted that modernist or developmentalist discourses, visible in preoccupations with ‘progress’ and ‘development’ – or their lack – in representations of peoples, have acted to denigrate peoples identified as Third World or underdeveloped (Manzo 1991; Sachs 1997; Escobar 1997; Hanlon 1998). In a slightly different vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that ‘the politics of historicism’ – by which peoples are evaluated negatively for exhibiting affective or religious non-modernist world-views – does continuing damage to postcolonial subjectivities (Chakrabarty 2000). Taken together these apparently disparate pieces of social theory build the argument that modernism has long been influencing nationalism.¹ Not to be confused with modernist theories of nationalism from scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1994) – that nationalism emerges because nations are the socio-political units most appropriate to modernisation – the connection between modernism and nationalism explored in this paper is that people’s ethnic sense of self is profoundly affected by how modern (or primitive) their nation is perceived to be.

The proposition that modernism influences ethnic identity is examined through the example of Okinawa, a chain of islands to the south of Japan. Several Japan studies scholars have noted the importance of Japan as a dominating presence in Okinawan subjectivity from the late nineteenth century when the islands were annexed in the early part of the expansion of the Japanese Empire. ‘Okinawans’ were imagined in comparison to the modern Japanese. The first part of the article explores this history of modernist imaginaries of Okinawa in relation to Japan. The rest of the article then traces modernism in Okinawan identity through ethnography of fishermen from the Miyako Islands in the far south of Okinawa who worked for Japanese skipjack fishing joint ventures in the South Pacific from the 1960s to 2000. There were a range of factors involved in the structural and subjective relations between Okinawan and Pacific Islanders; as well as modernism, class and Okinawans’ cosmopolitan tendencies affected relations. Since modernism acts to hierarchicise ethnic groups, and because it contains vestiges of colonial racism, it acted as an antagonistic influence on relations between the Okinawan fishermen and the other ethnic groups they worked with, negating cosmopolitan influences on relations. This study of a small group of fishermen, therefore, poses an issue to consider more generally in studies of nationalism; the role of modernist discourses in shaping ethnic identity as a factor affecting relations between ethnic groups.¹
Historical background: modernist imaginaries of Okinawa in relation to Japan

The Ryūkyū Islands run south from Japan’s Kyūshū to Taiwan in the East China Sea. For much of the last millennium the Ryūkyūs were a transport and trading hub in the China-centered region (Furuki 2003). For several hundred years until the late nineteenth century the Ryūkyūs were a functionally independent kingdom, but during the 1870s the islands were forcibly incorporated into the burgeoning Japanese state as Okinawa Prefecture. The Ryūkyūan economy was dismantled and replaced with Japan’s imperial capitalist system, leading to economic shocks such as the sotetsu jigoku (cycad hell) when famine forced large numbers of Okinawans to eat cycads despite the risk of poisoning. Economic woes pushed many Okinawans to migrate throughout Japan and the Empire in search of labouring work.

The annexation process, however, went beyond structural political and economic change; ‘Japan’ became a dominating presence in Okinawan subjectivities. Since Japanese nationalism was based on notions of cultural and racial homogeneity (Dikötter 1997), Ryūkyūans’ ethnic difference was a problem for the Japanese national project so Ryūkyūans were incorporated into the Japanese nation in a process called Ryūkyū Shobun (Oguma 2002).

Figure 1. Map of the Ryūkyū Islands and surrounding countries.
Various areas of Ryūkyūan life were labeled as undesirable, leading to a range of central government controls over the lives of people in Okinawa including the promotion of strict timekeeping, control of language and religion, changes in medical treatment (especially for people considered mentally ill), toilet sanitation reforms and the prohibition of bare feet. Historians such as Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1996) and Eiji Oguma (2002) have theorised representations of Okinawa as primitive in relation to Japan as an important part of the discourses by which Okinawa was subordinated. In one piece Morris-Suzuki applied the idea of TimeSpace to point out that Japanese spatial notions of civilisation/barbarity adopted from Chinese world-views were modified by European temporal notions of advanced/backward in the late 1800s and early 1900s, with consequences for the ways Japanese people viewed Okinawa in relation to themselves (Morris-Suzuki 1996). In other words, Okinawa had been stigmatised in the pre-modern era within a Japanese Confucian world-view that classified peoples into progressively less civilised zones according to their distance from the centers in the Kantō and Kansai regions. After Japan was re-opened to the West in the mid-1800s this spatial conceptualisation of ethnicity was compounded by temporal discourses about peoples spread by European colonials, in which ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ became part of the cultural capital of civilisation, and primitivity joined barbarity as a significant stigmatising principle. In this way distance from the center came also to signify regression into the past in Japanese conceptions of the periphery, including Okinawa.

Japanologist Tomiyama Ichirō has also highlighted the effects of Japanese nationalism on Okinawan ethnic identity since annexation. According to Tomiyama the policies of of Ryūkyū Shobun both reflected and reproduced prevalent mainlander ideas of Okinawans as backward, lazy, inefficient, prone to insanity, irrational and unhygienic. Tomiyama claims that these characteristics attributed to Okinawans were not random cultural traits ‘discovered’ by objective anthropological observers but acted to implicitly identify Japanese in contrast as modern, hardworking, efficient, sane, rational and clean (Tomiyama 1990: 5). This process thus created Okinawans as subordinated subjects within the Japanese nation. Tomiyama argued that this formulation of Okinawan identity exhibited the logic and values of imperialist capitalism. The characteristics attributed to Okinawans, however, also exhibit modernist values in the ranking of the Okinawan ethnic group as backward in relation to the modern Japanese and therefore subordinate within the Japanese nation.

Tomiyama’s (1998) depiction of the development of Ryūkyūan anthropologist Iha Fuyū’s ideas about Ryūkyūan culture reveals modernism at play in Okinawan subjectivity in relation to Japan. Iha worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after starting his career assisting the mainlander anthropologist Torī Ryūzō. They worked together to analyse and define Ryūkyūan culture. At that time, Aboriginal peoples from Taiwan, the northern Philippines and other places were commonly denoted seiban (‘raw barbarians’ in Confucian thought). Torī usually did not categorise the
Ryūkyūans *seiban*, because he wanted to establish that Ryūkyūans and Japanese shared common ancestry, and were therefore part of one nation (Tomiyama 1998: 169–71). But he was never able to anthropologically distinguish clearly between the *seiban* and the Ryūkyūans.

According to Tomiyama, Iha’s early writings show great anxiety over the lack of anthropological evidence to classify Ryūkyūans as Japanese rather than *seiban*. Why was Iha so concerned about this? The answer lies in this quote from Iha: ‘It is unbearable that a people that has exhibited “uniqueness” in such areas as poetry and architecture should be likened in terms of destiny to the *primitive* aborigines of the South Seas’ (Tomiyama 1998: 173, italics added). A modernist discourse in which primitivity carries stigma was clearly part of his world-view. Japan was associated with modernity and progress, and aspirations to identify with Japan went hand in hand with ‘hypersensitivity to any perceived backwardness’ (Siddle 2003: 138).

Because of tough economic conditions at home Okinawans made up a large proportion of the population of Japanese nationals living in various parts of the Japanese Empire. Okinawan families established communities in South East Asia and Pacific Island territories, opening shops and other kinds of businesses. By 1935 there were twice as many Japanese nationals (many of whom were Okinawans) in Micronesia as there were Micronesians (Hanlon 1998: 30–2). For Okinawans who lived in Japanese *Nan’yō* (South Seas) colonies their identity as subordinate to mainland Japanese was reflected in a range of practices. Pay scales were linked to ethnicity, with Japanese being paid the most, Okinawans and Koreans less, and under them the various Pacific Islander ethnic groups (Tomiyama 2002).

When Japan was defeated and the Empire dismantled at the end of World War II, Okinawans living in *Nan’yō* colonies were forcibly repatriated. Okinawa was not granted independence at the end of the war because it was considered to be part of Japan (although actually it remained under USA military occupation until 1972, when it was formally ceded back to Japan). Japanese political influence overseas in the postwar era was curtailed by sensitivities about the war, but Japanese businesses expanded around the region again once the Japanese economy had recovered in the 1960s. Japanese fisheries were part of this, with the major fishing companies returning to former colonies and also moving into new parts of the Pacific. Okinawan fishermen were employed in these ventures. The rest of this article uses ethnography of one group of Okinawan fishermen who worked in the Pacific to explore the role of modernism in their ethnic identity in relation to Pacific Islanders.

**South Seas fishing from Sarahama**

Sarahama is the fishing port on the island of Irabu in the Miyako group of islands in southern Okinawa near Taiwan. Humans first settled the Miyako
Islands about 4000 years ago. The archaeological record shows the early inhabitants shared some cultural features with peoples from the northern Philippines and Micronesia, and other cultural features with Ryūkyūan islands to the north, so it is not entirely clear where they came from; perhaps they were a mixture of peoples from different places. The Miyako Islands became part of the Ryūkyū Kingdom in the 1500s (Pearson 1996: 97).

Miyako Islanders are thus different to people from Okinawa Island, such as Iha Fuyû. While Okinawa as a whole was imagined as primitive in relation to Japan, within the Ryūkyūs Miyako was seen as primitive in relation to the civilisation centered on Okinawa Island. Field notes from 1921 by Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio equate travelling further south within Okinawa with traveling even further back in time (as referred to by Morris-Suzuki 1996: 91).

The Miyako Islands lie in the path travelled by western Pacific typhoons throughout summer and autumn. The typhoons are needed for the rains they bring, but salt water in the winds burns the leaves of vegetation, and the soil is not very fertile, so only a narrow range of agriculture is possible. As a result of annexation by Japan the cash economy became increasingly important, so commercial skipjack (also called bonito) fishing was developed. In 1916 boats with engines were introduced to Irabu and a katsuobushi (smoke-dried

Figure 2. Map of Miyako Islands in relation to Okinawa Island.
skipjack) factory was opened. In 1924 the Sarahama Fisheries Co-operative was established. Miyako fishers joined the southward advance (nanpō) and went to fish in the colonial territories Japan acquired in the Pacific following World War I (Wakabayashi 1993 and 1996). The following song recorded by fisheries sociologist Wakabayashi Yoshikazu is said to have been improvised by the first fleet of Sarahamans who went to the South Seas to fish in the early 1930s (Wakabayashi 1993: 85–6).6

The floating world beloved of this period of Shōwa
Lost in the love of money
Depart to find your fortune in the far South Seas
The pain of the ship leaving is heavy with money
Well-wishers overflowing the beach
Urging you to return safely
Return rich, return safely
Stay in good health and send us news won’t you
Weighing anchor with the blowing of the whistle
The ship is already swiftly leaving the harbor

The reign of the emperor Shōwa (known in English as Hirohito) started in 1926. In Japanese Buddhist philosophy the ‘floating world’ is transitory material life on earth, so claims that the Shōwa period was particularly enamored of the floating world, in conjunction with the other references to money in the song, show how keenly Sarahamans were feeling the effects of the increased importance of the cash economy, and that this was pushing them to travel for cash work. By the mid-1930s there were Miyako fishers working Palau, Chuuk (Truk), Ponape, Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan (Borneo) and Sulawesi (Celebes) (Wakabayashi 1993; Waugh 1986 and 1994).

At the end of World War II Miyako fishers were repatriated and worked around their home islands for the next fifteen years. Because of the very limited range of economic opportunities at home, however, in the 1960s when Japanese fishing companies returned to prewar fishing grounds in Micronesia and South East Asia – and also new areas around Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands7 – Miyako fishers were willing to go south again. According to Wakabayashi Yoshikazu (1993: 85, 102) an important reason why Sarahama fishermen remained involved in South Seas fishing, when fishers from other parts of Japan increasingly abandoned the hard life of distant water fishing, was the ‘backwardness’ (kōshinsei) of the Miyako islands. His choice of adjective illustrates how relative lack of affluence is often understood within the modernist discourses that have stigmatised Okinawan identity; a ‘colonialism of the mind’ still affecting contemporary Okinawan subjectivities (Nomura 2002).

In the second half of the twentieth century the numbers of Sarahama fishers operating locally remained fairly constant at between two and three hundred while several hundred worked in the South Seas. South Seas fishing peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when about seven hundred Sarahama fishers were absent for the ten-month fishing season. These were
halcyon days for the usually frugal economy of Irabu Island. In the 1970s, the fisheries turnover outdid agriculture, and ninety per cent of the value of Irabu fisheries came from the South Seas fisheries, and indeed Irabu was contributing a large proportion of the whole Prefecture’s fisheries related revenue. The most valuable catch the Irabu South Seas fisheries landed was in 1989 when it brought in ¥7,400,000,000 (Wakabayashi 1993: 92) (approximately US$53,200,000 at 1989 exchange rates). During this period many families realised aspirations to replace their traditional timber houses with modern concrete and steel constructions. Fishers who were able to continue working in the South Seas for a decade or more changed the socio-economic outlook of their families through sending their children to university.

By the 1980s, however, the pole and line method of fishing in which Sarahama fishers specialised was squeezed out by the high-tech low-labor purse seine method, and fishing companies employing crews from countries with cheaper employment costs. The number of Sarahama fishers working in the South Pacific had halved by the mid-1980s and continued to shrink thereafter (Wakabayashi 1993: 92–3). All of the fisheries employing Sarahamas in the South Seas closed down, except for one, Solomon Taiyo Ltd (hereafter referred to as Solomon Taiyo). Solomon Taiyo was a joint venture

Figure 3. Map of the South West Pacific.
between the Solomon Islands government and Tokyo-based fishing multinational Taiyō Gyogyō Kabushiki Kaisha (which changed its name to Maruha Corporation in 1993). Solomon Taiyo was one of a number of joint ventures established by large Japanese fishing companies with Pacific Island states in the 1960s and early 1970s. It had a fleet of pole and line fishing boats that targeted skipjack that was canned locally for the British market, smoked for Japanese katsuobushi, or exported frozen to be processed elsewhere. At first Solomon Taiyo’s fishing crews were made up of fifteen Japanese nationals (mostly Sarahamans) to fifteen Solomon Islander crew-in-training. Gradually the proportion of Sarahamans decreased and the proportion of Solomon Islanders correspondingly increased. Up until 1983 there were ten Sarahamans per boat, then until 1987 there were six or seven, until 1993 when there were four, and from 1993 until the cessation of the joint venture in 2000 there was a maximum of three Sarahamans on board each ship, and up to thirty-five locals (Wakabayashi 1996: 148; Barclay 2002).

One significant influence affecting relations between Okinawan fishermen and Solomon Islanders was the Okinawans’ cultural predisposition towards grassroots cosmopolitanism. Harking back to the pre-annexation history of the Ryūkyū islands as a peaceful center of trade and cultural contact, since the 1980s some Okinawans have asserted a positive non-Japanese identity symbolised by Ryūkyūan trading ships having acted as a ‘bridge to all nations’ (Arakaki 2002). Representations of Okinawans as having a bridging culture is a way of imagining Okinawa’s difference from Japan that counters stigmatic images of Okinawa as less modern than Japan.

This cosmopolitan identity movement was manifest in, and contributed to by the publication of a series called Sekai no Uchina’ânchu (Okinawans of the World), started in 1984 by the major Okinawan daily newspaper Ryūkyū Shimpō. The August 1986 issue of this series included a section on the Sarahama fishers of Solomon Taiyo, with photos of Sarahama fishers and their Solomon Islander friends and co-workers, and text detailing their daily lives in Solomon Islands (Ryūkyū Shimpō 1986: 258–69).

In the mid-1980s the Sarahama fishers, with financial support from the Japanese partner company, initiated homestay visits to the Miyako Islands for one Solomon Islander crew member from each of the twenty boats in the fleet, as a reward for working well. The selected Solomon Islander crew-members accompanied the Sarahama fishers home for a couple of weeks during their annual December–January holiday. The homestays were conducted for several years. All of my Okinawan interviewees cited the homestay visits as a central part of their representations that Irabu people related well with Solomon Islanders. Within Okinawa Prefecture and nationally the homestay visits were lauded as exemplary grassroots ‘internationalisation’ (kokusaika) activities (Kuruma 1984; Yomiuri Shimbun 1985).

Mainland Japanese and some Solomon Islander interviewees shared the perception that Sarahamans related particularly well with Solomon Islanders. Wakabayashi Yoshikazu found that, in addition to their fishing skill and
willingness to work away from home, one of the reasons only Sarahama fishers were employed by Solomon Taiyo was that they were seen by the Japanese partner company as ‘wealthy in conciliation with other peoples’ (*taminzoku to no yūchisei ni tomi*) compared to fishers from other parts of Japan (Wakabayashi 1993: 101). Phrases Solomon Islanders used to express this included saying the Okinawans were ‘so friendly’ and were willing to ‘mix up’ with ‘ordinary’ locals, unlike the Japanese manager ‘bigwigs’. Areke, a Solomon Islander manager who worked for Solomon Taiyo, put it thus:

Okinawans are much more like Solomon Islanders, you know? The Islander mentality. Okinawans have it, the mainland Japanese, they don’t. They don’t have that sort of attitude. Not as intimate as the Okinawans . . . The way you talk, ah, the way you share things, the way you reward things. The Okinawans are a little bit more casual. Whereas the mainland Japanese are more formal. And ah, on the boat too, the purse seine fleet is manned by mainland Japanese people . . . It is the way they organize work on board. On the purse seine fleet they are more strict, more aggressive, whereas on the pole and line boats [where Okinawans work] they are more together.

While Okinawan interviewees’ primary narrative of their relations with Solomon Islanders identified them as being good at bridging cultures, however, Okinawans were not primarily identified as cosmopolitan by Solomon Islanders. Many Solomon Islanders described clear social boundaries between Okinawans and themselves. Ilangana, who had worked on the Solomon Taiyo fleet for several years in the 1980s and become close friends with an Okinawan colleague had this response to my question on the matter:

I: I don’t feel part of their group. No. We always keep separate.
KB: You didn’t eat with your friend?
I: No. He was in with the Okinawans . . . They had another room. And all the boys [Solomon Islanders] eat at the back [of the boat].

Although the homestay visits are evidence of a certain social closeness between the Sarahama fishers and their Solomon Islander co-workers, when I asked Sarahama fishers for details of their social mixing with their co-workers while in Solomon Islands, they replied that there was little if any socialising. Sarahama fisher Ikema said he knew it was ‘rude’ (*mōshiwakenai*), but he did not socialise with Solomon Islander co-workers. The reason Ikema gave for this was that when the Solomon Islanders drank alcohol some tended to become too ‘uninhibited’ (*chōshi ni noru*), leading to conflict. One reason conflict might arise was the structural inequality between the groups; Okinawan fishers always held the top ranks on the boats on which they worked (such as Fishing Master, Chief Engineer and Captain) so their Solomon Islander co-workers were in effect their subordinates. Under the influence of alcohol dissatisfactions about this may have been expressed forcefully. Solomon Islanders who had worked for Solomon Taiyo indicated dissatisfaction with the nature of their subordination under Okinawan fishers. Lambi was a Solomon Islander who trained as an engineer through Solomon Taiyo and worked for the company for some years.
Working for Solomon Taiyo, I enjoy working for Solomon Taiyo . . . [but] I have a feeling that sometimes don’t really create a good working mood, yeah? Because sometimes the treatment they give us students, not nice for us . . . They want to give us ideas all the time, force us to work like slaves . . . That’s what happened with us. In the department where I work. With other departments maybe different . . . I believe in sharing ideas, working together. That is what I think. Bosses down there never did that. Not sharing ideas. Maybe they think they know everything. Sometimes when I am doing my work I receive some bangs on my head, even spanners they hit with. Especially these Okinawan people.

Okinawan fishermen’s cosmopolitanism was thus often confounded by hierarchical relations with Solomon Islander co-workers. Cosmopolitan practices were more in evidence in Okinawan fishermen’s relations with Solomon Islander villagers who lived near the baitgrounds they used. Village elder Lambete told me he had several Okinawan friends who visited his house regularly over the years.14 When they visited they brought whiskey for themselves and Lambete to drink. They taught Lambete’s wife how to prepare sashimi and other foods they liked. They gave his wife money to pay for the food each time they visited. They brought Lambete’s family presents from Japan. After the meal the fishermen slept over at their host’s house, on mats on the floor with everyone else. Lambete emphasised that his Okinawan friends did not require special rooms or arrangements; they drank and ate together with him in an atmosphere of camaraderie.

Lambete’s representations of Okinawans show that egalitarianism and willingness to associate socially were clearly part of the Okinawan fishers’ relations with Solomon Islanders. At the same time, however, the fact that Lambete stressed that the Okinawan fishers treated him as their equal may imply some kind of expectation that the Okinawan fishers might choose not to treat him as their equal. This impression is strengthened upon examination of other representations of relations between Okinawans and Solomon Islanders. According to Irabu fisherman Nagahama:15

If they invite us for a meal, we don’t say no, we go, there they don’t use chopsticks, they eat with a spoon or their fingers so, eat together. And their food, we don’t say ‘your food is yuck so I won’t eat it’ or anything like that, we eat together with our fingers, because if you eat together it makes them happy. That is how you get close.

Nagahama invokes an identity as well able to get along with other peoples, by explaining how the Sarahama fishermen ‘get close’. At the same time, however, the stance he takes towards Solomon Islanders is hierarchical. In this representation of Solomon Islander hospitality eating together was something he gave to Solomon Islanders, which made them happy. Nagahama gave Solomon Islanders the courtesy of not insulting their food, and of not refusing to eat with his hands as they did. There is no sense of equal reciprocity in this picture, no sense that their hospitality made him happy. The acknowledgement of the importance of his courtesy towards Solomon Islanders, in the absence of any sense that courtesy on the part of Solomon Islanders was also important, indicates a subjective inequality in ethnic
relations. The nature of this subjective hierarchy emerges through further quotes from the interview with Nagahama:

They almost all use Miyako’s, Sarahama’s language, those guys [Solomon Islanders]. . . ‘You haven’t seen Nakada recently have you’? they say, those guys in Sarahama language. ‘I don’t know so why do you [ask]? In the end, they want a cigarette, they come and call out to people they think are Japanese, take a cigarette and smoke it. One time, last year, it happened last year I think, with a baby, holding a baby, she came up to me . . . ‘Why are you walking around in bare feet’? [I asked], she was going around with no shoes on. When I asked whose baby it was she said it was mine, this person I didn’t know. ‘What? If it was my child wouldn’t its skin be a bit whiter’? I asked, [she said] ‘No, you didn’t give me an umbrella, you wouldn’t give me money even for a sun umbrella so I couldn’t protect the baby from the sun. The baby is tanned by the sun, that’s why the baby is so black’. [Laughter] That’s what she said. In my language. ‘That’s strange, I don’t remember you, here, have twenty dollars’ I said, she said ‘OK’, took it and said ‘Thank you’ . . . Before, a long time ago, this undeveloped place [mikaichi], is the word ‘undeveloped’? When we first went in, they threw lots of rocks, threw rocks, but they don’t do things like that now. Now everyone is close . . . [We] gave cigarettes, gave sewing machines, whatever we gave, they thought Japanese were great. Especially if you are Okinawan, if you are Okinawan, they think we are the best, if you go there. If you are from this island [Irabu] . . . We brought them here. Then when it was time to go home, we gave them money . . . Old clothing from each house here in Sarahama. We filled the ships with used clothing and went, and gave it to everyone. At that time over there even young women walked around with their breasts hanging out, most had them out, only a piece of bark wrapped around their waist. So, poor things, so, we went around each family and gathered everyone, and filled each boat with stuff for children to stuff for old people. We went and gave it to them and they thought it was the best. They were really happy . . . And when we go ashore, the Japanese should look like proper Japanese, put shoes on, well it is OK not to put a tie on, like a private ambassador, um, go ashore properly. If you do that they think ‘as you’d expect, the Japanese are impressive aren’t they’.

The picture of Okinawan fishermen that emerges from this representation is multifaceted. Again, Nagahama explains how the Okinawans bridged cultural barriers and became ‘close’ to Solomon Islanders through generosity: gifts of cash, cigarettes, sewing machines and clothing. Generosity, however, not only generates closeness between peoples, it may generate hierarchy. While charity and benevolence are difficult to recognise as symbolic violence because they are manifest in behaviours that show good intentions on the part of the donor, they may nonetheless reinforce hierarchical relations (Kondo 1990: 15; Ortner 1995: 179).

The hierarchy implied in Nagahama’s narrative of generosity is shaped by modernist discourses. He identifies as having the material wealth of modernity, and his references to shoes and bare feet are modernist. Before annexation Ryûkyûan commoners did not wear anything on their feet (Pearson 1996: 4–5). Barefootedness was one of the markers of backwardness by which mainland Japanese stigmatised Okinawans after annexation, and prohibition of barefootedness was one of the ‘reforms’ imposed in the name of modernising Okinawa (Tomiyama 1990). Being barefoot and eating only sweet potato is a negative image of the Ryûkyûan past used in political
rhetoric by officials arguing against the 1972 reversion of Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty after nearly three decades of USA military occupation (McCormack 2003: 93). Wearing shoes was part of how Nagahama thought Okinawan fishers should present themselves in Solomon Islands, so that Solomon Islanders would look up to them, in contrast to the Solomon Islander woman in the interviewee’s story who is characterised as being barefoot. Nagahama’s references to footwear mark Solomon Islanders as being less modern than Okinawans.

Modernism was also visible in ethnic subjectivities relating to work in Solomon Taiyo. Okinawan fishers were structurally dominant over their Solomon Islander co-workers in terms of workplace authority and remuneration. Nationality based remuneration hierarchies are normal practice in Solomon Islands and in international fishing industries. Okinawan representations of themselves as fishers in relation to Solomon Islanders legitimised their superior rank and remuneration based on ethnicised assumptions about capabilities as modern industrial fishermen. Key tendencies visible in these representations included assumptions that Solomon Islanders could not be as good at fishing as Sarahama fishermen, that Solomon Islanders lacked the work ethic and that Solomon Islanders were unable to manage money in the cash economy.

Mainland Japanese managers felt that Sarahama fishers were the best in Japan at the kind of fishing done by Solomon Taiyo (pole and line fishing using live baitfish). Sarahama fisher Shitajima explained that the reason Sarahama men were so good at this kind of fishing was that they played at fishing all throughout their childhood, so they became very good at reading water and weather conditions, and at reading fish behaviour. Many Solomon Islander children also play at fishing throughout their childhood and become remarkably skilled at reading sea conditions and navigating, but not one Okinawan interviewee mentioned any skills Solomon Islanders brought to their fishing for Solomon Taiyo. Any fishing skills attributed to Solomon Islanders in Solomon Taiyo by Okinawan and Japanese interviewees were seen as having been taught them by their Okinawan co-workers. Okinawans strongly identified as teachers in relation to Solomon Islanders, seen as learners. Several Okinawan fishers described Solomon Islanders as quick learners, but none questioned the assumption that Okinawans taught and Solomon Islanders learned, always in that direction.

So strong was the narrative that Okinawans had special fishing skills that Solomon Islanders lacked that it led some Okinawan interviewees to overlook evidence to the contrary. In 1999 seven of Solomon Taiyo’s fleet of twenty-one pole and line boats had no Okinawans working on them; some were fully localised, and some had Solomon Islander crews working with a Filipino Chief Engineer. Ikema, who had been working in Solomon Islands as late as 1998 and so should have known about the localised boats, told me Solomon Islanders were unable to run a fishing vessel unsupervised and that there were not yet any Solomon Islander Chief Engineers who had completed their training. Other Sarahamans acknowledged the existence of the localised
boats, but several doubted the capacity of Solomon Islander managed boats. According to the Miyako-based recruiter of Sarahama fishermen, Taira, and Solomon Taiyo’s Personnel Manager, Areke, the localised ships had about the same catch as the Okinawan managed ships, and localised boats were often amongst the top catchers each season. Areke pointed out that Solomon Taiyo was a commercial operation, not a training school, so no local executive crew members were appointed unless they demonstrated the capacity to work at the level of the rest of the fleet. Nevertheless, the perception that Solomon Islanders were less competent persisted among Okinawan interviewees, and was reflected in statements by several Okinawans that it was undesirable to work on a boat with fewer Okinawans because they equated this with a lower catch (annual bonuses for Okinawan fishers were tied to the catch rates).

In addition to feeling that they were more skilled than Solomon Islanders, and therefore were legitimately ranked and remunerated above Solomon Islanders, Okinawan fishermen sometimes also legitimised their dominant position through narratives about the work ethic. Meltzhoff noted in her research from the late 1970s that Okinawan fishermen tended to view Solomon Islanders as ‘innately lazy’ (Meltzhoff and LiPuma 1983: 25). Nagahama doubted the reasons Solomon Islanders gave for needing to take time off work and said ‘Solomon Islanders have no work ethic . . . Work, no motivation . . . When they get their pay they won’t come to the ship’. Other Okinawan interviewees were not as blunt as Nagahama, but there were widespread representations throughout the interviews with Okinawan fishermen that Solomon Islanders lacked a work ethic. Taira, the Miyako-based recruiter of Sarahama fishermen, said that Solomon Islanders did not work long term: they worked a few years, attained a more senior position, then became ‘no good’ (dame) and either quit or were fired. Another Sarahama fisher, Maezato, described the Solomon Islander fleet workforce as being half made up of good workers and half made up of workers with low commitment, some of whom were trouble-makers who incited the others to strike. Only one of the Okinawan interviewees, Shitajima, pointed out that it was unreasonable to expect Solomon Islanders to work as hard as Okinawans because they were paid so much less. Shitajima referred to a series of strikes that occurred when he worked in the Solomons in the early 1980s. Japanese manager Osaka said these strikes happened because the spirit of Independence (1978) inspired some of the crew to agitate against Okinawan leadership on the fleet as a form of foreign dominance. Shitajima, however, noticed that by the late 1970s some Solomon Islander crew members had become experienced and skilled enough to be doing the same work as Okinawan fishermen. When Solomon Islander fishermen started doing the same work as Okinawan fishermen the difference in pay levels came to seem very unfair. Shitajima saw this unfairness as a factor in the strikes, but none of the other Okinawan interviewees mentioned pay disparities having a role in Solomon Islander attitudes to work. This underplaying of the remuneration disparity by most Okinawan interviewees indicates that the narrative of work ethic may have
been contributing to a discourse of ethnic identity that justified their position vis-à-vis Solomon Islanders.

Differences in remuneration were also under-recognised by Okinawan interviewees in their representations of Solomon Islanders’ ability to manage money in the cash economy. The frequency with which Solomon Islander employees had no money left soon after payday was often framed as being due to Solomon Islands’ cultural values about sharing wealth amongst the family. One Okinawan fisherman, Maezato, depicted the ability to handle money in a cash economy as a modernisation learning curve. He said that when he first went to Solomon Islands in the early 1970s most Solomon Islanders did not wear shirts, and no one wore shoes, and the Solomon Islander fishers spent their entire monthly pay on beer within three days of getting paid. He said that by the late 1990s most people wore T-shirts and many had shoes or rubber sandals. He thought about half the crew still spent their money in the first few days, but many had come to want clothes and radio cassette players so were more careful with their spending. None of the Okinawan fishers raised the possibility that Solomon Islanders may have gone through their pay quickly because they were paid so little. In 1999 the most senior Solomon Islander fleet workers were paid a little more than SB$1,000 (US$210) in monthly remuneration, while most crew received less. Okinawan fishermen received ten times this amount. They received SB$1,000 a month in pocket money to spend in Solomon Islands while the other nine-tenths of the Okinawans’ pay went home to Irabu for their wives to use for the family’s living costs, including housing, cars and tertiary education for the children. In portraying Solomon Islanders as unable to manage their money Okinawan fishermen were expecting Solomon Islanders to cover their whole living costs and those of their families on the amount Okinawans themselves used as pocket money for their days off.

These narratives of skill, work ethic and ability to manage money, therefore, while somewhat based on objectively observable evidence, also went beyond the evidence into ethnicised representations of differences between Okinawans and Solomon Islanders. The dyads implied in these representations – skilled/unskilled, diligent/lazy and able/unable to manage money – are reminiscent of the dyads Tomiyama (1990: 5) highlighted in Japanese subjectification of Okinawans in the early twentieth century. The dyads applied in Okinawan representations of themselves and Solomon Islanders were about competence to function in a modern capitalist economy.

Modernist discourses were even more clearly visible in Okinawan representations of Solomon Islands society. Several Okinawan fishermen defined Solomon Islands as a ‘very poor country’. Fishing Master Tòriike described Solomon Islands as ‘the poorest country’ (ichiban bimbō no kuni), and said it ‘does not develop, at all’ (hatten shinai, nanimo). A couple of interviewees called Solomon Islands ‘undeveloped’ (mikaichi) and several referred to the country as ‘behind’ (okureteiru). Ikema gave a very detailed and concrete description of what he meant by describing Solomon Islands as okureteiru: (1)
there was a lack of culture, defined as the lack of a television broadcaster, the lack in most houses of video or satellite televisions, karaoke machines, fridges or washing machines, and a severe lack of jobs. (2) the level of schooling was low, with most people not finishing primary school, (3) organised labour did not work in Solomon Islands because leaders of unions were easily corrupted by management and, finally, (4) the Solomon Islands government did not protect the environment from fishers releasing fuel-polluted bilge in harbors. For every one of these points he compared Solomon Islands unfavourably with ‘Japan’ (Nihon).

While Ikema’s comments may be seen as factually correct on one level, they also exhibit modernist ethnicisation. This is most obvious in his use of the word okureteiru, but also in his valuing of consumer culture over non-consumer culture. Ethnicisation is also indicated by his representation going beyond the actuality of the situation. For example, he posited Solomon Islands’ labor and environment protection systems as flawed in contrast to Japan’s, when in fact these systems have been far from perfect in Japan as well. Japanese legal systems patently did not protect the marine environment from heavy metal pollution that maimed and killed people who ate fish from industrialised coastal areas of Kyūshū in the 1960s and 1970s. There are ongoing problems of environmental degradation in many Japanese fishing grounds, including those around Irabu. Through such representations Okinawan fishers applied modernist discourses – by which Okinawans have been stigmatised within Japan – to Solomon Islanders. Okinawans’ self-identification as cosmopolitan and therefore able to relate well with Solomon Islanders sat uncomfortably with this co-existing identification as more modern than Solomon Islanders.

The damage done by modernist discourses to relations with Solomon Islanders was most clearly visible in Solomon Islander representations of Okinawans. While Okinawan representations of relations with Solomon Islanders emphasised the positive aspects of their grassroots cosmopolitan practices, Solomon Islander representations of Okinawans emphasised more negative aspects of relations. The primary narratives related about Okinawans by Solomon Islanders were complaints about sexual liaisons between Okinawan fishermen and village women.

Okinawan Fishermen
There’s a strange ship at Labete
Weird music blares across
Raucous laughter
Who are they?
Foreigners.

Short stunted pygmy-like
Black stiff sea-urchin hair
Sickly yellow skin
Half moon eyes
Okinawa fishermen.
Strolling thru the village
Looking out of place
Clad in woollen jerseys
And track-suit trousers
Expensive radios
To impress the local lasses
Okinawa fishermen.

Are they accepted?
There is division among the people
Some for – some against
Many more on the fence
But there are half-castes now
Planted by
Okinawa fishermen.
(Sipolo 1981: 5)

This poem captures the essence of most Solomon Islander interviewees’ representations of Okinawan fishermen. Many Solomon Islander interviewees pointed out that the Okinawans’ greater access to the material goods of modernity, such as clothing, ‘expensive radios’, shop-bought food and alcohol made them attractive to women, and to families with eligible daughters. Representations of Okinawans as modern in relation to Solomon Islanders from the Solomon Islander perspective looked quite different to the earlier representations from the Okinawan perspectives. Desire competed with resentment in Solomon Islanders’ subordinated subjectivity.

As in Okinawan representations of Solomon Islanders, ethnic identity was performed in Solomon Islander representations of Okinawans, and the performative aspect was visible in disjunctures between representations of relations and the apparent actuality of relations. A closer look at stories about relations with Okinawans revealed a more complicated picture. The author of the poem ‘Okinawan Fishermen’ Jully Sipolo told me in an interview that most of her experience of Okinawan fishers was from when she was recuperating from an illness while staying with an aunt in a village frequented by Solomon Taiyo fishermen. One of the Okinawans noticed that she looked unwell so he brought her tonics and special foods until she recovered. Sipolo, therefore, had positive experiences of Okinawan fishermen, but somehow only negative images ended up in her public representation of them.

The relationships between Okinawan fishermen and village women were also not as sordid and exploitative as they appeared in prevalent Solomon Islander representations. Rarumana had two children with her Okinawan boyfriend.\textsuperscript{17} He had paid for her house, which was constructed of timber on high stilts with louver windows, and had electricity. This was the kind of house that indicated wealth in a Solomon Islands village. Rarumana had a television with a video player, there were toys including tricycles underneath the house, and hanging on the washing line were small T-shirts with the decorative English slogans so popular in Japan, such as ‘glorious boyhood life’. Rarumana spoke warmly of her boyfriend, whom she knew had another
family and wife in Sarahama, and whom she knew she would never see again
once he stopped working for Solomon Taiyo. Rarumana said that since she
had a nice home and a family to raise, she was satisfied.

The actuality of relations between Solomon Islanders and Okinawans was
that Solomon Islanders enjoyed the Okinawans' generosity and grassroots
cosmopolitanism. But this was overshadowed in their representations of
Okinawans by negative sentiments, some of which were related to modernist
influences on ethnic subjectivity in relation to Okinawans. That is, Okinawa
has attained the material wealth and cultural capital of modernity in relation
to Solomon Islands (if not in relation to Japan), while Solomon Islands
remains struggling to achieve a successful modern economy and is stigmatised
as a 'least developed country'. It is reasonable to suppose that Solomon
Islanders' history of having been colonised and imagined as the epitome of
black primitivity means they are particularly sensitive to subordinating
modernist identity relations. Elsewhere I have argued that this combination
of factors was indeed a negative influence on Solomon Islanders' perceptions
of relations with Okinawans in Solomon Taiyo (Barclay 2004). There were
other influences, including anti-Asian racism, but modernist discourses by
which the Solomon Islands nation (as a part of Melanesia) was imagined as
backward compared to Okinawa (as a sub-group of the Japanese nation) was
a key influence. Modernism within nationalist discourse thus detracted from
the Okinawans' grassroots cosmopolitan practices and contributed to friction
in relations between Solomon Islanders and Okinawans.

Conclusion

Since Japanese modernity was imposed on Ryûkyûans in the 1870s modernist
discourses have ranked Okinawans below/behind the Japanese. Modernist
hierarchies in ethnic subjectivities have been part of the history of troubled
relations between Okinawans and mainland Japanese. This article has shown
that modernism has also caused friction in Okinawans' relations with other
ethnic groups, specifically Solomon Islanders. Okinawans' cultural predis-
position towards grassroots cosmopolitanism was counteracted by hierarchi-
cal modernist imaginaries that ranked them above/ahead of Solomon
Islanders. Solomon Islander interviewees' representations of Okinawans
generally left out the fishermen's generosity with shop-bought gifts and
homestay visits to Okinawa, instead focusing resentfully on their greater
access to the goods of modernity and hierarchical workplace relations, and
putting a negative spin on their friendships with Solomon Islander villagers.
Relations between Okinawans and Solomon Islanders were on the one hand
sweetened by the Okinawans' egalitarian informal manner and generosity,
then on the other soured by this hierarchical stance taken as modern in
relation to Solomon Islanders.
While there were particularities to the operation of modernist discourses in this context – such as the special meaning of footwear in Okinawan ideas about modernity – this ethnography raises some general questions about the nature of contemporary nationalism. Modernist discourses are a global phenomenon, even if they act differently in specific times and places. Modernist imaginaries of ethnicity act to rank ethnic groups, and can therefore be one of the rationales underpinning chauvinism in nationalism. Questions about the effects of modernism in nationalism could therefore be usefully employed to understand ethnic relations in other contexts.

Notes

1 Elsewhere I give an expanded explanation of connections between the various ideas tied together here as modernism (Barclay 2002).
2 Elongated vowel sounds in the Japanese and Okinawan languages respectively are indicated by diacritical markings as per conventions for transliterating each language.
3 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out Oguma’s work and its relevance for this topic.
4 By this stage Ryūkyū no longer existed as a polity, but many ‘Okinawans’, including Iha, continued to identify as Ryūkyūan.
5 Oguma (2002) also discussed the significance of this search for common ancestry with Okinawans for Japanese nationalism.
6 This song was published in Japanese by Wakabayashi (1993: 85–6). I translated it into English.
7 As is customary in that country Solomon Islands is referred to with no preceding ‘the’.
8 For further details on Solomon Taiyo as a company and its economic contributions to Solomon Islands see Barclay and Wakabayashi (2000).
9 The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney required that participants in this research remain anonymous. For that reason in this article interviewees are referred to not by their real names, but by place names. Sarahama interviewees have been given names of places in the Miyako Islands, Japanese mainlander interviewees are referred to by place names from the mainland, and Solomon Islander interviewees are referred to by place names from the Solomons. Interviews with Sarahaman fishers and Japanese managers were conducted in Japanese. Interviews with Solomon Islanders were conducted in English or Pijin. Translations into English are my own unless otherwise specified.
10 Areke: interviewed several times on the Solomon Taiyo base at Noro during the period June–August 1999.
11 Ilangana: interview at Agnes Lodge in Munda 3 June 1999.
14 Lambete: several interviews at Agnes Lodge in Munda during the period June–August 1999.
15 Nagahama: interview in his home 6 November 1998.
16 Maezato: interview in his home on Irabu 6 November 1998.
17 Rarumana: interview in her home in a baiﬁshing village 31 May 1999.

References


