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Master of Arts Thesis

Okinawan Textiles as Japanese Heritage
A Critical Approach

MA in History, Arts and Culture of Asia
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To Gillian.

Abstract

The Ryūkyū archipelago, in Southern Japan, is home to some ancient techniques for crafting (*Kijōka-bashōfu*) and dyeing (*Bingata*) textiles which are not found elsewhere in mainland Japan. The Kingdom of Ryūkyū was annexed to the Japanese empire only in recent times (1879), after centuries of relative independence, and the Japanese governments of the first decades of the 20th century has made considerable efforts to reshape and silence the local identity. This process of neutralization of local culture also affected the visibility and the perceived identity of those crafts within the national cultural discourse throughout the whole century.

My thesis inspects different issues related to the intercurrent relations between heritage and nation. I will reconstruct what has been done to the Ryūkyū local heritage in the past and what the latest developments have been. I will also highlight the differences existing between the ways the identity of these crafts, *Kijōka-bashōfu* in particular, are presented in documents aiming at the international, rather than domestic, public. By doing so, I will offer an insight on the cultural policies implemented by the Japanese governments in this respect. Finally, I will operate an audiovisual analysis on a documentary made by entities independent by Japan, representing the everyday life and the activities of local craftspeople involved in the production of these textiles. With that, I will also assess how the local discourse on identity differs from the national discourse.

Keywords: *kijōka bashōfu;* craftsmanship; culture; heritage; media; nation-work; textile.

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Introduction

Heritage - a vague term used to define a certain cultural practice, or a monument, amongst several other things, still existing nowadays and deemed important by an entity, such as a nation - is usually deeply intertwined with the concept of hegemony. The traditions and the cultural practices (usually defined as *Intangible Heritage*) and the monuments, or the artworks (*Tangible Heritage*) are almost invariably selected by a ruling élite among a plethora of cultural products, and they represent a canon of a national culture which is a direct consequence of the choices (usually political) of the ruling community. This whole process takes the form of a continue renegotiation of values employed by the communities to establish what is important in the present, as stated by Laurajane Smith (Smith, 2017).

By selecting a cultural product as a shared national heritage, the community in power within the nation tacitly but firmly affirms what is important and what elements of the past are to be preserved. The remains of the past are a necessary part of the identity of a community. Electing a certain past is therefore needed to indicate to the ruled community which values are considered fundamental and what is the master narrative of the nation. The repackaging and glorification of heritage has been widely employed during the 19th and the 20th centuries as a tool for nation work. In this respect, Japan has employed this kind of procedures several times, with different purposes. The most evident example, in this regard, was the creation of National Treasure system, which I am going to thoroughly discuss in the second chapter. Especially, the case of Okinawan local heritage is probably exemplary for the manifold aspects it includes, which I analyse and present.

Due to its peculiar history, its natural environment and its relations with the other political entities of the Asia-Pacific region, although being officially part of Japan, this archipelago has always presented traditions and cultural features perceived as “different” from those of mainland Japan. Those characteristics, after the annexation of the archipelago have gradually been exposed to a process of cultural assimilation,

aiming at ‘neutralizing’ the differences with Japan and repackaging those peculiarities as a regional, minor expression of a wider, national culture.

In its past history, which I will inspect in the first chapter, the Ryūkyū archipelago (西南諸島 *Seinan shotō*), has been in a marginal position in comparison with the rest of Japan. This has led to the birth of peculiar cultural expressions which are not found elsewhere in Japan. The archipelago stretches at the southernmost border of Japan, between the island of Kyūshū and Taiwan. For many centuries, this archipelago has had a history deeply intertwined and yet politically independent from that of the Japanese empire. The archipelago previously divided into three different kingdoms (Okinawa, Sakishima and Amami) was unified in 1429 and became the Ryūkyū Kingdom, having its capital in the city of Shuri, on the island of Okinawa. This kingdom, also thanks to the good diplomatic relations with the Ming dynasty of which it was tributary, greatly flourished for about 150 years, during which it played a key role in maritime trade between East and Southeast Asia. The Kingdom was later invaded in 1609 by the army of the Lord of Satsuma, a vassal of the Japanese shogunate and lost its independence. The annexation of the archipelago into the Empire was completed in 1879, with the formal creation of the Prefecture of Okinawa. The region was then occupied by the American army at the end of the WWII, and returned to Japan only in 1972, even though a relevant contingent is still settled on the island. The whole history of the archipelago, with all the exchanges and the contacts held in the past with other countries in East and South-East Asia makes the methodologies of analysis related to transcultural history quite useful in analysing the historical identity of the archipelago.

In my thesis, I will analyse the different forms of repackaging Okinawan crafts and local cultural expressions have undergone to be integrated into the national heritage. The processes of repackaging have different features depending on the entity that performs it: throughout this work, I will inspect the differences occurring in how the repackaging was operated by the *Mingei* Movement, the Japanese Government and by foreign and local media. The techniques I focus on are those used to craft *bashōfu*

textiles, which are, nowadays, only produced in the archipelago. I believe that the history of *bashōfu* in the modern age can be particularly meaningful to get an insight into the Japanese heritage policies, due to its present relevance and to the amount of processes it has undergone. What I will do is also study the relationship between craftspeople and the Japanese state and see whether they are included or not in the national cultural discourse. In my analysis, I will employ different media related to the national government and the craftsmen to evaluate how Japan has taken control of local heritage and is deploying it as a tool of governance. How has Japan tried to manipulate Okinawa's traditions so far? How are these traditions presented in different medias? What are craftspeople doing to protect their techniques and their identity?

In the first chapter I make a review of the scholarship which has proven useful for this work, before proceeding on to a general overview of Okinawa's history, highlighting the most relevant moments and events in its common history with Japan. I will stress upon on the elements which have been employed by the Japanese authorities in forging a common national identity and neutralizing regionalities, also employing the conceptual tools linked to transcultural history and transculturality at large. In the second chapter I will analyse the main concepts and actors that hold a role within the Japanese national system dealing with the recognition of artisans and introduce *bashōfu* textiles. Finally, in the third chapter, I will discuss, by examining media about *bashōfu* and the craftspeople involved in its production, their discourse about themselves and that made by Japanese official bodies, their technique and their relationship with the nation.

Chapter 1: Contextualising Ryūkyū Culture and History in East Asia

1. Positioning within the state of the field

For this work, I have worked by drawing on different sources, trying to give a plurality of perspectives on the chosen topic, to provide the reader a wider angle. I have decided to start with an historical overview on Okinawa's history to support the main concept of the first chapter, that is the debate on the supposed historical belonging of Ryūkyū archipelago to mainland Japan and of its cultural independence. In doing this, I have decided to rely on the most authoritative sources available: the collection of essays on Okinawa's history edited by Josef Kreiner (*Ryūkyū in World History*, 2001), which was particularly meaningful in presenting me a critical analysis on this aspect. In this respect, the volume edited by Akamine Mamoru (*The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, 2017) has also proven useful to examine the main events in Okinawan history. The second section of this work, instead, presents several conceptual tools effective in approaching the questions I deal with. In this respect, I have given a considerable amount of attention to the concepts of nationalism and ethnicity as key points for my whole argument. To better tackle them, I have referred to, in order, *Nationalism* (John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith, 1994) and *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Anthony D. Smith, 1986) which have been of paramount importance to understand the main aspects related to these intricate and complicated matters. The concepts there exposed served as a basis for me to better understand the specific case of Japan, in which I have delved deeper into through essays such "Cultural Nationalism in East Asia" (1993) by Harumi Befu, "Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism" (1999) and "Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan" (1992). The latest introduces varieties of nationalism (namely the *organic* and *romantic* nationalism) which are deeply embedded in some features of the topic I inspect. These

aspects will later be necessary to understand the policies of heritage and power I present thereafter.

The topic of heritage employed as an instrument to establish power has largely been analysed by previous scholarship. In this regard, the most remarkable example is the essay written by Laurajane Smith, "Uses of Heritage" (2006), where she makes a compelling and detailed analysis of the different manner heritage can be used as a power tool. The concept of nation work will also play a relevant role throughout my whole thesis, especially the way it was envisioned by Timothy Brook and Andre Schmid (*Nation Work: Asian Elites and National Identities*, 2010) and illustrated by Kristin Surak in relation to Japanese national culture (*Making Tea, Making Japan. Cultural Nationalism in Practice*, 2013). Another source I have referred to that carefully reconstructs the history and the ideas of the *Mingei* Movement in relation to Okinawa is the volume by Yūko Kikuchi (*Japanese modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*, 2004) which meticulously inspects primary sources of people related to the *Mingei* Movement and reconstructs their thoughts and reviews their agency in the rediscovery and repackaging of Okinawa's heritage and culture. Other sources I have drawn upon are those analysing the concepts of transcultural history and transculturality, which have proven useful in inspecting cultural heritage as something unbound from the modern nation states: I have referred to the collection of essays edited by Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch and Christiane Sibille (*Transcultural History Theories, Methods, Sources*, 2012) which builds a useful methodology to start analysing history from a different perspective to overcome the master narratives of the nation-state. For the categories of transcultural objects and art instead, I have relied upon the introduction composed by Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp (*EurAsian Matters: An Introduction. Art History, Materiality, and the Transcultural Object* in the collection of essays *EurAsian Matters*, 2018) and the one written by Juliane Noth and Joachim Rees (in *The Itineraries of Art. Topographies of Artistic Mobility in Europe and Asia*, 2015): they both highlight the most consequential points in critically approaching objects and cultural practices from a transcultural

perspective, especially focusing on the relevance of the mobility of objects and the institutions in relation to culture.

Considering the specific context of Okinawan heritage, it has also undergone different analyses concerning several aspects: Mary Loo Tze has, for example, made an exhaustive and convincing analysis of the process of assimilation of the Castle of Shuri into the national heritage (Heritage Politics. Shuri Castle and Okinawa's incorporation into modern Japan, 1879-2000) before and after WWII. A similar operation has been done by Sumiko Sarashima in her doctoral work concerning Bingata, a technique used to dye cloth (Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan: Bingata, a Traditional Dyed Textile from Okinawa, 2013). Other two works that have proven fundamental in the elaboration of this work have been "Kingdom of Beauty. *Mingei* and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan" (2007) and "The Folk Craft Movement in Japan, 1925-1945" (1996) respectively written by Kim Brandt and Lisbeth Brandt. They both use a chronological narration to inspect the evolution of the *Mingei* Movement and they tell what has happened between the Movement and Okinawa with a very attentive eye.

The most relevant and complete work on *bashōfu* is, in any case, the doctoral thesis written by Katrien Hendrickx, "The Origins of Banana-fibre Cloth in the Ryukyus, Japan" (2007), where she sets a well-round analysis of the different aspects related to *bashōfu*. The role of the museum exhibitions concerning crafts in shaping a national identity was instead extensively analyzed in "*Material Choices. Refashioning Bast and Leaf Fibers in Asian and the Pacific*" (Hamilton & Lynne Milgram eds., 2007) an astonishing volume which analyses the current situation of traditional textiles all over East Asia, also focussing on *bashōfu*. However, what I will do, is to analyse more in detail documents available online and documentaries focusing more on the position of the craftspeople involved, to get a different insight and a more detailed picture of the situation.

Finally, for the last chapter, where I sketch out an analysis of the dynamics between craftspeople involved in the production of *bashōfu* and the nation, I have

found illuminating, reading Michael Herzfeld's book "*The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value*" (2004) and Dorinne Kondo's "*Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*" (1990). These works make an extraordinary explanation of the intercurrent acts and flow coming into play for craftspeople in the contemporary age, and the internal dynamics within communities of artisans, providing me the conceptual tools for my analysis. While the first one is mostly focussed on the communities of artisans in Crete, even though making a wider point, the second one is set in Japan, proving extremely useful for this work. Although this thesis is not based on primary sources, differently from these essays, they have helped me reconsidering the relationships between, for example, a master artisan and the state under a different light.

2. An overview of Okinawa's premodern history

Figure 1: Map of the Ryūkyū archipelago

The Ryūkyū archipelago[1] comprehends several groups of islands, from north to south: Ōsumi, Tokara, and the actual Ryūkyū islands, further divided into Amami-Ōshima islands, Okinawa and the Sakishima islands. The first remnants of human activities in the region are rather old, dating back to about 32,000(±1000) years ago and are often identified as the oldest witnesses of *Homo sapiens* in East Asia.[2]

Although the archipelago is now officially part of Japan, as I illustrate throughout this chapter, its history before the annexation of 1872 differs quite remarkably from that of mainland Japan. Thus, here I make an overview of its history to highlight the most prominent traits of its history as an independent country. I believe this is meaningful to provide a general understanding of the principal issues at stake

[1] The group of islands stretching from of Kyūshū, the southernmost island of mainland Japan, to Taiwan, has been termed in several ways. The most common terms used are "Ryūkyū archipelago", "Southwestern Islands", "Ryūkyū islands" and "Ryūkyū Arc". All these names express a slightly different nuance of meaning, according to the situation. However, if not otherwise specified, I employ the term "Ryūkyū Archipelago" to indicate all the islands from the northernmost to the southernmost.

[2] Josef Kreiner, "Ryūkyūan History in Comparative Perspective", in *Ryūkyū in World History,* ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 1-2.

when discussing the repackaging and appropriation of local heritage by the nation, in this case Japan. I put strong emphasis on what has been done especially after the annexation, and the policies applied by Japan on the newly integrated territory.

The archipelago, due to its central position in East Asia, quickly started to receive visits by groups of immigrants both from the continent and mainland Japan. Nevertheless, it would be superficial to believe that the influences of these groups had spread equally all over the archipelago. The archeological remains suggest the existence of a "Northern Ryūkyū Culture" expanding from Ōsumi to Okinawa, presenting features somehow close to those of the Jōmon period (10,000 BC - 300 BC) and the subsequent Yayoi period (300 BC - 300 CE). Conversely, on the Sakishima islands, the "Southern Ryūkyū Culture" has features and characteristics akin to those of Taiwan and the Southeast Asian islands.[3] The whole region has therefore been from the very past an important contact zone among cultures that later pursued quite different developments. The transculturality of the region is, as I illustrate throughout the whole argumentation, one of the main points I focus on, as it can be deemed a remarkable feature of the culture of the archipelago.

In later centuries the islands of the archipelago continued their development, often independently the ones from the others, and their inhabitants kept trading with all the countries surrounding the archipelago, which was part of what is nowadays known as the "East Asia Trade Sphere", which saw Song China (960-1279) at its core and consisted of a trading network mainly managed by Chinese merchants who had settled in the countries involved, such as Japan, Korea, and other countries in Southeast Asia. The Ryūkyū islands were also participating, and many of the goods shipped from Japan to China, mainly shells and sulphur, had been exported from Amami Island.[4]

The importance of the Ryūkyū archipelago further increased thanks to the preferential role accorded by Ming China (1368-1644) in the 14th century. The Middle kingdom, called Chūzan, established the payment of an annual tribute to China, and

[3] Mamoru Akamine, Lina Terrell and Robert N. Huey, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 3.
[4] Ibid.

was therefore given some privileges by the imperial court, such as military protection and exclusive trading conditions. The Middle kingdom eventually unified the archipelago under its control, giving birth to the first Shō dynasty (1407-1469), ruling over the Ryūkyū kingdom. The affinity of this Kingdom to coeval Ming China appears striking, and its richness compared to close countries is seen as a direct consequence of this good relationship (Kreiner 2001, 4). The following century instead is commonly recognized as the one during which the influence of Japan was strongest: several Japanese families moved to the islands during the reign of the King Shō Taikyū (1454-1460), establishing further contacts and trading relations with their mother country. During this period Buddhism, started to spread in the archipelago thanks to the many monks come from Japan, who also introduced Japanese literature and culture.[5]

The 15th century was later acknowledged as Ryūkyū Golden Age, during which the archipelago really became the 'Cornerstone of Asia' trading directly or indirectly with all the countries in both East and Southeast Asia. However, the importance held by the Kingdom as a trading sea power would rapidly decline in the following centuries due to the combination of three major events occurring in the zone: the decline of the Chinese tribute system, the increased activities of *wakō* pirates and finally the movements related to the military unification of Japan.

The weakening of the Chinese tributary relations with the Ryūkyū Kingdom marked the beginning of the decline of the archipelago as a trading sea power, which in the first half of the 16th was falling behind China and the newly-arrived Portuguese in terms of trading power.
During the second decade of the same period, the depleted Kingdom started to lose its independence in favour of the Japanese domain of Satsuma: the recently elected daimyo Shimazu Yoshihisa, in 1570 had sent a monk to Ryūkyū asking for tributes, while also banning all ships leaving without the requested documents from trade. The Kingdom ignored these requests for a few years but eventually, in 1575, had to give up. Thus, the power of Satsuma, backed by the shogun, grew considerably, although it

[5] Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia,* 40.

did not really supplant the Chinese power on the archipelago. [6] In the following years, the contrasts for the dominion over Japan would exacerbate, and the struggles for military hegemony between Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Shimazu Yoshihisa would end up involving the officially independent kingdom, which in 1609 with the invasion of an army from Satsuma, surrendered and offered loyalty to the shogunate. This submission would later lead to major interferences in the foreign politics of the Kingdom, such as the ban on Christianity in the 17th century, further confirming the strong authority of Japan.
This process proved unstoppable and gradually the Kingdom lost its independence, gaining a place within Japan. [7] This resulted into higher annual tributes to be corresponded to the shogun government, and the dispatch of regular missions to the court of Edo. However, although the Kingdom had lost almost every trace of its past independence, it still had several trading routes open with China, and the information coming from these routes were then usually shared with Japan.
Although the archipelago's political independence was decreasing, apparently the archipelago was still culturally distant from mainland Japan, as it was actually about to enter a new phase of its history. With the advent of the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), the kingdom started to be influenced by the new Chinese strong foreign policies; Japan was not interested in overtly contrasting China, and this led to a situation in which the kingdom was simultaneously and pacifically a vassal for both courts. In this period the kingdom decided to move closer to the Chinese cultural sphere, also in order to avoid being completely absorbed by Japan, thus creating a pseudo-Chinese national identity.[8]

This process of adapting and absorbing Chinese elements could be seen in several cultural features throughout the island, such as the architectures of the city, like the castle of Shuri, which recalls the Forbidden City of Beijing,[9] although still featuring elements typical of Japanese architecture, like the cusped gables of the doors.

[6] Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia,* 7-8.
[7] Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia,* 63.
[8] Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, 83.
[9] Ibid.

Figure 2: The Castle of Shuri, Naha

The adaptation of Chinese elements also pervaded other aspects of the Ryukyuan society, such as the public ceremonies. This double system of vassalage would strongly shape Ryukyuan identity for the following centuries, creating a society that really was a cornerstone for two powerful Asian civilizations. This conflation of cultures would however end a few centuries later, with the forced annexation of the archipelago by Japan in 1879. All the changes in foreign influence happened in its past but, however, are strongly symptomatic of a multi-layered and complex society which cannot be simplistically characterized neither as "Chinese" nor as "Japanese". In this respect, the transcultural history theory, that tries to go beyond the usual narrative aiming to describe the wider picture, overcoming the narrative of a static, rigid and homogeneous nation-state, seems to fit the peculiar identity of the Ryūkyū archipelago.

3. The *Ryūkyū shobun*: after the Japanese annexation

After the Meiji Revolution (1868), the newborn Japanese nation would pursue a much more aggressive foreign policy than before, with the compelling aim of modernization and being respected by the Western countries. This resulted, among others, in overtly hostile and imperialist policies against other countries which would culminate in the annexation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and later the occupation of Korea (1905), besides other events such as the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).

The official annexation of the Ryūkyū Kingdom started abruptly in 1872 with the so-called Miyako Accident. A mercantile ship travelling from the island of Miyako, in the Southern part of the archipelago, had shipwrecked close to littoral of Taiwan, and all the survivors had been brutally killed by native inhabitants of Taiwan. This event was quickly employed by Japan as an excuse to remark its control and power over the whole archipelago in contrast with China. The recent Meiji regime decided to deal with the affair by assuming that the murdered sailors were Japanese citizen, and that the Japanese Empire had *de facto* substituted the Satsuma *han* as the ruling authority over Ryūkyū. Thus, Japan was remarking its right to avenge the civilians and, by doing so, legally assuming power over the archipelago. Of course, this would trigger the reactions of both China and Ryūkyū, which were still tied to the old model of double allegiance. What is remarkable in this event is the evident change in terms of foreign policies and worldviews held on one hand by Japan (modern, imperialist and linked to the Western international laws) and on the other hand by China and Ryūkyū, still adopting family-like webs of relationships (Smits 2001, 288).

The controversy about the political belonging of Ryūkyū would continue for several years: on one side there was Japan relentlessly making requests to the authorities of the archipelago to give up local autonomy and quietly join the empire, on the other the Ryukyuan authorities were hoping for China's intervention (1875). The requests made by Ryūkyū were hinging, as stated before, on a recognition of roles

attributed to China and Japan, which were seen as *parent countries* deserving respect:[10] the Ryukyuan authorities were loudly claiming to this principle in their request. However, on the 4th of April 1879, the last King, Shō Tai (1843-1879) formally left the archipelago for Tōkyō to pay his respect to the Emperor, according him the authority over the former independent Kingdom. This ratified the annexation of the archipelago to the empire and the creation of the Okinawa *han*.

Even though the quarrel with China for the possession of the archipelago would last until 1895 and during the 1880s it even involved the institution of an international arbitration to decide, in 1879 the Kingdom eventually lost its sovereignty. The period running from 1872 to 1896 (or to 1880 according to Kreiner)[11] is commonly in Japan known as *Ryūkyū shobun* (the "dealing with the Ryūkyū", where *shobun* is a term usually employed to mean some unpleasant household chore such as disposing garbage) and it is symptomatic of the arrogance of the Japanese government in dealing with the matter. What is interesting to the scope of this work, however, is what started to happen to Ryukyuan culture from this moment onwards.

In the period following the annexation, a long process of assimilation had its start.[12] Surprisingly enough, the Japanese government allowed all the bureaucrats to maintain their former working places (although many of them launched passive resistance initiatives such as group resigning) and high-rank officials and aristocrats to pursue the lifestyle they had so far. Overall, the class that suffered the most for the loss of independence was the lowest, which was particularly hit by the lack of expenditures to improve local welfare by the new central government. One of the most important interventions made by the Japanese government during these years was the establishment of a multitude of schools staffed with mainland Japanese teachers, allowing the new ruling power to shape the mind of the future generations with a different set of notions. The phenomenon of using school education to inculcate

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[10] Gregory Smits *"*The Ryūkyū Shobun in East Asia and World History*"* in *Ryūkyū in World History,* ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 287-88.
[11] Josef Kreiner, "Ryūkyūan History in Comparative Perspective", in *Ryūkyū in World History,* ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 21.
[12] Tze May Loo. *Heritage Politics. Shuri Castle and Okinawa's incorporation into modern Japan, 1879-2000.* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 27.

nationalist values into students and therefore as a political instrument is seen as an expression of organic cultural nationalism, that is, as defined by Yoshino, one of the two varieties of cultural nationalism. [13] According to him, there would be two types of cultural nationalism, namely romantic cultural nationalism and organic cultural nationalism. The latter is based on the notion that the inhabitants of a nation are to be absorbed into the will of the organic state to be free, thus being deeply intertwined with the political aspects of nationalism. Although Yoshino's observations are generally applied to Japan as a whole, in the case of the Ryūkyū archipelago they seem to further adhere due the strongly political and cultural nature of the process of annexation.

Nonetheless, Japan also left the region the possibility to maintain the original administrative structure together with old customs and traditions, probably with the aim of limiting the generally widespread dissatisfaction of the population. This policy, called *Kyūkan onzon* (旧慣温存, "preserving old traditions") would last until 1903, when the launch of the Okinawa Prefecture Land Reorganization Project abolished all the old customs and pushed forward the process of cultural assimilation of the archipelago within Japan. The old customs and traditions, however, had already started to vanish during the 1890s, with the rise of a modern, middle class of Okinawans, looking at the mainland values rather than at those of the archipelago (Smits 2001, 294).

On the other hand, the policies applied by Japan in the territory are commonly identified as the main reasons for the still existing gap between the archipelago and mainland Japan: the process of *samuraisation* (Kreiner 2001, 11) which was aiming at homogenising Meiji Japan under common values such as obedience to the emperor, a common language and specific cultural features, in the Ryūkyū archipelago failed completely. This happened, according to Kreiner, mainly for the lack of some key values such as *bushidō*, Shintoism and Buddhism, while Daoism, conversely, was very strong. All these reasons would play a key role in influencing the successive developments in the local culture of the Ryūkyū and the place it held within the national

[13] Kosaku Yoshino. *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*. (London: Routledge, 1992), 64-7.

discourse on culture, especially during the 20th century.

However, there were some events that would later play a key role in the rediscovery and the appreciation of Ryūkyūan culture especially in mainland Japan, during the Taishō period (1912-1926) and the early years Shōwa period (1926-1989). One was, in 1924, the successful campaign supported by the influent architect Itō Chūta for the preservation of the Castle of Shuri.[14] The other, that proved to be incredibly influential in later years, was the first visit paid to the archipelago on behalf of the founder of the *Mingei* Movement Yanagi Sōetsu in 1938, which had an incredible outcome for Okinawan crafts, that I analyze and discuss further.

[14] Tze May Loo. *Heritage Politics. Shuri Castle and Okinawa's incorporation into modern Japan, 1879-2000.* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 201.

4. The Ryūkyū archipelago in contemporary history

The most important event for the archipelago, as for the rest of the country, would be the participation of Japan to WWII, which would coincide with an overall devastation of the cities, with uncountable losses in terms of casualties, buildings and historical goods. After the war, the archipelago was at the centre of a dispute between Japan and the U.S. concerning its sovereignty. The U.S. were interested in possessing this territory for its high strategic value, and in 1946 the archipelago was separated by the rest of the country. However, in July 1951 a referendum was hold, and the majority of the population actually wished to be returned to Japan. On the other hand, by signing the Treaty of San Francisco in September 1951, Japan gave up all the rights on the archipelago, paving the way to the creation of an independent state of the Ryūkyū. This act was seen by the local population as the second *Ryūkyū shobun*, and it is still a matter of friction and discontent today.[15]

As a result of the Treaty, from 1952, the first steps to establish a new Ryūkyū state were made. Most of the interventions were made with the aim to help Ryūkyū shaping their own identity, with projects concerning the reconstruction of the remnants of the Castle of Shuri, and the creation of a museum exhibiting local culture. Apparently, in fact, the main goal of the American authorities was to "Ryukyuanize" the archipelago, wiping out the effects of the previous Japanization.[16] This was made with the purpose of making the whole region easier to control, deleting any possible patriotic feeling towards Japan that could trigger uprisings. By re-establishing Ryukyuan traditions and culture, the U.S. were hoping to shape a territory that could be more manipulable, loyal and easier to control. Conversely, the entire territory of the archipelago was soon permeated by several military bases which heavily influenced the daily life of the inhabitants, often for the worse. Eventually, after two decades, in

[15] Josef Kreiner, "Ryūkyūan History in Comparative Perspective", in *Ryūkyū in World History,* ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 35.
[16] Tze May Loo, *Heritage Politics. Shuri Castle and Okinawa's incorporation into modern Japan, 1879 – 2000*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 150.

1972, the archipelago was returned to Japan, although most of its territory is still occupied by American military bases. Nowadays the sovereignty on the archipelago fully belongs to Japan, that has divided it into two prefectures, the Northern Islands belonging to Kagoshima Prefecture and the Southern Islands to that of Okinawa. Albeit in the last decades many steps towards complete integration of the archipelago into the Japanese nation have been made, it is still widely perceived as a foreign zone within Japan by its inhabitants,[17] and the debate whether Okinawa shall be given more autonomy by the central government is rather energetic. The citizens are pushing for the establishing of favourable trading conditions, such as a free trade zone in Naha, to revamp the local economy, but the central government is of course opposing this.[18]

As we have seen throughout this whole chapter, the specific history of this region is more complicated than it would seem, and it remarkably differs from the history of mainland Japan. In fact, it has experimented not only periods of political autonomy, but has also developed its own original cultural identity derived with the conflation and reworking of features found all over East Asia. Thus, when the region became part of Japan, its history and its cultural practices had to be rediscussed and properly repackaged to assimilate them into the broader area of Japanese culture. As I have already mentioned in relation to the case of the U.S. domination over Okinawa after WWII, the process of establishing certain cultural values, amongst which cultural heritage is comprehended, is often a tool for establishing and reinforcing political governance. This strategy had the primary goal to discourage the growth of independence movement claiming for an Okinawan autonomy from Japan, although some citizens do claim it. What I highlight in the following chapter is how these operations of repackaging of local culture and assimilation is done through the national heritage discourse and how the processes of nation-work take place.

[17] Josef Kreiner, “Ryūkyūan History in Comparative Perspective”, in *Ryūkyū in World History,* ed. Josef Kreiner (Bonn: Bier'sche Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 36-8.
[18] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Turning Okinawan Culture into Japanese Heritage

As I have highlighted in the last section of the previous chapter, when the archipelago was annexed to mainland Japan, its history and thus its culture had in some cases to be reprocessed and repackaged to build in its inhabitants a stronger sense of belonging to the nation.[19] The repackaging was mostly made top-down by the Japanese government, but some Okinawan authorities were obviously involved in its actualization, although, as Kreiner stated, many bureaucrats had started operations of passive resistance[20]. The process of reviewing and rewriting history to support the ruling ideology of a nation is efficaciously explained by Partha Chatterjee,[21] where he makes the case of Indian religious traditions. Among the various answers he gains, one seems to be applicable to the case of Okinawa's history and traditions: the majority, in this case the state, empowered by the community of mainland Japanese, holds the power. Thus, although the history of the archipelago is deeply intertwined with that of Japan, of China, of Korea and with other civilizations settled in Southeast Asia, being the inhabitants of the archipelago just a small percentage of population of the whole country, their history and culture had to be integrated into the majoritarian one, and this entailed for the specific history of the archipelago to be largely overlooked in the pinpointing of the national, master-narrative. So, after the annexation the cultural elements highlighted by the new government were those in common with mainland Japan. This was instrumental to trigger a process (the so-called *samuraisation* involving the whole Japanese society of that period) that would turn them slowly but inevitably into loyal subjects to the new ruling authority, the empire. Although the annexation of Okinawa is not comparable to a colonization by Japan, this process is particularly evident in this period, since Japan had also to tackle the Chinese feelings

[19] Eriko Tomizawa-Kay, "Reinventing Localism, Tradition, and Identity. The Role of Modern Okinawa Painting (1930s-1960s)," in *East Asian Art in a Transnational Context,* ed. by Toshio Watanabe & Eriko Tomizawa-Kay (London: Routledge, 2019), 102.
[20] Kreiner, "Ryūkyūan History in Comparative Perspective", 22.
[21] Partha Chatterjee, "National History and its Exclusions," in *Nationalism,* ed. by John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 209-214.

still present within the population of the archipelago. The post-annexation archipelago cannot be properly termed as a colony for at least two reasons: first of all, it was regularly integrated into the Satsuma *han* and then part of it became an autonomous prefecture, therefore being integrated in the nation; and secondly, the way it was governed by Japan strongly differs by the way the nation has ruled over other annexed territories such as the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan. Anyway, the position it held within the country was, at least from the cultural point of view, that of a country that needed to be 'educated' and integrated through strict control, and therefore it had to be subdued first. The narrative on culture imposed by the Japanese nation in this period, which differed from the original culture of the inhabitants of the archipelago, on which the Okinawans had no say, had to draw the archipelago nearer to Japan and farther away from China.

Thus, although at the beginning the government had decided to apply the *Kyūkan onzon* policy, allowing locals to maintain intact their traditions this openness would only last until 1903, with the start of the Land Reorganization Policy. However, how can a nation employ its heritage as a governance tool? How has Japan employed Okinawan heritage in the past?

In this chapter, I discuss how culture can be used as an instrument of power by the nation. In this case, I will first illustrate how cultural features, traditions and history can be used as a form of nation-work. Then, I will introduce the policies Japan has implemented during the 20th century concerning cultural heritage. In the end, I discuss *Kijōka bashōfu* throughout its history and examine its present state.

1. History and Nation-work in Meiji Japan

> "The problem facing Meiji nationalist historians was twofold: how to construct a nation from the material of Japan's past and how to insist on that nation's uniqueness. […] Meiji historians produced a nation not by "Westernizing" its past or skilfully blending "East" and "West", though these figures are scattered throughout their texts. Rather, they proceeded by restructuring Japan's relationship to its past; they strove to train the Japanese in a different way of appreciating familiar events and heroes so that these monuments all refer to the nation that was to emerge after the Meiji revolution."

(Keirstead 2010, 235)

As I have anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, and as illustrated by Keirstead in his article, after the Meiji restauration, the history of the country had to be accurately revisited and reviewed in order for it to suit the new necessities of the nation. Thus, the creation of a new, national history, overlooking regional differences and aiming at shaping a modern state, able to compete with the Occidental countries and to conquer itself a prominent role in Asia.

The process of modernization also involved culture: it was in fact necessary for Japan to showcase a solid, coherent culture that could be employed also in relation with other countries. This process of enforcing the identity of the nation through culture goes under the name of "nation-work" and can be summed up as "the social labor of objectifying the abstract concept 'nation'[22]", going usually in two different directions. First of all, within the country: it was crucial to create a homogeneous model to start the process of *samuraisation* of the population in the whole country, to create loyal and hard-working citizens that would give their total and selfless support to the national effort for modernization. Secondly, national culture was also used as an instrument for external recognition, especially aiming at Western countries. This particular aspect had different forms, evolving from a pacific showcase of cultural features with the purpose

[22] Kristin Surak, "Nation-Work: A Praxeology of Making and Maintaining Nations" *European Journal of Sociology* 53, no. 2 (2012): 173.

to sparkle the interest of Western countries towards Japanese culture. In the 1930s, Japanese national culture became part of a much more aggressive attitude Japan shown toward other countries.[23] It has also been highlighted how culture was employed to create a certain 'soft power', aiming to present Japan to the other countries of the region as a possible bridge between the Asian and European civilizations.[24]

The culture selected by the ruling elite in the case of Japan, was the now so-called "classic" Japanese culture, it revolved around books and artworks accurately chosen to represent a country that was trying to delete any trace of past Chinese influences, and create a canon to represent what was deemed as "pure" Japan.[25] The books chosen, such as "The Tale of Genji", which still is the Japanese classic *par excellence,* and the artworks as well created a precise master narrative mainly referring to the Kyoto region, seen as the cradle of 'classical Japan', while all the other regions were seen as 'local variations' of the core culture. The same goes of course for Okinawa and its surroundings, which were constructed as a periphery to central Japan and its culture was strongly associated with the ethnicity of its inhabitants. As I explain later, this was the conclusion to which, although for different reasons, Yanagi Sōetsu came.

The newly selected canon of culture is then promulgated and delivered to the population in several different ways, the most relevant being education, the control over mass-media and other entities, such as the museum. In general, the methods employed by the state to mould its official culture and the dynamics of cultural nationalism have been described with accuracy by Benedict Anderson (2006). In the case of Japan, Kristin Surak (2013), has brilliantly analysed, how the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) was chosen and elevated as a symbol of national cohesion and external recognition. She stresses upon how, in some cases, this practice has been used as an expression of a Japanese national spirit, during the years before WWII, aiming at cultural governance. This has relevant outcomes both for the Japanese governmental

[23] Kristin Surak, Making Tea, Making Japan. Cultural Nationalism in Practice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.101.
[24] Natsuko Akagawa, Heritage Conservation and Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: Heritage, National Identity and National Interest (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015) p.183.
[25] Haruo Shirane. "Curriculum and Competing Canons" in *Inventing the Classics. Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature* ed. by Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 220-249.

bodies and for its citizens: in the former case it provides all Japanese a homogenous set of common roots to which every citizen shall adhere to, strengthening the 'Japanese nation'.[26] In the latter, the knowing of these elements of a common past and the sense of belonging to a 'Japanese nation' proves to be fundamental for the citizens, as it stigmatizes their membership to this group identity.[27]

It is interesting to note how cultural features related to Okinawa were completely omitted in the new national canon, which was recalling Heian Period (794-1185 C.E.) as the ideal past to refer to for its artistic refinement, thus focussing on the artistic expressions related to the Kansai region. This also culminated in the aforementioned 1903's Okinawa Prefecture Land Reorganization Project made with the purpose of easing the assimilation of the archipelago within the state by silencing local culture.

[26] Rodney Harrison, *Heritage. Critical Approaches*. (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 142.
[27] Ibid.

2. Japanese heritage policies in the past and nowadays

Japan is one of the nations with the earliest legislation to develop a coherent and solid policy for the protection of cultural heritage. The first act related to the recognition and protection of cultural properties (*Koshaji Hozonhō,* "Law for the preservation of Ancient Shrines and Temples") was implemented in 1879, remaining effective until the promulgation of the National Treasures Preservation Act (1929).[28] Whereas the two aforementioned acts were uniquely aiming at the protection of the so-called Tangible Cultural Heritage, after WWII, Japan and South Korea were the first countries to promulgate policies for the protection and of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), too. The concept of intangible heritage is quite difficult and vague, and at global level, it is usually defined as "Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as a part of their cultural heritage".[29] The local definitions given to the ICH, can broadly vary depending on the country. In Japan, the first policy specifically quoting the concept of ICH (*mukei bunkazai)* is the Cultural Properties Protection Law, dating to 1950: its main aim, concerning ICH, is to select and protect, amongst others, cultural practices deemed worth of preservation.

A specific governmental agency, the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*bunkachō),* was founded in 1968 and given the task to pinpoint the holders of cultural practices believed to be endangered, or representative for the nation, and put them under protection. The process of designation, selection and recognition is gradual, and it usually takes many years. It eventually led to the creation of lists of craftspeople and local communities affiliated to the Agency, encouraged to perpetuate their activity and

[28] John H. Stubbs and Robert G. Thomson "Japan" in *Architectural Conservation in East Asia: National Experiences and Practice* edited by Stubbs, John H. and Robert G. Thomson. (London: Routledge 2017), 77.
[29] Kazuko Goto. "Policy for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan: how it relates to creativity." In *Handbook on the Economics of Cultural Heritage* (2013): 567.

sustain the cultural practice they were chosen for, also by receiving an annual amount of money.

It is therefore possible to appreciate how powerful and influent can the inclusion in this kind of lists be: once a technique or a cultural practice is selected, its national recognition is incredibly enhanced. This happens also thanks to subsidies and the official representation of the selected practice in official media. By drawing on Bourdieu, it can be said that this operation greatly enhanced the Cultural Capital[30] attributed to the showcased pieces, it elevated them from elements of rural communities acknowledged in the domestic community, to international flagships of a national culture and master narrative.[31] The inscription in the national list can also mean the first step for an even wider recognition, such as a nomination by UNESCO.

However, it is necessary to notice how, at the very core of this system of recognition of national heritage, is characterized by concepts that have their roots in an intellectual movement born during the late 1920s in Japan, the *Mingei* Movement.

The ideas and the concepts pushed forward by this movement in the national cultural discourse influenced the revaluation of local crafts by the following governments and by the Japanese society at large. The *Mingei*'s ventures were made to enhance the Japanese society's interest to quality crafts again, not made with the purpose of including or excluding certain crafts from the national canon. Nonetheless, I do believe that the echo and the importance of their initiatives will affect not only the policies related to culture, giving a lesser or greater attention to some techniques in particular.

[30] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" in *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* ed. by J.G. Richardson (Westport: Greenwood, 1986), p. 241-58.

[31] Kiwon Hong, "Nation Branding of Korea", in *Cultural Policies in East Asia: Dynamics between the State, Arts and Creative Industries*, edited by Hye-Kyung Lee and Lorraine Lim (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 69-70.

3. Okinawan culture as craft in the *Mingei* Movement

The *Mingei* movement was headed by Yanagi Sōetsu (1889-1961), a Japanese philosopher who developed a deep interest into folk crafts after a trip to Korea (that was a Japanese colony at that time) in 1916. The thing that charmed him the most during the trip was the rusticity, the simplicity and the practicality[32] of the pottery he had the chance to appreciate there. He advocated the idea that everyday crafted objects were of better quality even compared to fine arts,[33] in his opinion the quality, the philosophy and the aesthetics behind those crafted objects had to be acknowledged and revitalized all over the country by raising the awareness of people. In relation to the national identity, they were supporting the idea of a single national culture reinforced by several regional identities.[34] Finally, another point that appears central in Yanagi's discourse, was the emphasis on the 'naturalness' of Japanese crafts, a theme that will also appear in the Japanese nationalistic discourse on crafts.

After the official birth of the Movement, several initiatives were taken to improve the state of crafts in Japan. For example, the establishment of a craft guild in the Kamigamo district (Kyōto) in 1927, and the participation to several expositions organized by the Japanese government. By doing so, in a few years the Movement gained a remarkable recognition within the national borders, drawing the attention of Japanese industrial designers.

During the 1930s the popularity of the *Mingei* Movement kept growing considerably, with several projects run by its members in various regions of Japan (Such as San'in) as well as outside (e.g. Northern China, Taiwan and Korea) in the recently conquered territories.

At the end of 1938, Yanagi went to Okinawa, where for the first time he experienced local crafts, that left him astonished. From that moment, the central organizational body of the Movement was moved by a profound interest and

[32] Muneyoshi Yanagi, *Sōetsu Yanagi: Selected Essays on Japanese Folk Crafts*. (Shuppan Bunka Sangyō Shinkō Zaidan, 2017), 76.
[33] Lisbeth K. Brandt. *The Folk-Craft Movement in Early Shōwa Japan, 1925-1945.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 74.
[34] Ibid.

fascination with Ryukyuan culture and local crafts: the archipelago was described by Yanagi as a "handicraft paradise", with an emphasis on the production of textiles. Another issue Yanagi was stressing upon, was the relevance of Okinawan language, and culture at large, for the historical value for the nation: he strongly stated that in the Ryūkyū archipelago the language chosen for official purposes should have been the local dialect rather than standard Japanese.[35] This was part of a wider picture Yanagi had in mind, conceiving the southernmost (i.e. the Ryūkyū archipelago) and the northernmost (i.e. Hokkaidō) regions of Japan, where it was still possible to admire crafted objects considered as "purely Japanese"[36] (*jun nihonteki*). Moreover, he thought that these regions, Okinawa in particular, were the key to preserve the 'real Japaneseness' from a rapacious and dangerous Westernization, which was damaging the true essence of the nation. Nevertheless, as Kikuchi claims, in Yanagi's view, which she defines as influenced by a certain cultural pluralism but '*ultimately paternalistic'*[37] (the Ryūkyū had anyway to be subdued and controlled by Japan, whose culture was hierarchically superior). The Ryūkyū could anyway remain a relevant cultural landmark for Japan, especially in comparison with Korea and Taiwan, which were at an even lower grade. Therefore, in Yanagi's view, mainland Japan, in particular the central regions of Kansai e Kantō , was at the centre, followed by the Ryūkyū archipelago and Hokkaidō, and lastly by the Korean peninsula and Taiwan. This worldview strictly follows what had been done through the aforementioned process of cultural selection which had permeated the country after the Meiji Revolution and the annexation of Okinawa. Thus, even though Yanagi and his acolytes were sincerely admirers of the Ryukyuan culture, they believed that the mainland Japanese culture had to be predominant over it. This cultural hierarchy will perpetuate itself and, as I will later analyse, after the WWII, it will be one of the reasons for the *tropicalization* of Okinawan culture by Japan.

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[35] Yūko Kikuchi, "*Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*" (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 148-153.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

However, although the debate on the use of local dialect triggered several contrasts between the *Mingei* Movement and the Okinawan authorities, from this moment on the popularity of local crafts grew considerably in mainland Japan as well. A remarkable number of people in the big cities of Japan started to develop a wider interest into Okinawan textile production. Moreover, in general the activity of the *Mingei* Movement was supported by a widespread academic and social process of beautification of periphery.[38] In a small period of time, Okinawan textiles' recognition (especially that of *Kijōka Bashōfu* and *Bingata* garments) within the nation grew considerably thanks to the activities of the *Mingei* Movement. It was Yanagi's pamphlets *Okinawa's bashōfu* (1939) and *A Tale of Bashōfu* (1943), together with other initiatives organized by the *Mingei* Movement, that sparkled a certain interest towards this craft in the rest of the archipelago.[39]

As Okinawan crafts were held in major consideration by the *Mingei* Movement, the activities of the movement helped in shaping a widespread awareness about the importance of traditional crafts all over the country and their potential value, both symbolic and economic. In many rural regions of Japan, the traditional crafts underwent a remarkable revamp. Moreover, the ideas and the activities run by the *Mingei* Movement, were probably taken into account again after WWII, reconsidered as a basis for the aforementioned law of 1950 concerning the promotion and the protection of ICH.

Amongst the many different crafts that drawn the attention of the *Mingei* Movement, the *Kijōka Bashōfu* is probably one of the most interesting cases to study.

In the next sections I shall analyse its peculiar history and the recognizable agency involved in its promotion, from which I will draw my conclusions concerning Okinawan cultural heritage and its inclusion within Japanese national heritage.

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[38] Sumiko Sarashima, "*Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan: Bingata, a Traditional Dyed Textile from Okinawa."* (University College London, 2013), 150.

[39] Katrien Hendrickx, "*The Origins of Banana-Fibre Cloth in The Ryukyus, Japan"* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 199.

4. A closer look at *bashōfu*

Figure 3: an example of Bashōfu cloth

Bashōfu is the fabric obtained by the Japanese banana fibre (*Musa basjoo*, *Ito bashō* in Japanese), which is cultivated in the Ryūkyū archipelago but also in the Sichuan province in Southern China. The process of yarn making is incredibly long and complicated, and it is still completely handmade. The result, however, is a textile that perfectly tackles the local damp and hot weather since the fibre does not stick to the skin. *Bashōfu* has always been used (mostly due to the length and complexity of its production process) to produce the most valuable garments that were once prerogative of the local aristocracy. However, clothes in coarser varieties of *bashōfu* were, as demonstrated, [40] also worn by the lower classes. The most common varieties of *bashōfu*

[40] Amanda Mayer Stinchecum. "*Bashofū*, The Mingei Movement, and the Creation of a New Okinawa" in *Material Choices. Refashioning Bast and Leaf Fibers in Asia and the Pacific* ed. Roy W. Hamilton and B. Lynne Milgram (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2007), 107.

cloths usually present very simple designs. The threads, as shown by Akiko Ishigaki in the documentary *Au fil du Monde Japon*, are apparently still handmade spun: as for other bast fibres (such as flax or hemp), these also are knotted and spliced crafting a thread that is coarse and rather variable in thickness. In terms of weaving patterns, the most common seems to be a tabby weave, made keeping the heddles quite distant from one another, this generates an open weave that is light and with a low density of threads per cm^2, but at the same time very resistant. The dying process is made on the threads, which means that the overall quality of the dye is very high and will give resistant and long-lasting colours, since the dye better penetrates the fibre. However, the yarns are often left in their natural light brown colour (such as the one shown above) or dyed blue or green with indigo or other natural dyes. In many cases, the woven designs are obtained through *kasuri*, a technique which is found elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, which consists in tightly binding the yarns so that the dye will to penetrate them in their whole length while some sections will thus resist the dye. By doing so, just some portions of the threads will result dyed and, when woven, they will produce a blurry, fuzzy-edged design. The *kasuri* process can be single (when used only on the warp threads) or double (when used on both the warp and the weft threads). In any case, it is an extremely complicated and time-consuming process and it usually is an emblem of true dexterity and prowess in a craftsperson. The decorative patterns (as shown in the image below), are usually quite simple, depicting stylized natural elements, such as birds (in case of the トゥイグウ- (*touiguu*?) fourth one on the right, in the second row) or geometric patterns. They are

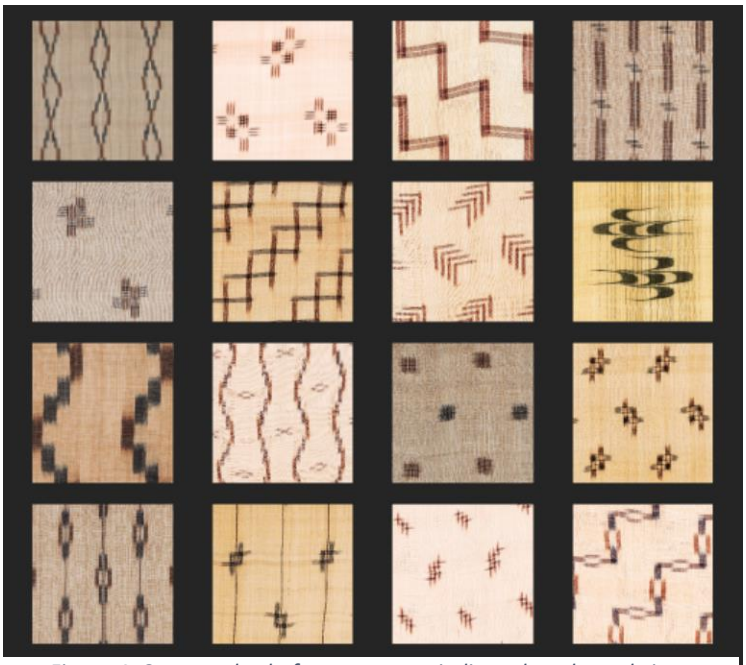

Figure 4: Common bashofu patterns, as indicated on the website www.bashofu.jp

all obtained through weaving, as apparently other techniques, such as embroidery, did not develop in relation to this particular textile.

With the annexation to Japan and the spreading of modern, inexpensive clothes at the beginning of the 20th century the production of *bashōfu* garments plummeted, and many plantations were abandoned. This was of course a side effect of the aforementioned broader process of cultural annexation, which aimed at deleting the traces of an independent Okinawan culture.

As I have anticipated, *bashōfu*'s production was, revamped thanks to the intervention of members of the *Mingei*, first of all Yanagi, together with Okinawan cultural heritage at large. Due to the Movement's efforts, *bashōfu* quickly substituted other cultural practices related to Okinawa and, in the collective imagery, became the symbol of Okinawa as a "tropical country", in opposition to the "classical culture" attributed to the mainland. In this respect, Okinawa started to be simplified and essentialized quickly, turning into a rustic, exotic and calm place, the perfect touristic destination for mainlanders. This probably is the main outcome resulting from the way Ryukyuan culture was framed as secondary to mainland Japanese's. Further, the archipelago was reshaped after the annexation through the association of its culture to a tropical, southern country,[41] becoming a reminder of the rural past to a now modernized mainland Japan. This process, as argued in "*Bashofū*, The Mingei Movement, and the Creation of a New Okinawa" (Mayer Stinchecum, 2007, 109) also shaped the conception Okinawan people had about themselves. They acquired the characteristics normally attributed to the fabric itself ("honest", "pure", "simple") in contrast with another type of textile, *Yūki-tsumugi*, which was disregarded by Yanagi as belonging to the elite due to its price. *Bashōfu* (at that time) was instead accessible to every social class and its production was anonymous, becoming therefore a symbol for the crafts *Mingei* Movement was trying to safeguard. This course had begun during the 1930s, but reached its peak after WWII, while the archipelago was under the U.S. military control. The huge devastations caused by the war created suitable conditions

[41] Ibid.

for a wide 'reconfiguration' of the archipelago as the tropical paradise, eventually giving the region that 'tropical feel' Yanagi used to mention. This feeling of the archipelago as a tropical country is still very present today and accompanies the visitor from the very moment he or she arrives in Okinawa, with several symbols associated to the lavishly tropical flora of the archipelago.[42]

Involved in the overall renewal of the image of the country was also *bashofū,* whose production had halted in 1945 following the destruction of many *ito bashō* fields in the region. The ascent of a young lady, Toshiko Taira (1920-), who was born in Okinawa but had worked in a factory in Honshū during the war, gave a solid input to the rebirth of this technique in the region and to its persisting thriving. She had the luck to be taken under the wing of the director of the factory, who introduced her to Tonomura Kichinosuke, a member of the *Mingei.*

Figure 5: Toshiko Taira in her workshop, spinning and weaving

In a short period of time, after she got back to Kijōka in 1947, where a weaving workshop was established, the link between her activity and those of *Mingei* strengthened considerably. The activity established by Taira, devoted to the crafting of

[42] Ibid.

bashōfu started to involve many disciples sent from the mainland to learn the technique which started to flourish again. This process of recognition received further confirmation when, in 1971, the government's cultural agency started looking for local crafts to be appointed as "Important Intangible Cultural Treasures". In 1974 the craft was inserted into the list, with Taira Toshiko as representative of the women "holding" the technique. Eventually, she reached the apotheosis in 2000, when she was declared "Living National Treasure". *Bashōfu* gained massive benefit from all this exposure and today is still one of the most common things to be associated with Okinawan culture at national level. However, what was often criticized about this manipulation is the process of exoticization underwent by *bashōfu* textiles: they started quickly to be associated with the idea of a 'tropical' Okinawa as conceived by Yanagi while any other detail associated with their production turned overlooked. What was instead neglected from the principles of *Mingei* in the 'repackaging' of *bashōfu* was the idea that crafts had to be anonymously made and available for different social classes, non-elitist. Not only *bashōfu*'s production is nowadays associated almost exclusively with the name of Toshiko Taira, due to her enormous exposure in mainstream media and her inscription into national heritage lists, but also the original availability of these textiles to all social classes was lost since now they are very high priced.[43]

Finally, and more importantly, we could perceive how *bashōfu* was employed by Japan as a sort of cultural nation-work. By so strongly associating it to the idea of exoticism of the archipelago, it has created a landmark in which all the characteristics (legitimized by the government) of Okinawa are present: the rusticity, the simplicity, the honesty. This manipulation has worked in two directions: on the external level, it has provided mainland Japanese a set of ideas that are strongly associated with Okinawa and its inhabitants, making it a familiar, calm place. On the internal level, it has given Okinawan people a marker of their identity, to be worn with pride during local celebrations, reminding them who they are and why they, as inhabitants of Okinawa, are a local expression of a wider Japanese national culture.[44]

[43] Mayer Stinchecum, "*Bashofū*, The Mingei Movement, and the Creation of a New Okinawa", 114.
[44] Ibid.

The process of heritagization works in this sense as a nation-work, which allows the repackaging of a certain cultural practice to be incorporated into the nation state and used as a tool to ease the governance over a certain region or population and help assimilate it within the nation. This kind of nation-work, however, works differently from the tea ceremony mentioned by Kristin Surak, since it is employed as a governing tool over a population that is perceived as different within the same nation, and that perceives itself as different. However, this epitomizes the widespread idea within the *Mingei* group that Japanese identity had to be reshaped in the pattern of a strong, central culture surrounded and strengthened by local variations.

As I have explained throughout the chapter, culture and heritage can be powerful tools employed by a nation to include or exclude minority groups perceived as different. In the case of Okinawa, that had to be better included within Japan after its annexation, culture and heritage played a fundamental role in this process. While at the beginning of the 20th century the central government had decided, through the Okinawa Prefecture Land Reorganization Project, to silence the local culture by strictly imposing the central costumes, in later decades, also thanks to the ideas of the *Mingei* Movement (which held the role of the *intelligentsia* as delineated by Yoshino)[45], *bashōfu* textiles were implemented again in the local cultural discourse.

Throughout this act, Japan has managed to strengthen its relationship with the archipelago, although maintaining the sovereignty over it. On the one hand, this operation of repackaging of local textiles, along with an overall process of 'touristicization' has allowed a better integration of Okinawa within the national texture and a massive improvement of its economy. On the other hand, this has brought deep changes in the production processes of *bashōfu* textiles, and all of its production is now associated with the name of Toshiko Taira, the lady designated by the national government as the 'authorized' producer of *bashōfu*. However, although being the only one authorized, she is not the only one possessing the ability of weaving it.

[45] Kosaku Yoshino*, Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*, (London: Routledge 1992), 1.

In the next chapter I shall analyse how *bashōfu* is presented in media related or unrelated to Japan. I evaluate how Akiko Ishigaki, another weaver of *bashōfu*, is presented into a documentary independent from the Japanese government, and I make a comparison between her and Toshiko Taira. The questions I will try to answer in this case is: how are *bashōfu* and its makers presented in in the media?

Chapter 3 - *Bashōfu* and its weavers in the 21st century

Throughout the last chapter I have presented how *bashōfu* has been repackaged by the authorities related to Japanese governments and how it has evolved within the Japanese public imagery, becoming more and more linked to the idea of the Ryūkyū archipelago as a tropical paradise in the years following WWII being appreciated in mainland Japan as well. This was made possible also thanks to what had been done by the *Mingei* Movement during the Shōwa Period, although the final outcome of the process of reacknowledgment did not strictly adhere to some principles suggested by the doctrine of the Movement (such as the anonymity of the maker).

Bashōfu is now nationally recognized as a refined product and one of its main producers, Toshiko Taira, has been awarded the top recognition possible for craftspeople in Japan. However, she is not the only weaver of *bashōfu* since there is at least another one, called Akiko Ishigaki (1938-), living on the island of Iriomote in the same archipelago, who enjoys no recognition from official authorities. What I analyse in this chapter are the ways *bashōfu* and its weavers are represented in the media, both related and unrelated to Japan to inspect the differences in packaging heritage.

1. *Bashōfu* in Japanese media

Nowadays *bashōfu* is presented in websites, linked to the local authorities, aiming to improve tourism, both domestic and international, to the Ryūkyū archipelago. For example, the first result obtained by searching '*bashōfu*' on Google is a webpage ("Bashofu – The oldest weaving craft in Okinawa") part of the larger website "Be.Okinawa" owned by the "Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau" (OCVB), an organization founded in 1996 with the aim "at rebuilding a strong and efficient system to promote tourism in Okinawa".[46] The same organization also

[46] Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau: https://www.ocvb.or.jp/foreign/en

manages another touristic promotion website (https://www.visitokinawa.jp/) with similar contents. The two websites are available in many languages, both European and Asian (Thai, Italian, Russian, Chinese, English amongst others) and they provide a very wide presentation of local attractions and possible activities to be done in the archipelago. It is interesting to notice how the Be.Okinawa proposes to visitors three different categories of experience: "Trend", "Premium" and "Relax" so that the Okinawan experience proves suitable for any kind of visitors. Every category contains many possible activities or things to see. Browsing into the "Relax" category there's a link to the aforementioned page presenting *bashōfu* to the public. The description is composed of a few lines with very brief sentences and it attributes the main place for the making of *bashōfu* specifically to the village of Kijōka and makes a strong reference to Toshiko Taira, remarking her status as "Living National Heritage" and that of *bashōfu* as an "Important Intangible Cultural Heritage". The text is followed by a couple of images portraying the production process and two purses made of *bashōfu.* At the bottom of the page there is a map of the "Okimi Village Bashofu Hall" and a link to the official website of the Kijoka no Bashofu Hozonkai, the association charged for the promotion and the preservation of *bashōfu* by the government. The website in this case is only available in Japanese, and it provides a much more comprehensive explanation of the products of *bashōfu* fabric, comprehending a section dedicated to the main patterns, some clips on the production of the fabric and a specific page focussing on the relationship between *bashōfu* and the environment.

The two websites evidently have very different goals: while the first one aims at attracting tourists, especially from abroad, the second one has mainly the task to raise general awareness about the existence and the current state of *bashōfu*. The difference in the use of colours (blue and yellow in the first case, recalling the sun and sea and in general the image of the archipelago as a tropical, relaxing place and somber, calm colours in the case of the second, recalling the colours and the texture of the fabric) or symbols (especially in the first one, whose logo is the local, celebrated species of *hibiscus* flower) make possible to understand how the official image of Okinawa in media is still strongly related to the one born after WWII, when it was decided that the archipelago had to become an attractive touristic destination. In the first website we can also appreciate how the aim has grown wider and mainlander Japanese are not

Figure 6: Still from the homepage of the website "Visit Okinawa".

anymore the only ones targeted, but the potential target now comprehends also various European countries (Italy, Germany, France, Russia, together with English speaking countries) and Asian countries (China, Taiwan, Thailand). Also, in this case, however, *bashōfu* textiles have been employed as an instrument to reinforce the general idea of Okinawa as a tropical paradise.

2. *Au fil du Monde Japan:* performing nature and spirituality in Akiko Ishigaki's *bashōfu*

Figure 7: Still from the beginning of the documentary - [00:34]

Akiko Ishigaki is the main protagonist of the documentary movie "*Au fil du Monde Japan*", one of five documentaries made in France in 2017 by Isabelle Dupuy Chavanat and Jill Coulon and published on the website of the French-German television channel Arte.

The whole series of documentaries is set in Asian regions (the other four are respectively set in Mongolia, India, Tibet and Laos) and their main target are French or German speaking viewers in Europe, due to the origin of the production channel. The series presents craftspeople dealing with traditional textiles whose production is although very long and complicated and not much fruitful, therefore excluded from the mass-consuming market and exposed to the risk of vanishing given the scarce number of people holding the correct knowledge to reproduce and pass on the technique to the next generations.

From the aesthetic point of view, the most evident feature is the combination of natural landscapes with a very calm music soundtrack (for example [00:34-00:55]),

providing the viewer the idea of an idyllic, faraway place, almost untouched by modernity. Images of natural landscapes will recur several times during the documentary, showing different places in Iriomote which are all connected to the lives and the work of Akiko Ishigaki and her husband who are committed into the production of *bashōfu* and other textiles and dyes.

Although the issue of vanishing traditions is not openly discussed throughout the documentary, the undergoing message is of promotion and support to these traditional ways of making textiles, which are in danger of disappearing.

The documentary does not discuss neither the national policies concerning culture nor the issues of how globalization has affected or is affecting these crafts nowadays, but it is mostly centred on the life of Akiko Ishigaki, her husband, their life on the island of Iriomote, and the activities she has done for enhancing the state of her textiles in Japan and abroad.

From the documentary, we understand how the various weaving and dyeing techniques, amongst which *bashōfu*, where passed down onto her by the family, and by her grandmother, as she represents the third generation of weavers. She lives on the island with her husband, Kinsei, together with whom she has established an atelier on the island. The atelier is attended by a number of students willing to learn the

Figure 8: Akiko Ishigaki (left) in her workshop with her two colleagues Maki Chiaki (centre) and Michio Masago (right) [12:45]

techniques Akiko is teaching, and this brings also many visitors to the place. What appears striking is getting to know how, differently from Toshiko Taira, Akiko's work, although she is not recognized as a 'National Living Treasure' has actually enjoyed a good recognition both on the national level, since her products are sold in the whole Japanese archipelago, and on the international level, having cooperated with worldwide known Japanese stylist Issey Miyake and showcasing her works in Milan and New York as well. Although being related to a rural environment that looks far away from the rest of the world, we learn that she is not interested in keeping her products inside the Ryūkyū archipelago or inside Japan, but she has accepted for them to travel worldwide.

Figure 9: Akiko Ishigaki and her colleagues praying [14:26]

In general, much of the documentary is focussed on the relationship between the work of Akiko Ishigaki and the environment: not only she uses natural dyes and fibres to produce garments, but the whole production processes are set within the natural environment employing only natural ingredients, and this is repeated several times during the documentary, also emphasising how it would be impossible to obtain the same results in the dying process in mainland Japan due to the ever-changing conditions of the water, the timing and the trees. Therefore, she is stressing how

difficult it would be to transmit her knowledge to someone else, and that the real prowess can only be learned by dedicating a great amount of time and energy observing it with attention.

One of the central themes of the documentary seems to be that of the community surrounding her work and living on the island (shown for example in the celebrations for the Mother's Day [24:20-25:26]). She also speaks quite in detail about her relationship with her mother and the feelings of gratitude towards her for leaving her a remarkable quantity of *bashōfu* yarns before passing away, and she still uses it [22:30 – 23:33]. In general, one of the most recurring themes seems to be that of gratitude (in Japanese 感謝 *kansha*): this term is pronounced when Ishigaki is speaking about her mother, and it also appears, for example, on the banner hanging on the ceiling during the party for the Mother's Day. But the feelings of gratitude and appreciation are also directed towards nature in at least two occasions: by Kinsei Ishigaki when he describes the prayers he addresses to the god protecting the island whenever he is cutting a tree [08:15-08:40], and by Akiko Ishigaki and her colleagues when they are praying in the forest [14:20-14:55] (fig.9). What thus, appears as the main aim of the documentary is representing and emphasising the centrality in the relationship between the craftspeople and nature, and how this is hinged upon living in harmony with nature.

However, the documentary also appears to be strongly biased by a Western gaze, since it provides a strongly romanticised view about the life on the island and on the textile production of Ishigaki as well: the images of the island presented reinforce the idea of a faraway place which could not differ more from the huge and chaotic cities of mainland Japan, and the characters living on the island are depicted almost as living an idyllic life completely in harmony with nature (fig. 9). I do not want to suggest they are not in harmony with nature at all, but many of their behaviours, at least in the way those are presented in the documentary, seem to be all but spontaneous. I refer, for example at the way the documentary ends, with this very evocative and aestheticizing picture of a dancer slowly moving to the sound of a Japanese traditional music on the beach while wearing Ishigaki's dresses [49:30-51:00] (fig.11). The message it conveys

seem to distort to an extent what the reality of the crafting process, which is also made of hard work and difficulties, is.

Figure 10: Akiko Ishigaki depicted while swimming [34:10]

In this sense, I believe that the target audience has had a priority by the production in deciding what message had to be conveyed by the documentary, which in the end reflects what the *expectations* of the Western public are, therefore constructing a discourse on the topic, rather than producing an over comprehensive view of it. Thus, the documentary is seems implicitly biased in having to present its contents to an audience that already has a certain idea of the topic in analysis. In this regard, the documentary and the discourse it produces, even though independently from the Japanese government, reflects the same ideas about *bashofū* and Okinawan culture promoted by the Japanese state: those of Okinawa as a tropical and romanticised place. On the other hand, though, the references Ishigaki makes on the impossibility of reproducing her crafts at the same level in Kyoto, gives us an insight on the way she probably considers mainland Japan as a place also culturally different from Iriomote and from the Ryūkyū archipelago. Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice how, although, for different aims, the imagery of the Ryūkyū archipelago and its

heritage proposed to different audiences (i.e. the Japanese and the Westerners) by different entities (the Japanese government and the producers of the documentary) overlap in many points, producing an image of the archipelago and its heritage, as a romantic, calm and faraway place.

Figure 11: Akiko Ishigaki dressing up a local dancer [48:30]

Conclusions

Throughout this whole work, I have tried to sketch out a picture of how Okinawan history was actually distant from that of mainland Japan, and how it was reviewed and repackaged after the annexation of Okinawan to the Meiji state in 1879. Reframing the history and the culture of the Ryūkyū archipelago under the label of transculturality is something that makes many questions arise but doing it can provide new perspectives on the relationships between the culture of a region and the state and makes us question the existence of a monolithic national culture and master narrative.

First of all, in examining the relationship between Ryukyuan culture and Japan, what I found most interesting was in particular the ever-changing relationship between local traditions and the state: while at the beginning it was possible for Okinawan people to maintain their traditions and old customs thanks to the *Kyūkan onzon* policy before its abolition in 1903 and the introduction of the policy for the reorganization of the land ending in a forced operation for silencing local culture. Some decades later, thanks to the initiatives of the *Mingei* Movement, the Okinawan culture was reintegrated, although into a different category from that of mainland Japan, into the canon of national culture. However, what shall not be forgotten is the way Okinawa's culture was used to repackage the whole image of the archipelago as a tropical paradise fit for mainlanders – and nowadays international as well – tourists, and *bashōfu* also held a role in this process.

I have also given a glance at the so-called "power of lists", showing how powerful the process of nomination and inscription can be in assessing the national recognition of one craftsperson over the other, in this case of Toshiko Taira over Akiko Ishigaki. Although they both benefit from a certain recognition of their skills and for the beauty of the textiles they produce, the previous is much more well-regarded in the country than the latter due to her presence into the "Living National Treasure" list and probably also due to her direct link with Yanagi Sōetsu, who was one of the main

responsible for the rediscovery of Okinawan culture and its assimilation within the national canon.

To sum up, all these processes make us understand how heritage and power are strictly related the one with the other and how heritage can be used by the community holding power to reinforce its status and as a governance tool.

In second place, what I have found interesting to analyse and appreciate was the way Japan has integrated Okinawa into the national culture, and what emerges is a discourse based on a multiplicity of narratives: while at the centre we find Kyōto and in general a solid 'core' culture based on the classical canon, mostly hinging on the Heian Period (794-1185) we see how the Ryūkyū archipelago is inserted into a different, exotic and tropical narrative, that is repackaged and sold as a regional variation of the 'core' culture.

The case of *bashōfu* therefore proves interesting for a better understanding of the complicated relationships occurring between heritage and power, the craftspeople and the state and, on a wider scale, the intercurrent dynamics between the state and culture.

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4) Screenshot from the website www.bashofu.jp
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