**Constant fear of ostracism**

Miho Zlazli

MA Applied Linguistics and Language Pedagogy

PhD Linguistics candidate at SOAS University of London, UK

[miho.zlazli@gmail.com](mailto:miho.zlazli@gmail.com)

# Abstract

This chapter consists of my autoethnographic narrative, including diary entries, which delineates what it feels like to live as an Indigenous person whose community is under ongoing cultural assimilation, followed by its analysis. The main issues identified in the narrative were emotional insecurity and its coping mechanism – to pretend to be someone else. By applying Peirce’s Theory of Signs to motifs identified in the narrative, I examined relations between individual and groups to discuss solutions. I argue the importance of having an awareness in one’s own roots or Indigenous knowledge system, recognising historical context or power relations that one is involved in, and negotiating one’s contingent pluralistic identity to resolve constant fear of ostracism and establish agency in one’s life.

Keywords: autoethnography, narrative, Indigenous knowledge system, Peirce’s Theory of Signs

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# Prologue

When I read Chihiro’s evocative poetic autoethnography,[[1]](#footnote-1) which was almost a declaration that elegantly portrayed her transformation from living and dying as a woman, wife and mother to as an autoethnographer who can express herself fully, I wondered what I have been through in my own turbulent life.

I was born Indigenous[[2]](#footnote-2) and raised as a minority Christian girl in the Ryukyu Islands in the north-western Pacific of South Japan. Feeling alienated from the society where I lived in, I often dwelled in foreign folktales. When I was released from the cage, I started to chase after my imaginary *Blue Bird of Happiness* (Maeterlinck, 1908) – a life with a sense of true belonging. However, I repetitively ended up with pretending to be someone else.

I was fortunate that my path crossed with scholars who prompted me to explore my Indigenous identity. Relearning traditional Indigenous knowledge system including my ancestral tongue has helped me rediscover who I want to become. Traditional Indigenous knowledge system can be understood as a holistic system of knowledge that has developed over many generations through a complex fabric of practices and understandings based on physical and spiritual interdependence between individuals, their community and Indigenous territories (Howden, 2001; Davis [1999] as cited in Howden, 2001).

This process deeply stirs my life and threatens close relationships that I have built over many years, but I have a hope that the Blue Bird of Happiness will be within my reach soon when we find a new social equilibrium within which we can build a new relationship based on our true selves and mutual trust.

*Being trapped in a finite body*

*A beautiful infinite soul*

*Being blinded by dust and fumes*

*A seagull's call from high up in the sky*

*A key I found to depart today*

*A beautiful infinite soul*

*Opens the door to luminant realms*

*A seagull's call from high up in the sky*

# *Sleeping Beauty*

This section contains seven episodes from my childhood memory in a village where I was born and raised. They illustrate how my family and I lost access to our traditional knowledge system, what historical context we lived in, and what impacts they had on us. My diary entries contain composite motifs based on my real experience. People’s names are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

(1) *Saturday 20th September 1980 – Reception*

*Oh no! The neighbour’s granny is sweeping the path.*

*I can’t go home (my grandmother’s house)!*

On Saturdays, I was supposed to go to my grandmother's house after school to wait for my mother to finish her work. Her house was at the end of narrow path where I often found this lady over 100 years old. She was a monolingual Ryukyuan speaker who did not understand Japanese. I was scared to go near her. I did not know what to talk about with her nor even know how to greet her in Ryukyuan.

(2) *Sunday 28th November 1982 – Year 2*

*I got a pair of red and white Karukan**[[3]](#footnote-3) buns. Yum! We had the 100th anniversary (of our primary school) today. Year 6 people wrote the anniversary song with their music teacher, and we sang it together in the gymnasium. So, my great grandma also learned at this school, right? I wonder how it was like.*

I innocently imagined how the school was like a century ago, but it was the very beginning of the assimilation policy imposed by the Meiji government of Japan (Yoshimura, 2014) following the annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom to Japan in 1879 (Mizuno, 2009). In the early years, the school attendance was low among children of commoner origin.[[4]](#footnote-4) The lady in Episode 1 did not attend the school either. Except a brief attempt of English language education under the post-war US occupation (Trafton, 1991:25; Masiko, 2014), the official language and knowledge system at school have been always Japanese since then.[[5]](#footnote-5)

(3) *Sunday 4th December 1983 – Year 3*

*“****At 8 am,*** *Mum woke me up and helped me prepare for the Sunday school.*

***From 9 am,*** *I played the organ for the children’s service.*

***At 9.30 am,*** *we received snack and drink from Sawa’s mum and split into three age groups to learn today’s Bible story.*

***At 10 am,*** *I lit the first candle out of four for the first day of Advent for adult people’s service.*

***At 10.10 am,*** *I went to the rear of the prayer hall to make a cup of coffee with plenty of cream and sugar and waited for adult people to finish the service.*

***At noon,*** *Dad took us to a nice restaurant.*

***At 1.30 pm,*** *we went to the Southeast Botanical Gardens.*

***In the evening,*** *we got home, had dinner, watched TV and fell asleep.”*

My teacher looked puzzled when she read my essay. The topic for writing was “What did you do last weekend?” I thought I did well, but I was surprised to read other classmates’ vivid stories about their joys and mishaps. I remembered that other kids were jumping up and down over cushions in the storage area next to the prayer hall, but I wondered what they were so excited about.

Our home atmosphere was slightly tense partially due to our implicit family language policy[[6]](#footnote-6) introduced by my mother who was from a family of teachers who supported the assimilation policy (Ishihara *et al.*, 2019: 27). When we went to the restaurant, we ate in silence. My father and grandmother occasionally whispered to each other inaudibly in stigmatised Ryukyuan, which they felt most at home among themselves. Being unable to speak or behave freely under surveillance, I became emotionally detached. Many years later, I once spent a week together with a family from Tokyo in the same house on a research trip. I had mixed feelings when I saw their children freely enjoy their mother tongue, which was *Kyōtsūgo* [the common language] in Japan (Sanada, 2019). They also had far more complex vocabulary than their Ryukyuan peers who had to correct their speech to adapt to Japanese society.

My worldview then was almost solely based on what I learned at Sunday school, which was significantly different from the traditional views in the Ryukyus. Feeling alienated from other children, I often immersed myself into TV anime series of folktales from Japan and Western countries.[[7]](#footnote-7) I often spent time looking at the horizon at dawn or dusk as the colours of sky and ocean glided smoothly over the spectrum, which stretched out into my imaginary realms.[[8]](#footnote-8) I also spent time alone in my own small universe at a corner of the churchyard while waiting for adults to finish their prayers.

(4) *Date unknown*

“*Whoever strikes you on your right cheek,* *turn to him the other also.* *And if anyone would sue you to take away your coat,* *let him have your cloak also*.”

*–* Matthew 5:39-40

*Am I an evil and wicked person?*

*I have a dark fantasy that I cannot reveal to anyone, never.*

*I get mesmerised by crucifying dainty fairies on the wall of the dining hall.*

*Am I insane? Would I rather not be alive?*

I never said “No” to anyone. I constantly watched out for others. People loved me; I became empty. The more they took advantage of me, the more I felt that I was on a mission. I was eventually swallowed up in the *shadow* of myself (Jung, 1959).

(5) *Monday 12th August 1985 – Year 5*

*Grandma took me shopping today. Whenever I go out with her, I feel like that we are wrapped in a translucent film. My hearing goes distant as we talk to people.*

Many years later, I learned that my birth Christian community was ostracised by local society when it started as a group of 20 local Ryukyuan families in the beginning of the 20th century (Yomitan Church, UCCJ, 2016: 26, 30). My grandmother might have inherited their psychological trauma and lived in an imaginary bubble which I experienced with her. I might have inherited it from her because I also felt detached from local society at every turn. I even thought that we might be aliens in disguise of villagers.

(6-1) *Monday 26th October 1987 – Year 7*

*It’s a hot day today. A mirage is hovering above the ground. The harness (of the marching bass drum) digs into my shoulders. The sun is baking my skin. Hm? There is a shadow of someone climbing above the score board of the stadium. Oh, the Hinomaru**[[9]](#footnote-9) is set alight!**[[10]](#footnote-10)*

In a few days, the protester’s retail shop was burned down for revenge by Japanese right-wing extremists. That jet-black colour and smell *…* I could not believe that it was the same place that I used to visit on the way home from piano lessons.

Black right-wing vans blasting military songs kept arriving from mainland Japan and flooded into our village. My poor grandmother was shaking. She screamed “The war has begun again!” and hid under the dining table.

I knew by knowledge that our islands once turned into the scorched earth during the WWII. Many survivors repetitively shared their terrifying stories and emphasised “No more wars”, but it just did not feel real. I used to gaze blankly at American soldiers jumping off the helicopter in grey parachutes (Tanji, 2011) from a classroom window. It was part of my daily life. Seeing my gentle and calm grandmother panicking like that … For the first time, I realised that I was also part of the same history.

(6-2) *Monday 9th November 1987 – a few weeks later*

*The newspaper headline read, “Chibichiri Cave - the Statue of Peace destroyed: Revenge against burning Hinomaru”. The article said that a claim of responsibility by the extremists was found next to the statue: “The villagers who burn down the national flag do not deserve to have peace soon. We put down the divine punishment!” (Okinawa Times, 1987)*

The news struck me because the statue was very personal to me. It was just situated in April to commemorate civilians who lost their lives in compulsory group suicide at Chibichiri Caveunder the influence of Japanese imperial ethos (Tanji, 2011; Yomitan Kanko Kyokai, no date)*.* In the earlier months, we watched over the production site in the heart of our community. At the unveiling ceremony, I read aloud the community people’s declaration of perpetual world peace …

(7) *Sunday 2nd April 1989 – Year 9*

***Mum:*** *“Just put on anything, let’s go! Hurry up!”*

*I reluctantly put my limbs through old baggy clothes for protection against Habu[[11]](#footnote-11) snakes and mosquitoes. The clothes will get dirty and scratched up anyway.*

*To prepare for Shiimii Festival,**[[12]](#footnote-12) we cut heavily overgrown grass and swept our family cemetery site (which was located just one step further from Chibichiri Cave).*

*While having a quick lunch, a few tourists wandered towards us. They were looking for a path to go down to the cave (which became famous because of the incident). I quickly hid myself.*

I was embarrassed, feeling that I was crude. They were dressed in fancy clothes and speaking Tokyoite-like Japanese. As I see the moon in double vision with my astigmatic eyes, I felt that our land had parallel worlds for locals who had flesh-and-blood memories there and mainlanders who pursued their imaginary paradise (Ina, 2010; Sudo, 2016; Murray, 2017).

# Encounters

The following nine episodes from my adolescence outside the village delineate ideological issues that I faced in gender, lifestyle, religion, and socio-politico-economic status.

(8) *Monday 16th April 1990 – Year 10*

***Classmates:*** *“Wow, you know Hōgen! But you are a girl!”*

*Hōgen* means ‘dialect’ in Japanese. Ryukyuan people call their mother tongue a dialect (of Japanese) due to the historical context mentioned in Episodes 2 and 3 (Clarke, 2015). There is also a saying that a language is a dialect with an army and navy (Max Weinreich [1894-1969] as cited in Blackwood and Dunlevy, 2021: 238).

I went to a selective high school near the capital of Okinawa[[13]](#footnote-13) to prepare for competitive university entrance exams in Japan, but later my parents only allowed me to apply for local universities because I was a girl (Hammine, 2020a, 2020b; Tsutsui *et al.*, 2021). I was surprised to see that female students there spoke like Tokyoites despite the school being only one hour drive down south from my village where we spoke a contact language of our ancestral tongue and Japanese (Sugita, 2014). Romaine (2008: 103) argues that women tend to use more prestigious variants than men who are likely to have higher status and power.

(9) *Thursday 10th June 1993*

***Among classmates:*** *“Sorry, what did you just say? So many different dialects!”*

I went to local medical school. Nine out of ten were male students, and more than half of us were from all over Japan along with a few international students who passed the highest level of JLPT.[[14]](#footnote-14) Female students became more masculine than male peers to survive patriarchal society in Japan (Froese, Sekiguchi and Maharjan, 2018). In group work, we often heard a variety of regional Japanese dialects and enjoyed the differences. If we were in Tokyo, they would simply adjust their speech to sound like Tokyoites (Ferguson, 1959; Sanada, 2019).

(10) *Friday 17th October 1997*

***Boyfriend:*** *“You think you must save me from the Path of Perdition.* *Don’t you see how arrogant you are? You can’t be better than my mother.* *She raised me alone by herself, working hard at nightclub.”*

Pastoral care or counselling service was scarcely provided at that time. The sole knowledge that I could rely on to survive my complicated adolescence was our Christian tradition that was only accumulated for a few generations (Trafton, 1991: 29-31; Tomiyama, 2016). I took a leave of absence and dived into a professional night entertainment world to explore what my former boyfriend meant.

(11-1) *Friday 21st November 1997*

***Otōsan:****[[15]](#footnote-15) “Oh, she’s pretty. Welcome to our Okiya!”*

***Okāsan:*** *“Let’s name her Aguri.”[[16]](#footnote-16)*

(11-2) *Wednesday 25th February 1998*

***Onēsan:*** *“You’ve become much more feminine than before.”*

***Okāsan:*** *“We’ll miss you. I’ll keep you registered at the Kenban.*

*You can come back any time.”*

During the three months of work shadowing, I learned a lot indeed. While overflattering superiors, ordinary people revealed *lust for violence* (Elbert, Moran and Schauer, 2017) to inferiors or stigmatised night entertainers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) when a moral system was not functioning. I was also impressed with their alternative underground safety network.

I understood that a rare gem was the one who was kind to people in vulnerable positions according to their inner moral value. An influential Japanese journalist Tsuneo Watanabe (1926-) also reflects that what supported him during the student mobilization under the extreme war conditions was ‘the sky filled with stars above’ and his ‘inner moral value’ which were never spoiled by bullets flying towards him or absurd military codes (Yasui, 2020). I became more interested in embracing new worldviews.

(12-1) *July 1999 – a field visit to Nepal*

*Filled with nostalgic ambience everywhere … What makes me feel so?[[17]](#footnote-17) But look at the disparity in the world … Shouldn’t I have saved people’s lives by donating the cost for my field tour? I’m just watching how they give up their medical treatments after their long journey on foot. We are ugly extravagant savage.*

(12-2) *August 1999 – at the IFMSA[[18]](#footnote-18) General Assembly Meeting in Mexico*

*“That Yugoslavian boyfriend and Swedish girlfriend … He experienced the Kosovo War, and she is probably a migrant. They look so mature. I can't believe that they are of my age. And all those delegates from … more than 100 countries? Such a diverse world we live in. So much disparity here again.”*

I eagerly attended many field visits and student activities but got overwhelmed partially because I was too naïve to cope with brutal realities unfolding in front of my eye and because I lost spiritual connection to the God. People were often nasty in the competitive environment. I gradually ware out.

(13) *Date unknown*

*Attempted suicide. When I woke up in a hospital, my former classmate was standing next to me as a medical intern.*

I urgently needed spiritual guides. I envied people who managed to survive in the secular world on their own.

(14-1) *February 2001*

***Me:*** *“I’m tired of the worldly life. I cannot forget a sense of peace when I covered myself with a headscarf and gown as Saint Mary at a Nativity play as a child. Could you accept me as an apprentice at your covenant?”*

***Abbess:*** *“Let’s have weekly counselling first. When all doubts are gone, let’s think about it again.”*

(14-2) *April 2001*

***Me:*** *“I've been thinking of my Muslim friends lately. They were always by my side whenever I was alone at the bottom. They also wear similar clothes and live a monastic life while living their family life. I wonder how it is like.”*

***Abbess:*** *“Go and examine their life. You will definitely come back.”*

(14-3) *May 2001*

***Nor Huda (Malaysian classmate):*** *“Salam alaikum, Miho. Is it true that you converted to Islam? Unbelievable!”*

I took *Shahada[[19]](#footnote-19)* to have a trial period in the real-life settings. Since then, I have found one puzzle piece that perfectly fits my worldview – *Tawheed*.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, I still felt alone and isolated from society. I wondered how it is like to live in Muslim society as a family because I received extravagant support[[21]](#footnote-21) from their society.

(15) *Date unspecified*

***Supervisor (Prof of Neurosurgery):*** *“So, family or career? Make up your mind. I also sacrifice my own family. I work from 7 am to 11 pm.”*

***Me:*** *“I think … family?”*

After learning the possibility of transfer to Turkish medical school, I relocated to Turkey and married a local Turkish partner. However, as soon as my social status changed from an unaccompanied Japanese Muslim woman to someone’s wife, I was embedded into their rigid social dynamics. I faced an intense patriarchy and traditional practices which were uncritically justified under the name of religion. I did not have a chance to transfer to medical school against my partner’s will. Later, I remarried an Algerian British Muslim in England and fell into similar dynamics again.

(16) *Date unknown*

*Why do I repetitively fall into a trap of patriarchy? A wife’s destiny lies in her husband’s hand just like children’s destiny in their parents’ hand.*

Patriarchy, or a social system that prioritises the rights of males and elders, may not to be entirely blamed if the privilege holders take their proportionately increased responsibility for collective survival (Lakoff [1996] as cited in DeGagne, 2008: 22). For example, in Muslim society, I not only enjoyed unconditional financial maintenance (Gani and Khan, 2019) but also gender segregation (Sattari, 2020) as a person who was tired of sexual harassment in Japanese society (Tsunoda, 2003). I was content while I strategically managed to cope with a set of concrete constraints (Kandiyoti, 1988).

However, my suffering was greater than gratitude as a woman who wanted a freedom in public sphere in Turkey or as a convert Muslim woman in England who had poor access to Muslim women’s networks which were typically reserved for women of same ethnic origins.

# Awakening

Accumulated encounters, including those mentioned in Section 3, eventually led me to important *turning points* (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003: 8). I share four such turning-point moments or *epiphanies* (Denzin, 2013: XI) from my son’s childhood and my postgraduate/research life.

(17) *March 2014 – Year 2 (my son)*

*I was told by Japanese Saturday School in London that my son had to leave because his Japanese language competence was not good enough.*

***My son:*** *“Why am I excluded? Am I not Japanese?”*

It was heart breaking to witness my son’s suffering. He had many friends there, and it was the only place where he could use his heritage Japanese language. He saw it as his first-order community where he would not be questioned his membership. However, the main purpose of the Japanese supplementary school was to maintain the order of Japanese society among expats’ children so that they would smoothly adapt themselves to Japanese society on their return (Doerr and Lee, 2009). The incident also rekindled my old wounds, but I could not identify the reason yet. To create a *Third Place* (Oldenburg, 1999) for heritage Japanese speakers, I started a master’s degree in language pedagogy at SOAS University of London.

(18) *November 2015 – Postgraduate*

***Lecturer:*** *“Which part of Japan are you from?”*

***Me:*** *“Okinawa.”*

***Lecturer:*** *“Oh, so, do you speak Ryukyuan?”*

***Me:*** *“Not really, why?”*

***Lecturer:*** *“Do you know that your language is endangered. You should revitalise your own language, too.”*

*Yes, older people do speak their mother tongue among themselves, but not even they use it to us. What was she so curious about our insignificant dialect?*

My ancestral tongue never crossed my mind until she reminded me of it. I did not even know that Ryukyuan was a language group (Shimoji and Pellard, 2010), neither a single language nor a dialect of Japanese (Clarke, 2015). I also realised for the first time that there were thousands of Indigenous languages across the world while there existed only a few hundred countries and territories (SIL International, 2021).

(19) *July 2016 – Year 4 (my son)*

*After school, I took my son to a nearby park. Samira (an Algerian mother) was also sitting next to me. I called out to my son not to push his friend.*

***Samira:*** *“Stop using Japanese to your son. Use Arabic. The language of paradise is Arabic.[[22]](#footnote-22) You should help him perfect his Arabic first.”*

What she said connected the dots. The discourse was familiar to me as my mother also forbade me to mimic how my classmates spoke – mixing Ryukyuan into Japanese. By the time, I was aware that our people were oppressed for using their own mother tongue under a political campaign (Roche, 2021). Islamic and Christian hegemony also marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems as paganism (York, 2003, no date) in varying degrees both in my partner’s community and mine, respectively.

(20) *Monday* 9th *March 2020 – returned from a research trip*

***Partner:*** *“Look what happens when you leave your home behind.”*

***Me:*** *“I need your support. I know I cannot stay in the field too long. I understand it impacts our family life, but I still need to conduct brief field visits for my PhD research periodically for two years.”*

***Partner:*** *“What’s the point of your research?”*

***Me:*** *“It’s about regenerating my community and exploring my own identity.”*

***Partner:*** *“Converts are contaminating our religion.”*

As my research progressed, my partner’s abhorrence grew stronger. It was partially due to his patriarchal gender view that women should not neglect her domestic responsibilities, but there was also something else, with which I still cannot pull a pierced thorn out of my chest. I thought that he would understand what I felt as Indigenous Ryukyuan because he was also Indigenous Kabyle Amazigh.[[23]](#footnote-23) However, he was more concerned for decolonization of Algeria from French influence. It was heavily influenced by an ethno-cultural unity centred around Islam and Arabic that actively supressed Amazigh culture (Harris, 2020). Given the fact that the French colonial empire used the Kabyle identity to divide and conquer Algeria (Aïtel, 2014: 27), my partner projected his negative attitude towards the Kabyle people’s political resistance onto my research activities.

After being constantly restrained within or bounced off ideological boundaries, I eventually broke a taboo of transgressing lingo-cultural (Turnbull, 2020) and religious (Ramadan, 2010) boundaries. My such actions have been threatening close relationships that I built over many years, but I am desperate to find another puzzle piece of my life – an intersection of my Muslim identity and the Ryukyuan knowledge system.[[24]](#footnote-24)

# Indigenous efflorescence

While my life being deeply stirred, the following episode has provided me an insight on what to aim at for future.

(21) *Thursday 5th* *May 2020 – Year 9 (my son)*

*I was attending an online meeting organised by English-speaking, mixed-roots Ryukyuan people mainly from Ryukyuan diasporas.[[25]](#footnote-25)*

*My son overheard our discussions and asked, “Mum, am I also Ryukyuan? What’s the difference between Ryukyuan and Japanese? Why do we have Japanese passports if we are Ryukyuan?”*

My son’s questions were inspiring. Even a teenager derives such straight forward questions. In fact, our ancestors were ruled under the Ryukyu Kingdom, which was annexed to Japan in 1879 (Mizuno, 2009) as mentioned earlier. More than a hundred people gathered there and shared their unique life stories, which my son found relevant to his own circumstances. He felt a personal connection to the Ryukyus for the first time. It never occurred to him during our family visits to Okinawa, where he was often singled out as a White *Hāfu**[[26]](#footnote-26)* who does not speak proper Japanese (Burke, 2016).

Since then, I have been interested in creating a *Thirdspace* (Soja, 1996) where self-identified Ryukyuans from varied backgrounds can negotiate their pluralistic identity and explore a new way of life (Ting-Toomey 2015). Given that the memory and praxis of the Ryukyuan knowledge system are gradually disappearing due to the ongoing assimilation to Japan, such a space could be also beneficial for descendants of traditional Ryukyuan people to rediscover what it means to be Ryukyuan. Process- and future-oriented discussions may help the Ryukyuan people to build a new efflorescent[[27]](#footnote-27) Ryukyuan society, which may also help them navigate through their turbulent geopolitical circumstances surrounded by great political powers (Iwama, 2021).

Since I identified two missing pieces (spiritual connection and intersectionality) and the future direction, I have often recalled the following Hadith:

*The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said:*

*God Almighty says, “Oh, Son of Adam, be unoccupied to submit to God. I will fill your chest with richness and alleviate your poverty. Otherwise, you will fill your hands with work, and I will not alleviate your poverty”*

*– At-Tirmidhī (9th century CE: No. 2466)*

My troubled life was constantly haunted by fear of ostracism and unnamed void, which had been always filled with alternatives or readily available bounded ideologies. The void might have been created when my family and ancestors were suddenly stripped off their Indigenous knowledge system. They attempted to fill the gap with cut-and-pasted Christianity introduced by Western missionaries to fulfil their demands of everyday life. I also attempted to fill the void with whatever available around me.

# Epilogue

Finally, I share four episodes related to the current pandemic of COVID-19 which has impacted me both negatively and positively. While feeling impatient to race against time to sustain the Indigenous knowledge system (FAO, ABI and CIAT, 2021: IX), I also feel protected by physical boundaries created by lockdowns.

(22) *Tuesday 16th February 2021*

***Sister-in-law:*** *“Leila’s father has passed away. Poor her, she can’t even come back to attend his funeral.”*

***Me:*** *“Innā lillāhi wa Innā ilayhi rāj’ūn …”* [[28]](#footnote-28)

Borders to Algeria was completely shut due to the pandemic. They did not even allow Algerian citizens to enter their own country. I felt sorry to Leila, a relative of mine who lived in England. I have many symbolic dreams these days. At times they alleviate my pain and other times make me fidgety with all sorts of other feelings.

(23) *March 2021 – in my dream*

*Walking on the seashore with Grandma at dusk …*

***Me:*** *“Grandma, that islet is glowing in turquoise. What is it?”*

***Grandma:*** *(explains in an inaudible voice)*

*Suddenly, the tide went out, and we crossed to the islet together. When we arrived there, the scene switched to a churchyard in a historical site in Europe. We walked around together to enjoy sightseeing, then I was awake.*

She is now over 100 years old and lives in a care home. She has never come to Europe, and her right leg is amputated. However, she used to pull me up a cliff[[29]](#footnote-29) with a sac full of *āsa[[30]](#footnote-30)* and urchins on her shoulders. In my dream, she was young and strong again as she used to be. I wondered what the dream was about. A few weeks later, my chest was tightened when I learned that islets were often used as cemeteries and that turquoise could be the colour of the Hereafter in the Ryukyuan worldviews (Nakamatsu, 1975; Imaizumi, 2021). It is also said that when the tide goes out coral reef lagoons *inō[[31]](#footnote-31)* surface to connect this life to the spiritual world (Hashio, 2017). Did my unconscious know the traditional knowledge without my conscious knowledge?

(24) *Summer 2019 – at care home*

*Grandma pointed out of her room window, saying “Kumā umi yagutu yo, ippē magasaru gai ga turari an. Yā ga tacchi, namā haman tōku natōn” in our ancestral tongue.*

*Translation:*

*“This area is sea, so large shells can be harvested. Now the seashore is far away because (so many) houses are built.”*

A peculiar history and unique atmosphere in her time, and my own childhood memories … Those vivid experiences are temporal and would eventually disappear along with our ancestral languages if we do not document them now, but travel restrictions due to the pandemic prevent me from visiting them. It is frustrating and heartbreaking, but the last words that I exchanged with my grandmother have been a relief to me.

(25) *March 2020 – the latest visit to my grandmother*

*I sang hymns in Ryukyuan to Grandma as she used to do in prayer meetings among our relatives (most of them have already passed away). Then, we said the Lord's Prayer in Ryukyuan together.*

***Me:*** *“I’ll be always praying for you, Grandma.”*

***Grandma:*** *“Nothing makes me happier than that, Nifee dō,[[32]](#footnote-32) Miho.”*

Despite a negative impact of the pandemic, lockdowns have also protected me from direct exposure to ongoing cultural assimilation in the field. My PhD research is emotionally draining. The more you become self-aware, the more you get sensitive. It is also sad that there are not many people who I can share such feelings. Many people turn away as if they are garden eels who stow away quickly as I move the water nearby. I would like to close my story with Kitty O’Meara’s poem:

*“And the people stayed home.*

*And they listened, and read books, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.*

*And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.*

*And the people healed.*

*And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.”*

*– Catherine M. O’Meara* *(2020)*



Figure 1. Illustration by Boehman (no date).

# Unravelling the story

Brockmeier (2012) posited that narratives have four basic functions, which are communicative (intersubjective understanding), rhetorical (explaining), empathetic (being aware of the self and others), and cognitive (reflexive and imaginative).

I wrote my first-person narrative to share what it feels like to live as an Indigenous person whose community is under ongoing cultural assimilation, especially emotional insecurity and its coping mechanism – that is, to pretend to be someone else. I argue that it is difficult to fully embrace an *alterity* (Gillespie, Kadianaki and O’sullivan-Lago, 2012) to negotiate contingent self-identity (Ting-Toomey, 2015) when one’s own knowledge system is undervalued.

As an Indigenous Ryukyuan researcher who supports new speakers[[33]](#footnote-33) of Ryukyuan languages, I hope that this narrative will convince potential new speakers and stakeholders of language revitalisation how important it is to maintain access to the Indigenous knowledge system and to facilitate a Thirdspace (Soja, 1996) where new speakers can negotiate their pluralistic identities based on both Indigenous knowledge system and the current diversity observed among them.

In this section, I first examine *semiospheres* (Lotman [1982] as cited in Semenenko, 2016) in the narrative and discuss relations between individual and groups, and then reflect on the implication of the Blue Bird of Happiness in terms of semiospheres and relations.

## 7.1. Semiospheres and relations

Zittoun (2012) argues that the mind of self who makes a meaning and develops through culture can be described as a semiotic system. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) triadically stratified the system’s dimensions into *iconicity* (feeling or immediate consciousness) that is bound to time and space, *indexicality* (reaction or existential connection), and *symbolicity* (synthesis or habit-taking) that has a full degree of semiotic freedom and openness. However, he also regarded them as simultaneously present and constant ingredients of our knowledge (Atkin, 2010; Innis, 2012).

As an equivalent to the dimension of symbolicity, I use the term semiosphere which Semenenko summarised as a concrete collective mental sphere with an abstract character, including languages, where all communication and meaning generation take place (Lotman [1982] as cited in Semenenko, 2016; Semenenko, 2016). I listed major semiospheres, related relations (which can be categorised in the dimension of indexicality) and icons identified in the narratives in Table 1.

Among many motifs, I first touch upon a unique Ryukyuan spatial realm which also extends to a spiritual realm, in relation to Episodes 23 and 24, before exploring pivotal relations between individual and groups which lead to the elucidation of the Blue Bird of Happiness.

Table 1. Semiospheres and related relations and icons identified in the narrative. Numbers in brackets indicate episode numbers.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Semiospheres (simbolicity) | Relations  (Indexicality) | Icons  (Iconicity) |
| **the (un)conscious self**  i. inner moral value  ii. the shadow (Jung, 1959) | iii. identity (identification with others)  iv. physical and spiritual connections: a sense of peace (14); being suicidal due to self-doubt or feeling isolated and alone (4) (13) | i. the sky filled with stars above (11)  ii. a dark fantasy (4); dreams (23)  iii. all episodes  iv. a finite body / an infinite soul (Prologue); Saint Mary’s clothing (14-1) |
| **Indigenous knowledge system (IKS) and ancestral tongue**  i. (un)conscious intergenerational transmission  ii. intersectional IKS as Ryukyuan Christian | iii. historical context and its impact: Indigenous;2 minority; marginalised; stigmatised; hōgen (8);unable to speak or behave freely under surveillance (3); psychological trauma (emotional breakdown; shame)  iv. **when unaware of IKS:** obedient to be taken advantage of / pretending to be someone else (4); silence (3); forgotten (18); feeling alienated / emotionally detached (4) (5)  v. **when aware of IKS:** feeling at home; enabling to focus on who I want to become (21); enabling to embrace an alterity (Gillespie, Kadianaki and O’sullivan-Lago, 2012) | i. Indigenous territories and resources (23) (24); nostalgic ambience (12-1); ancestral cemetery (7)  ii. Sunday school (3); prayers with my grandmother (25)  iii. the moon in double vision with my astigmatic eyes / Indigenous territories being parallel worlds for locals and mainlanders (7)  iv. *Sleeping Beauty* (Trites, 1997); becoming empty (4); wrapped in a translucent film / imaginary bubble (5); aliens in disguise  v. self-identified Ruykyuan people’s life stories (21) |
| **ideology**  i. society  ii/iii. nation state  iv. religion | i. social order / moral system: patriarchy (8) (16); underground safety network; positionality: politico-economic disparity (12); overflattering superiors / lust for violence to inferiors (11); being nasty in competition (12)  ii. **Japan:** assimilation policy; Kyōtsūgo as official language; family language policy (3); *diglossia* (Ferguson, 1959) (9); repercussions of imperialism / US military occupation (6); singles out hāfu26 people (21)  iii. **Algeria:** decolonization movements under ethno-cultural unity / French colonialism using Indigenous Amazigh identities to divide and conquer the North Africa (20)  iv. **Christianity/Islam:** hegemony against IKS (10) (20); prioritising Arabic over other languages (19) | i. Geigi15 community (11); lifestyle (15) (20); Third Place (Oldenburg, 1999) (18); physical boundaries by lockdowns due to the pandemic of COVID-19 (22)  ii. monolingual Ryukyuan speaker (1); the 100th anniversary (2); the incident of burning Hinomaru9 (6); fancy clothes / Tokyoite-like speech (7); Japanese Saturday School in London (17)  iii. a pierced thorn in my chest (20)  iv. extravagant support (14-3) |
| **imagination** | i. imaginary paradise: mainlanders’ image of Indigenous territories (7); my imaginary life as a nun / to live as a family in Muslim society (14); *Indigenous efflorescence* (Roche, Maruyama and Virdi Kroik, 2018) (21)  ii. associated emotions: healing, hope, a sense of true belonging  iii. counter effects | i. Thirdspace (Soja, 1996) (21); Blue Bird of Happiness  ii. released from the cage / a seagull’s call from high up in the sky / a key to open the door to luminant realms (Prologue); the horizon at dawn or dusk / a corner of the churchyard (3)  iii. garden eels stow away quickly as I move the water nearby (Epilogue) |

### 7.1.1. A unique Ryukyuan realm inō

The Ryukyu Islands (Figure 2: left) are fed by the Kuroshio Current from the Western Pacific Warm Pool (WPWP), which makes the islands one of the richest centres of endemic species in the world’s coral reefs (Kan 2011). They are also located in the typical track of typhoons originating from WPWP (Kan 2011), which also contributes to the unique spatial formation of Ryukyuan community (Figure 2: right).

As seen in Episode 23 and 24, the coral reef lagoon inō(Hashio, 2017)is both a pivotal element of the unique cosmological constructions (Abe, 2016) and a source of resource for their everyday life. However, inō, along with other ecosystems,has been destroyed by continuous land development (Omiya, 2004; Imamura *et al.*, 2020).

Given that both my son and I experienced a pivotal turning point to rediscover our pluralistic identities for the first time when we felt reconnected to our Indigenous knowledge system, fading memories of blessing inō in Episode 24 is alarming because the destruction of Indigenous ecosystem may also lead to the destruction of our spiritual foundations.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2. The Ryukyu Islands (left) (adapted from Kan, 2011) and a traditional community realm in the Ryukyus (right) (Adapted from Architectural Institute of Japan [1989] as cited in Tomigusuku City, 2020). The community is surrounded by the mother forest Kusati Mui (腰当森: Cuddling Forest) which shields the community from typhoons and cold winds. It also has an ancestors’ cemetery. The sacred grove utaki has a sanctuary ibi where their guardian deity descends, and only priestesses can enter there. The Worship House Ashagi/Tun is also situated near the forest. They believe that the Everlasting World Nirai Kanai exists far off the coast to the south-east. It is the origin of all life, and life is eternal there. The forest, coral reef lagoon inō, and the cultivated land provide resources to the community.

### 7.1.2. Pivotal relations

As identified in the narrative, individual life is simultaneously embedded in an array of semiospheres and entangled in a complex variety of relations with groups and other individuals (Table 1). Individuals congregate under *semipermeable symbolic boundaries* and associated feelings to form a group (Madureira, 2012), and different individuals have different construct of semiospheres and group belongings.

Madureira (2012) posits that the meaning-making process occurs with differences and ambiguities and that belonging to a specific group creates an emotional tension between *Heimweh* (striving for the known and security) and *Fernweh* (curiosity for novelty and taking risks) (Ernest Boesch [1916-2014] as cited in Madureira, 2012). She continues that needs for collective survival may promote Heimweh which reduces the permeability of group boundaries possibly to the degree of disqualifying others.

In fact, Ryukyuan Indigenous knowledge system has been disqualified by Japan initially as part of their *Rich Nation, Strong Army* campaign in the early 20th century against the Western Powers (Samuels, 1994). My partner’s abhorrence against my emergent Indigenous identity was also driven by his wish for decolonization of Algeria from repercussions of French colonialism (Episode 20).

In contrast, individual also exerts their imagination to *rupture* (Zittoun, 2012) their current entrapment to create a new dynamics of meaning-making (Episodes 7, 14 and 21). They are contingent upon the context where they emerge, and the process unfolds within the irreversible flow of time in their life course (Madsen, 2021).

## 7.2. Blue Bird of Happiness

In Prologue, I described the Blue Bird of Happiness as ‘a life with a sense of true belonging’ and stated that it realises when ‘a new social equilibrium within which we can build a new relationship based on our true selves and mutual trust’ is achieved – in other words, when we create a new dynamics of meaning-making that is coherent with who we want to become (the true self) and what relations we want to have (identity). However, it could be “a real effort at an impossible task” (Valsiner [2007] as cited in Brockmeier, 2012) because we live in different developmental stages in our life course (that means we will not reach our true selves simultaneously at any time point) and our interests in relations do not necessarily coincide.

Nevertheless, I argue the importance of having an awareness in one’s own roots or Indigenous knowledge system, recognising the historical context or power relations that we are involved in, and negotiating one’s pluralistic identity (Grossen, Zittoun and Ros, 2012; Zittoun, 2012). Having access to the holistic knowledge system which has been passed down for generations will contribute to the foundation of the self, from where one’s inner moral value will develop and become a beacon to navigate through an uncertain future. Knowing power relations will reduce fear for unknown threats, and therefore Heimweh will be also reduced. Finally, updating one’s pluralistic identity based on both traditional knowledge and one’s acquired experiences will increase Fernweh to promote our reflexivity and empathy to others, which will facilitate the process of creating a new dynamics of meaning-making – that is, a step closer to the Blue Bird of Happiness.

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1. It was part of our joint panel presentation at the International Conference of Autoethnography (ICAE) 2021 (Tsuchimoto *et al.*, 2021) (The presentation video is available from the reference). This article was also developed from my presentation within the panel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When the word ‘Indigenous’ is capitalised, it does not simply indicate that Indigenous peoples have unique history and relationship with their territories and resources, but also that they are marginalised in the mainstream of society (UNDESA, 2008; Merlan, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Karukan* is a Japanese confection made from grated yam and rice flour. Red and white colours are often used for festive or auspicious occasions in Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The late period of Ryukyu Kingdom had a rigid social class system (Akamine, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We had opportunities to sing Ryukyuan folksongs, cook traditional cuisines, and experience traditional performing arts as part of the curriculum. A few passionate teachers and students also delivered speech or performed plays in Ryukyuan. I heard that such opportunities are increasing at school (Madoka Hammine, personal communication, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Family language policy means a policy on language use within the home and among family members (King and Fogle, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kawauchi (1975) and Nippon Animation, Co., LTD (1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tsuchimoto also mentioned how an finite garden links to the infinity in our joint panel at ICAE 2021 (Tsuchimoto *et al.*, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hinomaru* [the circle of the sun] means the flag of Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the full story, see Chibana (1988) (English translation is available). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Habu* is a venomous pit viper endemic to the Ryukyus. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The festival originates in China. During the third month of Chinese lunar calendar, the whole clan gets together at the cemetery to honour their ancestors (NHK *et al.*, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Okinawa has been the political centre of both the former Ryukyu Kingdom and the current Okinawa Prefecture of Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Japanese Language Proficiency Test. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. They were my *Otōsan* (father), *Okāsan* (mother), and *Onēsan* (sister) at *Okiya* (a lodging house for *Geigi* [Geisha]). *Kenban* means a *Geigi* association. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. She named me after the heroine of a popular TV drama series called *Aguri* (NHK, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It could be because I projected what I had lost to their traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Shahada* is a testimony to become a Muslim. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Tawheed* is a belief of the sole absolute Creator who surpasses the limit of our imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For example, a free three-months Islamic foundation course in Malaysia with provision of stipends (RISEAP, 2021), or an invitation to perform a mandatory pilgrimage *Hajj* for free of charge from Japan, to name a few. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There is a saying among Arab Muslim people that the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said “Love the Arabs for three reasons: I am an Arab, the Qur'an is Arabic and the speech of the people of Paradise is Arabic” (Dūrī, 2012: 269), but it is said to be fabricated (As-Sakhawī, 1985: 63-64). Meriem Sallemine (personal communication, 2019) identified that this belief had an impact on language use of the Zenata Amazigh people during her PhD fieldwork in Southern Algeria. Also, see Footnote 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Imazighen [plural of Amazigh] are Indigenous Peoples from the North Africa (Harris, 2020). Also, see Footnote 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For example, I cannot worship ancestors nor spiritual beings but can recognise their existence and send greetings. The Ryukyuan people are exclusive in terms of their close-knit ties of kinship and community relations that are uniquely situated on their Indigenous land and sea, which extends to their relationships with ancestors and spiritual beings in their unique cosmological constructions (Abe, 2016) so as with other Indigenous peoples (e.g., Henry and Pene, 2001; Chilisa *et al.*, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For details of migrations, see Kondo (2014) and Yomitan Village History Editing Room (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hāfu [half] means ‘mixed-race’ in Japanese. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Roche *et al.* (2018: 225) proposed a new coined term *Indigenous efflorescence* to describe ‘political empowerment, economic success, and cultural flourishing’ of Indigenous peoples. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. It is a prayer and greeting of condolence in Arabic, meaning “Surely we belong to God, and to Him shall we return”. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. That path was the only route to access the nearest seashore at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. āsa is an edible green alga *Monostroma nitidum* in my ancestral tongue. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For details, see Figure 2 (right). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Nifee dō* means ‘thanks’ in our ancestral tongue. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Here, ‘new speakers’ means people who had little home or community exposure to the target endangered language but has acquired it through language revitalisation efforts (O’Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)