

Mediating Traumatic Memories and a Reality of Absence: Returns/Repatriations of Artefacts as Strategies for Okinawans' Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission.

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ABSTRACT

In recent repatriation cases, issues regarding geopolitical relations and ownership rights prevail against the symbolic values and meanings attributed to artefacts by source communities. Investigating the recent repatriation case of twenty-two objects to Okinawa, I argue that looted and non-looted artefacts mediate Okinawans' traumatic history and present experience. Counteracting locals' feeling of disconnection caused by the annexation of Okinawa and the deportation of their cultural heritage, the repatriation of artefacts to the Ryūkyū emphasises how Okinawans' lives are entangled with the happenings of their physical surrounding. Besides showing their physical trauma, the re-socialisation of artworks offers tracings for the socio-cultural history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and locals' pre-war relationship to their land, thereby re-activating Okinawans' concealed memory. Resultantly, it opens doors to intergenerational knowledge transmission: direct contact with those objects could enhance scholarly research undertaken in Okinawan art and cultural history. Okinawans could learn about the culture of the Ryūkyūans in museums. Therefore, I lay the ground for further ethnographic research to explore how Okinawan artefacts' repatriation/return could lead to the recognition of Okinawan indigeneity and sovereignty and empower the people with self-governance and self-determination.

KEYWORDS

Okinawa; repatriation; artefact; trauma; ownership; indigeneity; sovereignty

These past decades have seen an increase in cases of repatriation, notably with the demand for restitution of stolen objects from Sub-Saharan Africa to French¹ and British museums² or the debates around the ownership of the Parthenon Marbles.³ Nonetheless, when investigating cases of looting, attention is usually given to the repercussions on global power relations, legal and political issues, and ethical questions relating to ownership rights. Consequently, symbolic values and meanings pertaining to source communities are overlooked.

On March 15, 2024, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a statement addressing the recovery and return of twenty-two artefacts to Okinawa, Japan's southernmost and westernmost region. Amongst these were scrolls, pottery pieces, an ancient map and a letter. The latter revealed that the objects were looted during the Battle of Okinawa (April 1–June 21, 1945), when the Okinawan land and people suffered significant damages. While the Japanese government has prioritised the greater perspective of the nation, I investigate how Okinawans' entanglement with a history of economic, political, social and cultural oppressions and traumas resulted in a confrontation with a landscape of ghostly encounters, ghostly reminders of the pre-war and post-war atrocities.

During a symposium on Okinawan history, art and culture held in October 2019 at the Sainsbury Institute, art historian Hiroko Ikegami observed an epistemological chasm between the art of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and 'modern' Okinawan art created by the loss of artworks and archival materials during the Battle of Okinawa.⁴ Although English-language scholarships remain scant, I filled in this gap by studying the recent repatriation of Okinawan artefacts. I effected a spatial turn by reviewing scholarships that challenged the dominant conceptualisation of the landscape as an imputation of ideas on the land. Ultimately reaching an ontological theory of *presencing* that offers a material turn, I analysed several artefacts to understand how they bear traces of trauma, mediate Okinawans' violent pre-war and post-war experiences, and how their return could reframe conceptual ruptures between Okinawans, the land and their cultural

¹ Felwine Saar and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: Vers une nouvelle éthique rationnelle* (2018).

² Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

³ Geoffrey Robertson, *Who Owns History: Elgin's Loot and the Case for Returning Plundered Treasure* (Hull: Biteback Publishing, 2019).

⁴ Hiroko Ikegami, "Research on Postwar Okinawan Art: The State of the Field," in *Okinawan Art in Its Regional Context: Historical Overview and Contemporary Practice: Sainsbury Institute Occasional Paper 2*, ed. Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (2022), 15.

heritage. Therefore, this study was methodologically approached through different perspectives ranging from historical to anthropological to art historians to legal and political.

This thesis argues that looted and non-looted artefacts could mediate Okinawans' past traumatic history and their present experience. Besides counteracting cultural amnesia, the re-socialisation of objects in their context of origins could offer a rupture from a transgenerational trauma by formulating effective strategies to aid recovery. Although beyond the scope of this thesis, I lay the ground for further ethnographic research that could explore the extent to which artefacts' repatriation/return to Okinawa could empower the people with self-governance and self-determination and lead to recognising Okinawan indigeneity and sovereignty.

The first part will explore how World War II and the annexation of the islands by U.S. military forces and the Japanese government impacted the relationship between Okinawans and their native land. The second part will examine how the looted objects offer tracings for the different historical correspondences and how their repatriation can challenge the disconnection felt by Okinawans with the land by formulating effective strategies to aid recovery. Eventually, the third part will return to a legal perspective to stress how this case of repatriation presents a need for the recognition of Okinawan indigeneity and sovereignty, complex acts neglected by the Japanese authorities ever since the end of World War II.

TRAUMATIC LANDSCAPE: A DISCONNECTION WITH THE LAND?

The Historical Position of the Ryūkyū Kingdom

Okinawa prefecture was once the Ryūkyū Kingdom, a nation independent to mainland Japan stretching from Kikai Island to Yonaguni Island. Ruled by three royal rulers, it became the cornerstone of Asia. In the fourteenth century, the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhū Yuánzhāng (1328-1398), forbade overseas trade and travel by all Chinese to counteract piracy and enforced the tribute system under which the Ryūkyū became China's vassal.⁵ Ryūkyū ships carried Chinese goods to other Asian nations where they were exchanged for foreign merchandise to sell to the Chinese market.⁶ After being unified in the fifteenth century, the Kingdom was invaded and defeated by the Satsuma clan in 1609; it then became controlled by the Tokugawa shogun's *bakuhān* administrative system.⁷ Both a vassal of Japan and China, the Ryūkyū Kingdom was established as a buffer zone by the royal government.

Nevertheless, the restoration of imperial rule in 1868 prompted the abolishment of feudal domains (*han*) and the emergence of prefectures in 1871.⁸ Renamed the 'Ryūkyū *han*' by the Meiji government (1868-1912), the Ryūkyū Kingdom was 'subject to the policy of *hanseki hōkan*, the return of feudal lands and population to the emperor, as well as that of *haihan chiken*, the replacement of the feudal domains with prefectures'.⁹ Its loss of self-rule was exacerbated when Japan dispatched troops in 1874 to retaliate against the massacre of Ryūkyūan shipwreck victims by Taiwanese aboriginals in 1871.¹⁰ Although first condemned by the Chinese government, the incursion was later justified as an imperative measure taken for the protection of 'people belonging to the nation of Japan'¹¹, a statement interpreted by the Japanese government as China's recognition of Japan's right of jurisdiction over Ryūkyū. After terminating Ryūkyū's dual allegiance and tributary relation with China, the Meiji government began integrating Ryūkyū into the Japanese polity by proceeding to a forced annexation in

⁵ Mamoru Akamine, "Introduction: What Do We Mean by the 'Ryukyu Kingdom'?" in *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, eds. Mamoru Akamine and Robert Huey (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 6.

⁶ Akamine, "Introduction: What Do We Mean by the 'Ryukyu Kingdom'?" 7.

⁷ Akamine, "Introduction: What Do We Mean by the 'Ryukyu Kingdom'?" 8.

⁸ Mamoru Akamine, "The End of the Kingdom," in *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, eds. Mamoru Akamine and Robert Huey (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 143.

⁹ Akamine, "The End of the Kingdom," 143.

¹⁰ Akamine, "The End of the Kingdom," 147-148.

¹¹ Akamine, "The End of the Kingdom," 148.

1875.¹² In 1879, it culminated in the abolishment of the Ryūkyū *han*, the handing-over of the authority on land, persons, and officials to the emperor, and their inclusion in the Okinawa Prefecture.

The Traumatic events of World War II

After the 1931 attack by the Kwantung army against the Chinese garrison in Mukden, Japan's reputation deteriorated as the League of Nations condemned their aggressive colonisation of foreign territories.¹³ In joining the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936 and the Axis powers in 1940, Japan was propelled into the Second World War.¹⁴ Unspared by those conflicts, Okinawa witnessed one of the deadliest chapters in its history, which left an indelible trauma on its population.

Discriminations against Okinawans began with their pejorative designation as '*Ryūkyū-jin*' (Ryūkyūan), implying inferiority in status and social exclusion.¹⁵ Okinawans also faced cultural erasure with the standardisation and nationalisation (*kokuminka*) of 'Japanese culture' to show unity in wartime.¹⁶ In 1943, many Okinawans relocated to the mainland for jobs and were exposed to air attacks.¹⁷ Other civilians moved to the countryside where they suffered from food shortages.¹⁸

Trauma unfolded during the Battle of Okinawa when Okinawan soldiers and civilians witnessed thousands of war crimes. Instead of being captured by the enemy, the Imperial Army ordered Okinawans to commit suicide.¹⁹ American soldiers also committed atrocities by killing war prisoners, sinking Japanese ships transporting civilians, and sexually assaulting young women and teenage girls during 'girl-hunts' (*musume-gari*).²⁰ The Okinawan Prefecture estimates victims of the Battle of Okinawa at over 149,425 dead or disappeared. Although the

¹² Akamine, "The End of the Kingdom," 153-154.

¹³ Jacqueline M. Atkins, "Setting the Context," in *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931–1945*, ed. Jacqueline M. Atkins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 42.

¹⁴ Atkins, "Setting the Context," 45.

¹⁵ Steve Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," in *The Okinawan Diaspora in Japan*, ed. Steve Rabson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 99.

¹⁶ Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," 100-101.

¹⁷ Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," 110.

¹⁸ Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," 110.

¹⁹ Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," 130.

²⁰ Rabson, "Wartime (1937–1945)," 136.

war ended in 1945, the U.S. military occupied, administered, and built military bases in Okinawa until 1972, after destroying the island's natural environment and seizing local farmlands.

The Appropriation of Okinawa by the U.S. Military

While tackling the issue of U.S. military bases in Okinawa, French researcher Céline Pajon highlights that Japan signed a treaty in 1951 that symbolically 'sold' Okinawa to the U.S. in exchange of (1) the recovery of national sovereignty; (2) the ability to sell goods on the U.S. market; and (3) a military protection against threats propagated by Japan's communist neighbours during the Cold War.²¹ Consequently, the U.S. occupation authority confiscated lands in 1953 to more than 50,000 Okinawan owners to build and expand military bases, which by definition Pajon considers an appropriation of the land by foreign soldiers and their families.²² Okinawans have ever since shown their opposition to the U.S. occupation: they organised protests like the *shimagurumi-toso* in 1956 during which they denounced the negative environmental, economic and social impacts the presence of the U.S. troops had on local communities.

To American anthropologist Christopher Nelson, the past keeps resurging itself into and forging the reality of Okinawans today with painful and unexpected consequences.²³ For instance, a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl was raped by three G.I.s on September 4, 1995, which reminded locals of the 'girl-hunts' (*musume-gari*) which occurred during the war. Resultantly, a direct link with the land seemed formulated by Okinawans as Pajon notes that the people 'demanded a reduction or even complete departure of the bases' while the Governor of Okinawa, Masahide Ota, '[refused] to sign the leases of land rented to the U.S. bases'.²⁴ Nevertheless, locals received little to no support from the Japanese government and Ota was sued by the Japanese government and forced to sign the leases, after his defence of the

²¹ Céline Pajon, "Understanding the Issue of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa," *Asie. Visions* 29 (Paris, Brussels: Institut français des relations internationales, 2010), 7–8.

²² Pajon, "Understanding the Issue of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa," 12.

²³ Christopher Nelson, "Introduction: The Battlefield of Memory," introduction to *Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance, and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa*, ed. Christopher Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

²⁴ Pajon, "Understanding the Issue of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa," 17.

fundamental rights of Okinawan citizens was openly dismissed for the greater cause of the nation.

Rethinking the Concept of Landscape

Examining the acts of building undertaken by U.S. troops in Okinawa illuminates a prevailing conceptualisation of the landscape in social sciences: a set of values and symbolic meanings projected onto the material land. Drawing upon the term ‘Landschaft’ coined in sixteenth-century Northern Denmark, Kenneth Olwig reveals the dialectical tension between a substantive vision of the land and a scenic approach politically defined by a social body that attributes values and meanings determined by common laws.²⁵ Besides emulating a dichotomy between nature and culture, the notion of landscape as a visual phenomenon implies a rupture between the observing subject and the observed object through acts of perception – that lead to an arguable disconnection between people and the land. This approach to landscape, therefore, involves appropriating the natural land through human acts of worldmaking. Similarly, the U.S. military and the Japanese government exemplify what Tim Ingold characterises as a ‘building perspective’ – the human ability to imagine new symbolical pictures and manipulate their physical surroundings to materialise these new configurations.²⁶

Nevertheless, Ingold challenges these multiple ruptures implied in the concept of landscape by presenting a ‘dwelling perspective’, based on an ontology of *presencing*.²⁷ To articulate a landscape of trauma, Okinawans must be present in the environment. Their lives, movements, and relations are entangled with the happenings of their physical surroundings as they engage with the materiality of the land and other entities dwelling in this environment. As mentioned above, the island was destroyed by the bombings during World War II. The direct trauma imparted on the land and the resultative impact on local communities demonstrate Okinawan lives’ entanglement with their environment. In his study of the relationship between landscape and language among the Western Apache, Keith H. Basso advocates for reciprocity

²⁵ Kenneth Olwig, “Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic,” in *From Britain’s Renaissance to America’s New World* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

²⁶ Tim Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living: How Animals and People Make Themselves at Home in the World,” in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 183.

²⁷ Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living,” 185-186.

in the relationship between entities and places.²⁸ The landscape thus becomes a socio-cultural tracing of the interplay between the social body and its environment. The consequences of the appropriation and occupation of the land by U.S. military on the populations confirm that the individuals are not self-contained, disembodied individuals only projecting intentions on the land, but sensing, embodied creatures melding into the pure concreteness of the environment.

Okinawans as the 'Outsiders'?

I nonetheless argue that the traumatic event of World War II, the signing of the security treaty in 1951 and the presence of U.S. military forces on Okinawan soil occurred at the expense of the restoration of Okinawans' sovereignty. Since its restoration to Japan in 1972, Okinawa has been subjected to the unequal treaties signed by the U.S. and Japan, which dismissed the fundamental rights of Ryūkyūans and illegitimised their mutual relationship of existence with the land. The U.S. military's presence in Okinawa and the Japanese government's refusal to listen to Okinawans' claims resulted in a reversal in positions. When the U.S. and Japan were the 'unfamiliar outsiders' who colonised the land, they progressively sidelined the local populations to the point of disconnecting them from their lands.

Nonetheless, Okinawans' correspondences with entities present in a shared environment or *milieu* left traces. Tracings can be immaterial as previously suggested in the study of the conceptual landscape, but Maurice Merleau-Ponty also vouched for the visibility of those tracings offered in and by artistic creations.²⁹ Thus, I will examine how the twenty-two artefacts recently repatriated to Okinawa can challenge this disconnection felt by Okinawans with the land by being recovered and returned to Okinawa.

²⁸ Keith H. Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," in *Senses of Place*, eds. S. Feld and K. H. Basso (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1996), 54–55.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston, USA: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–190.

ARTWORKS MEDIATING A TRAUMATIC CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Investigating the Looted Objects

In March 2024, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a statement addressing the recovery of twenty-two Okinawan artefacts. FBI agent Geoffrey Kelly informs that, amongst the artefacts, an ancient map and paintings were found by the children of a World War II U.S. veteran in January 2023 (respectively, Fig.2[a] and [b]; Fig.3).³⁰ After more research, the family discovered that they were registered in the FBI's National Stolen Art File. Provenance research effected by the public and the FBI and an unsigned typewritten letter enclosed with the objects indicated how they were looted during the Battle of Okinawa. When the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, most artefacts belonging to the royal family moved to Tokyo; those left behind remained in Nakagusuku Palace. Although eight employees of the palace hid the royal treasures before fleeing during the Battle, they were looted by U.S. soldiers and most remain lost to this day. The repatriation/return of those Okinawan artefacts could challenge Okinawans' understanding and relationship with their past and present environments.

³⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), "Art Crime Team: FBI Boston Recovers and Returns 22 Historic Artifacts to Okinawa, Japan," *Federal Bureau of Investigation* website, March 15, 2024.



(Fig.2[a]) Photograph of the nineteenth-century hand-drawn map of the Yaeyama Islands, with a focus on Iriomote. Inserted in: Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] (2024, March 15) ‘Art Crime Team: FBI Boston Recovers and Returns 22 Historic Artifacts to Okinawa, Japan’. Boston: Federal Bureau of Investigation. Photograph by the FBI.



(Fig.2[b]) Photograph of the nineteenth-century hand-drawn map of the Yaeyama Islands. Inserted in: Chie, Tomie. (2024) ‘[Photo Feature] Okinawa's "treasures" that were plundered during the Battle of Okinawa and returned to Japan were discovered along with "Ogoe" paintings in the home of a US veteran’[*Shashin tokushū*] *Okinawa-sen de ryakudatsu, henkan sa reta Okinawa no `takara'-tachi kome taieki gunjin no ie kara `ogoe' to tomoni hakken*]. Photograph by the Ryūkyū Shimpo News Agency.



(Fig.3) Photograph of an *ogoe* painting of a Ryūkyūan king recovered in 2023. Inserted in: Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] (2024, March 15) ‘Art Crime Team: FBI Boston Recovers and Returns 22 Historic Artifacts to Okinawa, Japan’. Boston: Federal Bureau of Investigation. Photographs by the FBI.

Analysing the objects illuminates Okinawans’ pre-war relationship with the land and the physical trauma caused during or after the events of the Second World War. For instance, the map retrieved by the Okinawan authorities informs about the relationship between Okinawans and the islands. Although the Americans claim that it represents Okinawa, only the Yaeyama islands located in the southwestern region of Okinawa prefecture can be observed. At the centre of the FBI’s photograph, a close-up view of Iriomote is depicted: its mountainous range highlighted with a gradation of blues demonstrates different elevation gains, while the villages represented with red circles are connected through an inland route depicted in a red line. The map also stresses Okinawans’ openness to an oceanscape, which is not a physical barrier but a contact zone between islands. Many sea routes in red show how Ryūkyūans navigated between the islands. When the FBI’s photograph emphasises one fragment of the map, Okinawan authorities showed the complete artefact, thereby revealing other islands, from left to right Hateruma, Kuro, Kohama, Taketomi and Ishigaki. Additionally, it records a socio-cultural biography marked by external influences. Although the FBI’s photograph shows some cracks on the map, it conceals its major tears, stains, mouldy areas and other damages. Contrary to the U.S. who shows the ‘beautiful’ part of the artefact, or metaphorically the ‘good part’ of history, the Okinawans stress a history of destruction, physical damage and trauma.

Similarly, the *ogoe* painting necessitates further examination as it provides insight into the nation's socio-cultural history. *Ogoe* paintings were posthumous portraits of Ryūkyūan kings painted on the walls of the Enkaku-ji temple until 1717 and later hanging scrolls.³¹ This *ogoe*'s imagery centres around Sho Iku, the 18th king of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, who appears larger than the high officials and retainers to emulate his authority and power. He is dressed in a luxurious, multi-coloured *ryusou* and adorned with the Ryūkyūan crown, *Tamamookanmuri*. According to Ryūkyūan history-specialist Kazuyuki Tomiyama, this traditional dress demonstrates a combination of Chinese and Japanese influences.³² The *ogoe* thus traces a socio-historical landscape based on inward flux between members of a societal hierarchy, and outward interactions with external entities from Japan and China.

Additionally, curator Nobuyuki Hirakawa claims that '[the] *ogoe* were made using the best materials and techniques of the time, and with the originals, we can trace the changes in Ryūkyūan painting'.³³ Before recovering the *ogoe*, only black-and-white photographs taken by Japanese artist Yoshitaro Kamakura testified of the artistic skills of Ryūkyūan painters and enabled art historians and members of the public to engage visually with the portraits; however, the loss of the paintings limited the access to further knowledge about their materiality.³⁴ Now rediscovered, comparisons between the photograph and the *ogoe* painting show its cultural biography: it presents tears and stains around and on the king's face, hypothetically caused by their deportation.

Materially Mediating Trauma

Okinawans have openly expressed their desire to see looted and non-looted artworks returned to the islands. During an economic meeting with President Clinton in June 2000, a delegation from Nago requested the investigation of Okinawan looted objects' whereabouts to speed their return to the island.³⁵ They emphasised the often-brutal decontextualisation of objects from their original context, which resulted in them becoming *ethnographic fragments*, objects

³¹ "Where Were the Ogoe Paintings?," Shuri-jo Castle Park Management Center, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://oki-park.jp/sp/shuri-jo/en/about/3798/3838>.

³² Tomoko Shiraishi, "Returned Portraits Give Insight into Ryukyu's Twist on Chinese Culture," *The Japan News by Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 13, 2024, accessed August 1, 2024.

³³ Shiraishi, "Returned Portraits."

³⁴ "Where were the *Ogoe* paintings?"

³⁵ William H. Honan, "Okinawans Hope Economic Meeting Puts Focus on Art Missing Since War," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2000.

‘defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers’.³⁶ Okinawans contend that most Okinawan artefacts were taken as ‘war trophies’ by American soldiers during the Battle of Okinawa; yet this claim is *partly* unfounded. While Okinawa Prefecture catalogued 1,041 Okinawan artifacts stored at 34 U.S. institutions, they did not investigate their provenance.³⁷ Conversely, Takayasu Fuji’s provenance research undertaken in thirty-seven museums in the U.S. proved that out of 1,984 artefacts ‘400 were obtained in the pre-war years and during World War II’.³⁸ Nevertheless, many objects remain in the private collections of individuals who are unfamiliar with Okinawan art and consequently mislabel them as ‘Japanese’. Those Okinawan *ethnographic fragments* become physical bodies whose experiences of displacement mirror the experiences of Okinawans.

Caused by their deportation during the aforementioned events, the physical trauma observed on artefacts parallels Okinawan communities’ traumatic memory and amnesia of losses.³⁹ Initially, those objects entered in a relationship with Okinawans, which might be defined by Elizabeth Burns Coleman as inalienable possession, ‘a permanent and inherent association between the possessor and the possessed’.⁴⁰ Not mere passive things, their presence affected the lives of individuals. Capable of ‘making a difference in the course of some other agent’s action’,⁴¹ the map was hypothetically used by the Ryūkyūan government to plan commercial exchanges within and outside the kingdom; similarly, the *ogoe* probably emulated the authority of the royal court. This ability to *affect* the Okinawan people positions these artefacts as social agents that powerfully ‘construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not occur if they did not exist’.⁴² Consequently, the objects’ deportation by non-Ryūkyūans affected local communities as a *tabula rasa* of their biographies resulted in

³⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 387.

³⁷ Fuji Takayasu, “Provenance of Okinawan Artifacts in the United States,” *American View: U.S. Embassy Japan Official Magazine*, 2008.

³⁸ Takayasu, “Provenance of Okinawan Artifacts in the United States.”

³⁹ Felwine Saar and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain : Vers une nouvelle éthique rationnelle* (2018), 31.

⁴⁰ Chappell and McGregor, 1996, 4, quoted in Elizabeth Burns Coleman, “Repatriation and the Concept of Inalienable Possession,” in *The Long Way Home: The Meaning and Values of Repatriation*, ed. P. Turnbull and M. Pickering (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 83.

⁴¹ Edwin Sayes, “Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say that Nonhumans Have Agency?,” *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 1 (2014): 141.

⁴² Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 173.

Okinawans' cultural amnesia. Resultantly, the restitution of artefacts to Okinawa could re-activate this concealed memory.

Furthermore, their return and repatriation could impact 'broader community initiatives to perpetuate and renew cultural knowledge and practices as part of contemporary cultural revitalization processes and the affirmation of cultural identity'.⁴³ Besides stressing their importance in intergenerational knowledge transmission, Moira Simpson illuminates the correlation between heritage and indigenous health and well-being. She argues that repatriation and return both help to formulate effective strategies to aid recovery from post-colonial trauma, with its psychological effects and resultative acculturation.⁴⁴ Research conducted in Canada demonstrates the link between post-colonial trauma, the loss of cultural continuity, and higher rates of social ills (i.e., suicide) and health problems (i.e., chronic heart disease and diabetes).⁴⁵ Although no similar research has been undertaken in Okinawa, one could surmise that the re-socialisation of Okinawan artefacts in their original context could benefit local communities. In addition to renewing and strengthening a 'lost' traditional Okinawan culture, it could empower community members with self-governance and self-determination and reassert Okinawans' sense of pride in their native language and practices. I am nevertheless aware of the limitations and speculative nature of these claims, which remain to be substantiated by further ethnographic research amongst local communities.

Engagements with the Artefacts

Although asking for more transparency from local authorities might be unrealistic considering the early stages of this return, Okinawan communities might benefit from following along the journey of those artefacts and their engagements with the cultural sector. Since their return in March 2024, several pieces of information were communicated by Okinawan authorities concerning what happened to those twenty-two artefacts. In an article for the local newspaper *Ryūkyū Shimpo*, Tomie Chie informs that eighteen out of the twenty-two artefacts were unveiled to stakeholders and journalists during a ceremony held on April 30th at the Okinawa Prefectural

⁴³ Moira Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice: Heritage, Repatriation and Cultural Education," *Museum International* 61, no. 1–2 (2009): 122, (UNESCO Publishing and Blackwell Publishing Ltd.).

⁴⁴ Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice," 122.

⁴⁵ Simpson, "Museums and Restorative Justice," 123.

Museum and Art Museum in Naha City.⁴⁶ Governor Denny Tamaki affirms that direct, tangible contact with those objects will enhance scholarly research undertaken in the fields of Okinawan art history and cultural history.⁴⁷

Of particular interest were the *ogoe*, found only in the FBI's black and white photographs by Okinawans before their return in March. In an article published on May 24, 2024, Chie declares that a meeting of experts presided by Tana Masayuki, Chairman of the Prefectural Cultural Property Protection Council, considered ways to restore the *Ogoe* paintings found in poor condition.⁴⁸ He confirmed the committee's intentions to designate *Ogoe* paintings as Important Cultural Property by the nation.⁴⁹ They concluded that restoration would begin in 2025 after effecting scientific analysis of the pigments and paper properties.⁵⁰

Working on one painting at a time for two years, experts will present the first to the public no sooner than 2027, and all four pieces are expected to be restored in more than eight years.⁵¹ The aim is to eventually allow Okinawans to engage with those objects in the museum to learn about the culture of the Ryūkyūan/Okinawan people. Therefore, local authorities strive to learn, preserve, care and ensure the transmission of Ryūkyūan artefacts and knowledge to future generations.

⁴⁶ Tomie Chie, “[Dōga] denī chiji mo miwonoridasu Ryūkyū ōkoku no kokuō shōzō-ga ohirome ‘kenmin no kokoro no yori dokoro’ Naha Okinawa” [[Video] Governor Denny Also Takes Part in Unveiling of Portrait of the Ryukyu Kingdom's King, “a Source of Comfort for the People of the Prefecture” Naha, Okinawa], *Ryukyu Shimpo*, April 30, 2024.

⁴⁷ Chie, “[Dōga] denī chiji mo miwonoridasu Ryūkyū ōkoku no kokuō shōzō-ga ohirome.”

⁴⁸ Tomie Chie, “Ogoe,-koku no jūbun shitei o mezasu kōkai wa hayakute 2027-nendo yūshikisha-i 25-nendo ni shūfuku chakushu e Okinawa” [Okinawa's Ogoe Paintings Are Aiming to Be Designated as Important Cultural Properties by the Government, and Will Be Made Public in 2027 at the Earliest, According to a Panel of Experts. Restoration Work to Begin in 2025], *Ryukyu Shimpo*, May 24, 2024.

⁴⁹ Chie, “Ogoe,-koku no jūbun shitei o mezasu kōkai.”

⁵⁰ Chie, “Ogoe,-koku no jūbun shitei o mezasu kōkai.”

⁵¹ Chie, “Ogoe,-koku no jūbun shitei o mezasu kōkai.”

LEGAL LIMITATIONS

International Legal limitations

Nevertheless, the historical bond between Okinawan artefacts and people alone cannot ensure the return of all objects because ‘inalienable possession’ implies ‘ownership’ but not necessarily ‘property’.⁵² According to Burns Coleman, ‘[one] can be said to own something one does not possess as property, and to possess as property something one does not own’.⁵³ Consequently, Okinawans might claim rights or legal property over the objects based on their intrinsic connection to them. However, it neither justifies their repatriation nor provides a reason for handing over their legal property of rights back to Okinawa. If objects can be part of a group’s identity, they can also cease to be part of this identity. Indeed, the continuity of a cultural group as the rightful owner can be disrupted, thereby complicating the attribution of cultural property and repatriation. Consequently, people must demonstrate (1) the importance of the object in their communal practices⁵⁴, and (2) the unjust or illegal acquisition of artefacts.⁵⁵ These two conditions provide avenues for deciding to whom and where the artefacts should be returned.

They also underscore current issues with cases of repatriation. The aforementioned objects were deported in 1945, so their decontextualisation does not infringe the acts enforced by international laws. Indeed, the Geneva Convention proclaimed the prohibition regarding the looting of civilian property during wartime only in 1949.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the UNESCO 1970 Convention outlined strict regulations on the import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property to prevent illicit trafficking in peacetime: consequently, Okinawan artefacts could leave U.S. museums only if their provenances were ascertained and if the U.S. authorised their repatriation/return.⁵⁷ Moreover, the UNESCO 1970 Convention is not retroactive, which

⁵² Coleman, “Repatriation and the Concept of Inalienable Possession,” 89.

⁵³ Coleman, “Repatriation and the Concept of Inalienable Possession,” 89.

⁵⁴ Thompson, 2003, 252–253, cited in Erich Hatala Matthes, “Repatriation and the Radical Redistribution of Art,” *Ergo* 4, no. 32 (2017): 933.

⁵⁵ Björnberg, 2014, 464, cited in Matthes, “Repatriation and the Radical Redistribution of Art,” 936.

⁵⁶ *The Geneva Conventions of August 12, Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War* (International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1949), Article 53.

⁵⁷ UNESCO, “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property,” *United Nations Treaty Series*, entry into force April 24, 1972, in accordance with Article 21, Article 6(a).

means that a request about the recovery of artefacts can be formulated only if the said objects were ‘imported after the entry into force of this Convention in both States’.⁵⁸

National Legal limitations

Legal limitations are also encountered nationally. In 1971, the government of Japan introduced *The Act on Special Measures for the Promotion and Development of Okinawa*, which formulated a policy to address the socio-economic disparities and inequalities observed between Okinawa and mainland Japan.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, after amending the Act in 2002 and 2012, the government did not address the marginalisation and discrimination against Okinawans.⁶⁰ Their approach reflects their refusal to recognise the Ryūkyūan/Okinawan peoples as a cultural indigenous community with a right to self-determination.

Cases of repatriation underscore the socio-political boundaries historically established between the Okinawan and Japanese identities. At the beginning of the Meiji era (1868-1912), the country aimed to construct a ‘modern Japanese identity’ to counteract the threatening powers of the West. The ratification and assimilation of Ryūkyūan/Okinawan culture and identity required a change in ‘Japanese perception of Okinawans, replacing the negative stereotypes with a closer affinity to the “vulnerable” folk community’.⁶¹ Efforts to build a singular ‘Japanese culture’ culminated in Japan’s enactment of the *Law for the Protection of Cultural Property* in 1950, thereby ‘[developing] the cultural protection system to encapsulate “Japanese culture” in the concept of “cultural property”(bunka-zai)’.⁶² Besides loosely interchanging the notions of ‘cultural property’ and ‘cultural heritage’, the government further distinguished ‘intangible cultural property’ and ‘intangible folk cultural property’ to underscore the transition from ‘folk’ to ‘non-folk’, ‘nonprofessional’ to ‘professional’, ‘craft’ to ‘art’, and ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’. Yet, it reinforced a hegemony that placed Okinawans’ cultural

⁵⁸ UNESCO, “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.”

⁵⁹ Asato Nagatsugu and Nobuo Shiga, “Okinawa and the Link Between Socioeconomic Disparities and Colonialism in Japan,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, March 19, 2024.

⁶⁰ Cultural Survival, “Observations on the State of Indigenous Rights in Japan,” prepared for the United Nations Human Rights Council: 4th Cycle of Universal Periodic Review of Japan, 42nd Session of the Human Rights Council (2017), 2.

⁶¹ Hideyo Konagaya, “Heritage Production in National and Global Cultural Policies: Folkloristics, Politics, and Cultural Economy in Ryukyuan/Okinawan Performance,” *Asian Ethnology* 79, no. 1 (2020): 52.

⁶² Konagaya, “Heritage Production in National and Global Cultural Policies,” 46.

identity in a submissive position. If Okinawans are not legally recognised as an indigenous community empowered with cultural rights, it appears difficult to give them property over artefacts. Tensions between Okinawa and the Japanese government might have severe implications in demands formulated for the repatriation of artefacts.

Indigeneity and Sovereignty

Approaching the repatriation and return of Okinawan artefacts from a legal perspective is essential as, following Martin Skrydstrup's argument, it opens doors to address 'how property rights are defined by complex acts of recognition of indigeneity and sovereignty'.⁶³ Repatriation cases underscores Okinawans' history of marginalisation, colonial subjugation, and genocide while simultaneously acknowledging their distinctive cultural identity and right to self-determination. According to Eriko Tomizawa-Kay et al., departing from the assimilation of Okinawan art into 'Japanese Art' could '[focus] on the ethnicity, cultural diversity and uniqueness of Okinawan art since the time of the Ryūkyū Kingdom'.⁶⁴ Megumi Machida also declares that there happens an acknowledgement of the inward and outward flows, the 'cultural routes' and 'cultural roots' which perpetually reconfigured Okinawa's cultural identity.⁶⁵ Thus, establishing and recognising a history of Okinawan art could allow Okinawans to move beyond a history of oppression, confusion, instability, and uncertainties to embrace their indigeneity and sovereignty.

⁶³ Martin Skrydstrup, "What Might an Anthropology of Cultural Property Look Like?" in *The Long Way Home: The Meaning and Values of Repatriation*, ed. P. Turnbull and M. Pickering (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 75.

⁶⁴ Eriko Tomizawa-Kay et al., "Introduction," in *Okinawan Art in Its Regional Context: Historical Overview and Contemporary Practice: Sainsbury Institute Occasional Paper 2*, ed. Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (2022), 2.

⁶⁵ Megumi Machida, "Roots and Routes: Work in Progress," in *Okinawan Art in Its Regional Context: Historical Overview and Contemporary Practice: Sainsbury Institute Occasional Paper 2*, eds. Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (2022), 20.

CONCLUSION

After presenting the historical position of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, this article establishes how its annexation by Japan in 1875, the events of the Second World War, and the U.S. post-war occupation caused Okinawa's loss of self-rule and locals' feeling of traumatic disconnection to their land and cultural heritage. By offering tracings for the socio-cultural history of the Ryūkyūs and bearing physical trauma, the twenty-two artefacts emphasise how Okinawans' lives are entangled with the happenings of their physical surroundings. They emulate an ontology of *presencing* described by Christopher Tilley as the gathering of landscapes that brings the past in the present as 'an attempt to regain at least some of that intimacy and lost experience'.⁶⁶ By re-activating Okinawans' concealed memory, their repatriation opens doors to intergenerational knowledge transmission: direct, tangible contact with those objects could enhance scholarly research undertaken in Okinawan art and cultural history and provide learning opportunities to contemporary Okinawan communities. This article nonetheless highlights limitations in the current state of the international and Japanese legal systems. This repatriation case thus encourages further research on the recognition of an Okinawan ethno-cultural identity that could empower the people with self-governance and self-determination.

⁶⁶ Christopher Tilley, "Walking the Past in the Present," in *Landscapes Beyond Land: Routes, Aesthetics, Narratives*, edited by Arnar Árnason et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 18.

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