

**Ogasawara Island People of Japan**

Sav Cardinale

International Department, Meiji Gakuin University

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Prof. Gill

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## **Introduction**

Made up of 30 tropical islands just off the coast of Japan, the Ogasawara Islands are an island group now owned by Japan that have a complex history of ownership and a uniquely diverse population. The indigenous people of the island have faced a considerable amount of difficulties from its establishment in 1830 to now. Sovereignty battles and the multiple changes of ownership surrounding WWII have contributed to those of the indigenous population feeling as if they have no “correct” nationality to identify with. Additionally, their culture is viewed by Japan as non-native and therefore undeserving of cultural protection.

## **Early Settlements of Ogasawara**

Prior to 1830, there were a few documented encounters of the Ogasawara Islands from a variety of explorers, however most were brief and no settlements were established. Various Spanish and Dutch expeditions stumbled across the islands, mostly by accident or simply in search of other islands. Another notable example is when a crew of Japanese sailors en route to Edo faced a storm which forced them to seek refuge on the island (Arima, 1990). It wasn't until 1830 when the Ogasawara Islands had their first written documentation of a permanent settlement. A small group of Hawaiian natives as well as a handful of Europeans who were part of the British Empire heard of this small group of islands in the east and decided to sail out in search of them to establish settlements (Kramer, 2013). With their migration, some traditional aspects of Hawaiian lifestyle such as language, culture, food and Hawaiian canoes and huts took root in these new settlements. These practices, however, began to evolve after some time (Kramer, 2013). Between early settlements in 1830 and the mid-late 19th century, native settlers of Ogasawara were primarily independently governed. During this time the island population slowly increased. Mostly composed of sailors who, when encountering the island, decided to stay

and eventually had children with locals, as well as other miscellaneous explorers (Arima, 1990). Many accounts stated that these islanders looked neither European, Pacific Islander or Japanese, but rather a diverse mixture of the three (Kramer, 2018). Islanders made a living by trading with voyagers and serving as a pit-stop for whalers, as the local waters around the islands were prime whaling territory (Arima, 1990). The Hawaiian lifestyle of the original islanders was short-lived, as customs were overtaken and diminished by the high increase of outsider presence due to sovereignty disputes in the mid-late 19th century (Kramer, 2018).

### **Sovereignty Disputes and Falsified Ownership**

Life for the native islanders of Ogasawara Island undertook drastic changes in daily life following the arrival of Commodore Mathew Perry to the Islands on June 14, 1853, while in commute to the Ryukyu Islands. Perry, seeing potential for the islands to play a crucial role in trade routes to China, urged the US government to establish ownership (Arima, 1990). However, such actions were met with questioning from the British Empire, who took Perry's actions as trying to take forceful ownership of the islands. Calling attention to the commercial importance of the islands in the aid of trade, as well as the reluctance to have the British Empire or the US government closer to Japan, the Japanese government involved themselves in these sovereignty disputes (Arima, 1990, Kramer, 2018). Japan claimed original ownership of the Ogasawara Islands stating that a samurai-explorer by the name of Ogasawara Sadoyori took ownership of the islands as early as 1593. This claim, however, has since been falsified, and was thought to be fabricated by a poor Japanese commoner looking for a quick cash grab by insisting that he was the direct descendant of this fictional explorer (Chapman, 2016). Although this history was unverifiable, Japan was eventually able to assert ownership by using an early scholarly book written in 1786, *Illustrated Survey of Three Countries*. This writing fought to convey the

importance of developing some of Japan's surrounding islands with the intention of using them as defense posts from neighboring nations such as China and Russia. This assertion of ownership is partially ironic considering that this very book was condemned shortly after its publication by the Japanese government (Chapman, 2016). Following the Ogasawara Islands' recognition as a Japanese territory in 1876, inhabitants of the island were naturalized as Japanese citizens and the population of the island rapidly began to rise from the influx of mainland Japanese coming to relocate (Ishihara, 2018). With this influx, the original islanders slowly began to be outnumbered by mainland Japanese and experienced discrimination (Chapman, 2011). The islands remained under Japanese control until WWII, when the islands were captured by the United States Navy in 1945 (Arima, 1990). This occupation led to more western influence on the islands and an even greater decrease to the native population. Many of the residents were evacuated to mainland Japan following the capture, with some never returning to the island (Chapman, 2011). American occupation on the island did not end until over 20 years later, when they were returned to Japan in 1968 (Chapman, 2016). The constant influx of outside people, the naturalization into Japan, and the tossing of ownership between Japan and America did a considerable amount to the population and culture of the islands. Overtime, more Japanese moved in and many of the islanders were forced out, causing the identity of the islanders to become skewed and the native culture to be pushed into the minority.

### **Problems Experienced by Ogasawara People**

Today, the Ogasawara Islands and the native people face numerous hardships from the heavy influence of outsiders and relocation of the native population after WWII. Such hardships have proven to cause implications on the self identity of those who are descendents of the original islanders. As of 2021, there were only approximately 2,600 residents on the Ogasawara

Islands, of which less than 10% of the current inhabitants are suspected to be descended from the natives (Kuramochi, 2023, Kan'nai gaiyō). Following the naturalization of the Ogasawara inhabitants as Japanese citizens, some islanders noted that they felt as if they were kept under close surveillance during this time and were viewed as untrustworthy by mainland Japanese because they were not “true Japanese” (Chapman, 2011). Descendants of these natives have also reported being called “gajin” which means “foreigner” in Japanese because they do not view them as Japanese despite having citizenship (Chapman, 2016). The government of Japan has also never viewed the first inhabitants of the island as its first people group, but rather as squatters on their land (Chapman, 2016). One citizen who lived on the islands before, during and after the United States Navy occupation stated that “I did not see myself as an American or Japanese but as a Chichijimian, as do most of my friends who live here” (Chapman, 2011). The name “Chichijimian” is derived from the name of one of the main islands “Chichijima” among the Ogasawara Island group (*Ogasawara Islands*, 2023). Other accounts from native citizens of the island said that they “prefer to be identified as Japanese in light of Japan's economic strength in the international sphere” (Arima, 1990). Many islanders seem to have contrasting views on how they choose to view their self identity. Chapman theorizes that this might be due to the prolonged period that the islands were under United States administration, in which it had a considerable impact on the citizens identity and selfhood (Chapman, 2011). Those who want to identify with being Japanese, however, are often met with resistance. One islander stated that “ I am not American and I am not Japanese. Because of my face they won't let me be Japanese” (Chapman, 2011). Despite wanting to identify with Japan, islanders are met with discrimination from those who look true Japanese simply for not having enough Japanese facial characteristics. Not only do Ogasawara Island people face discrimination and a lack of uniform identity for the group, but the

Japanese government does not formally recognize them as an indigenous people. Because of this, there are currently no practices in place to help preserve the native culture and history of the island, leaving it to slowly be forgotten (Fackler, 2012). The lack of identity and protection of the native Ogasawara Island culture from the Japanese government is detrimental to the self-identity of the people and the preservation of their culture.

### **Conclusion**

Since 1830, the indigenous people of the Ogasawara Islands have faced many hardships. Originating mainly from Pacific islanders, the indigenous people who once had a culturally rich society now face discrimination from mainland Japanese for their lack of Japanese features. Their debatable and somewhat fabricated history of governmental ownership has also led to misconceptions of the national identity of the islands throughout history. Being tossed back and forth between British, Japanese, and American ownership has contributed to a lack of concrete cultural self-identity in much of the indigenous population. Many feel as if they do not fully belong anywhere, and some have even chosen to create a novel identity, “Chichijimian,” for the sake of belonging and community. Unfortunately, the lack of preservation efforts by the Japanese government for this group illustrate how little Japan is concerned with honoring the Ogasawara Island people as a proper indigenous population.

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