

**JAPAN AND OKINAWA**  
**A COMPARISON STUDY**

**BY**

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**22 OCTOBER 1994**

# JAPAN AND OKINAWA, A COMPARISON STUDY

The following report will discuss the physical, cultural, governmental, social and religious differences between Japan and Okinawa. Through this study, I hope that a detailed comparison of Japan and Okinawa that will enable the reader to formulate an informed opinion, good or bad, of these two countries.

## PART I - PHYSICAL COMPARISON

Okinawa is the largest island in the Ryukyu Island chain. (See Figure 1.) The word "Okinawa" means a knotted rope cast into a distant sea. The Ryukyu Islands stretch in a long arc from southern Japan down to Formosa (Taiwan), in parallel with the continental shelf off the mainland of China. Seventy-three islands are a part of the Okinawa Prefecture, in addition to a large number of coral reefs and rocky islets. By 1970 only 43 islands were inhabited, some with only a few people.

Okinawa itself is 60 miles in length and is only 2 miles wide in some places. The island has a population of 1 million inhabitants, with an additional 60,000 American military personnel (and dependents). Much of the surface of Okinawa is hilly and wooded, while less than one third of the total land mass has ever been cultivated.

The most significant geologic feature of the Ryukyu Island chain is the deep Ryukyu Trench. (See Figure 2.) It is a gash in the floor of the seabed that extends some 2,250 km.

It is 50 to 60 km wide and 18,000 to 24,000 feet deep. The trench was significant in the building of the mountains within the Ryukyu Island chain. Towards the south of Okinawa, underwater volcanic activity is still present today. This produces the phenomena of "boiling seas".

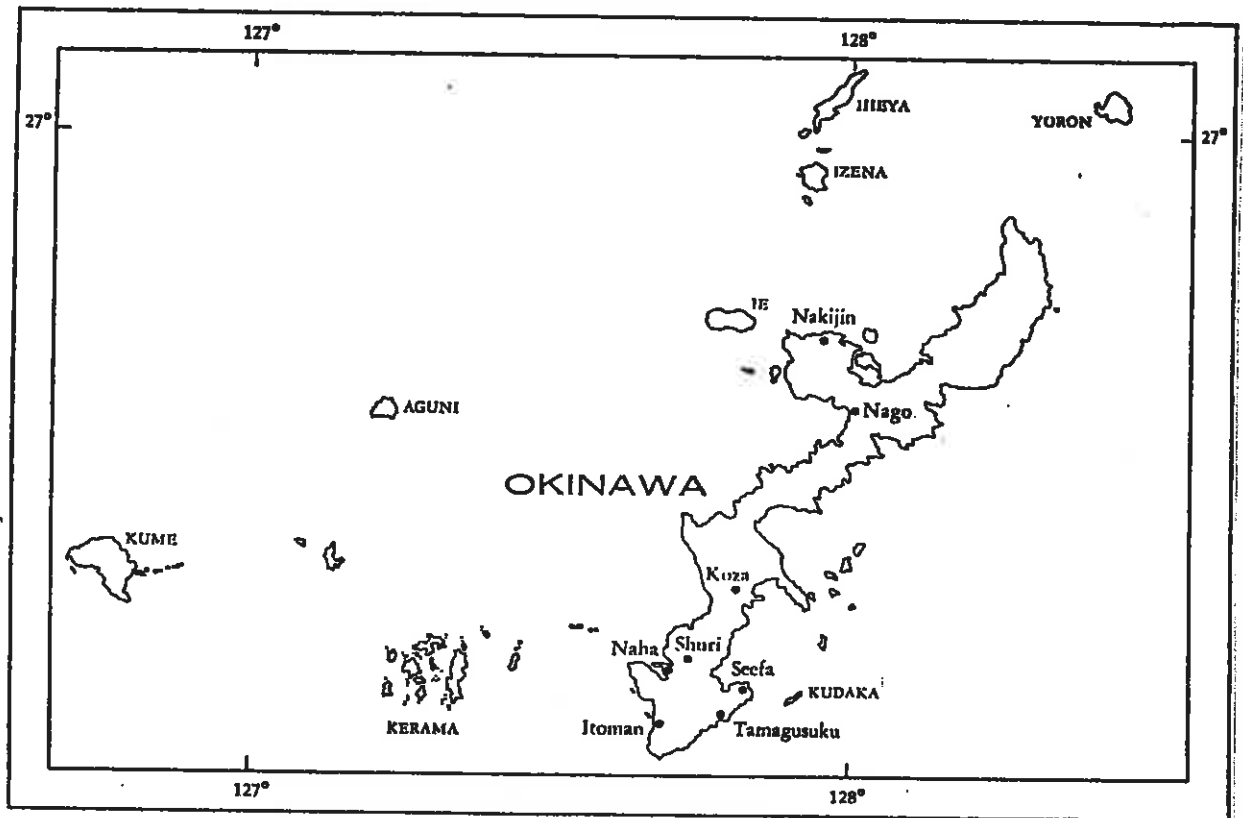


Figure 1. Map of Okinawa and outlying islands

Coral reefs are a common site around the islands. The reefs provide a home for many types of fish. The fish population thrives in the warm waters of the "Kurashio", or Black Current. When the Black Current mixes with the relatively cool waters from up north, many kinds of fish end up feeding near the reefs, attracted by the plankton within the warmer waters. The warm waters of the Kurishio are responsible for moderating the climate of Okinawa. The winter temperature is higher than normal for its latitude, creating a humid sub-tropical climate much like our own in Florida.

Okinawa suffers from seasonal Typhoons (or hurricanes). The Typhoon Season is in late summer to early fall. Their presence has greatly influenced the structures of houses, seasonal festivals, and the planting and harvesting of crops. Throughout history, the location and physical characteristics of the Ryukyu Island chain has played a major role in the fate of its people.

Japan, by contrast, lies in the North Pacific Ocean off the northeast coast of mainland Asia. It has Russia, Korea and China, as its neighbors. (See Figure 3.) The Japanese call their island chain "Nippon" or "Nihon", which means "source of the sun". Japan is made up of four principal islands. In the north is Hokkaido island. The next island in the chain, proceeding south, is the main island of Honshu. Continuing south, we find the island of Shikoku. Finally, the southernmost island is Kyushu. There is a total of

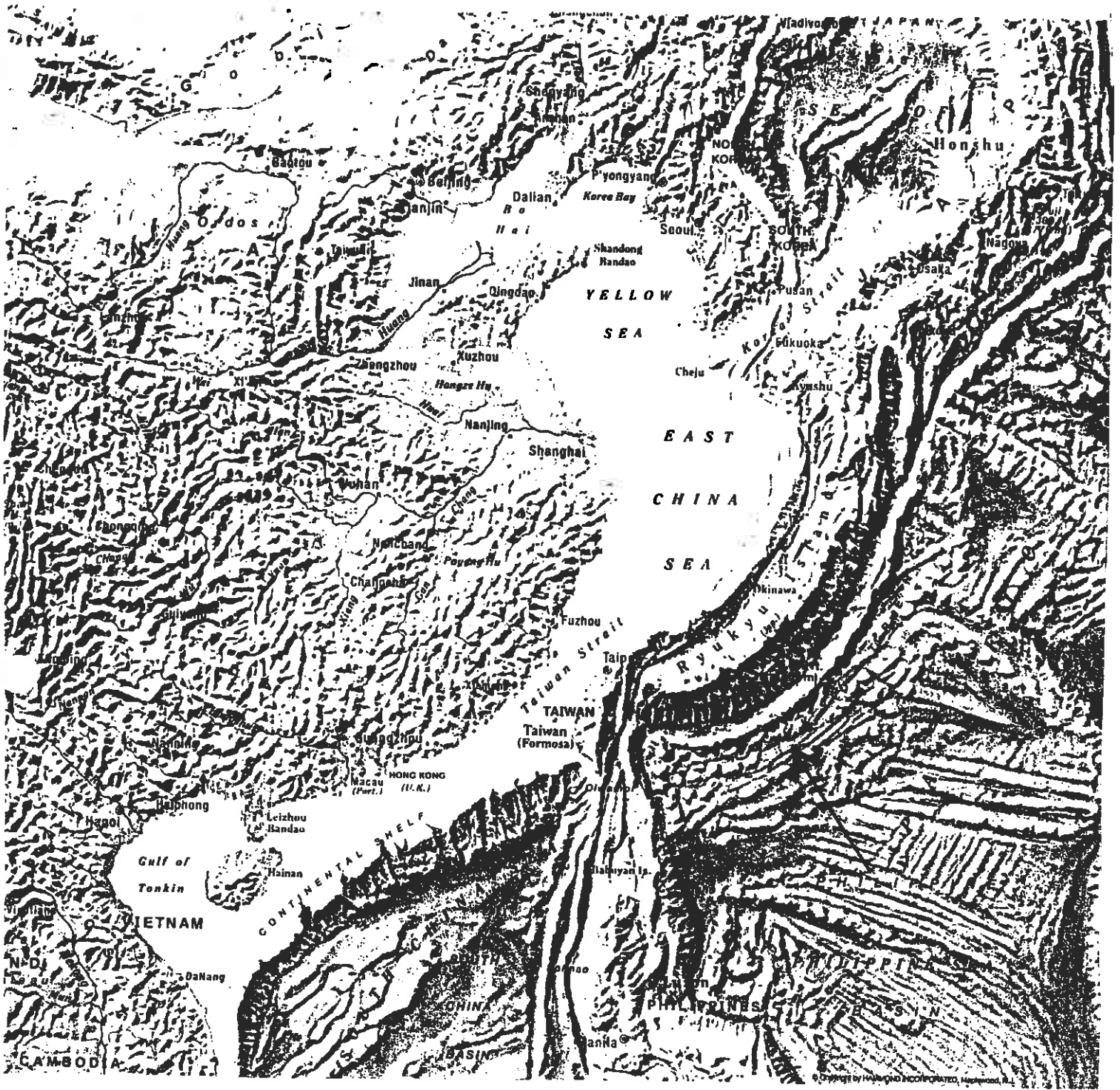


Figure 2. Ryukyu Trench Location

142,000 square miles. The Japanese island chain also holds over 1,000 smaller islands, including the Ryukyu Islands. (The Ryukyu Islands were returned to Japan on May 15, 1972.)

In general, Japan is rugged and mountainous (Mt. Fuji is 12,365 feet high, the highest point on the main island of Honshu), with its share of coastal plains. The rivers are short and swift. There are over 500 active volcanoes within the island chain. With such a violent geography, it is not surprising the amount of earthquakes Japan endures (since the year 1596, 21 major earthquakes have occurred, killing over 1000 people each time). With the rugged nature of the landscape, only 16% of the country is suitable for crops.

The climate in Japan represents what we are use to seeing in this country. Winters are cold, with frost and snow (depending on the elevation and location), while summers are hot and humid. The climate is suitable for the cultivation of rice, making it an important staple of the Japanese diet. The production of rice was an important factor in politics and military strategy for many centuries of the Japanese history. Success in battle or excellent service was rewarded in a certain number of "Koku" (one Koku was equivalent to 4.96 bushels) of rice.

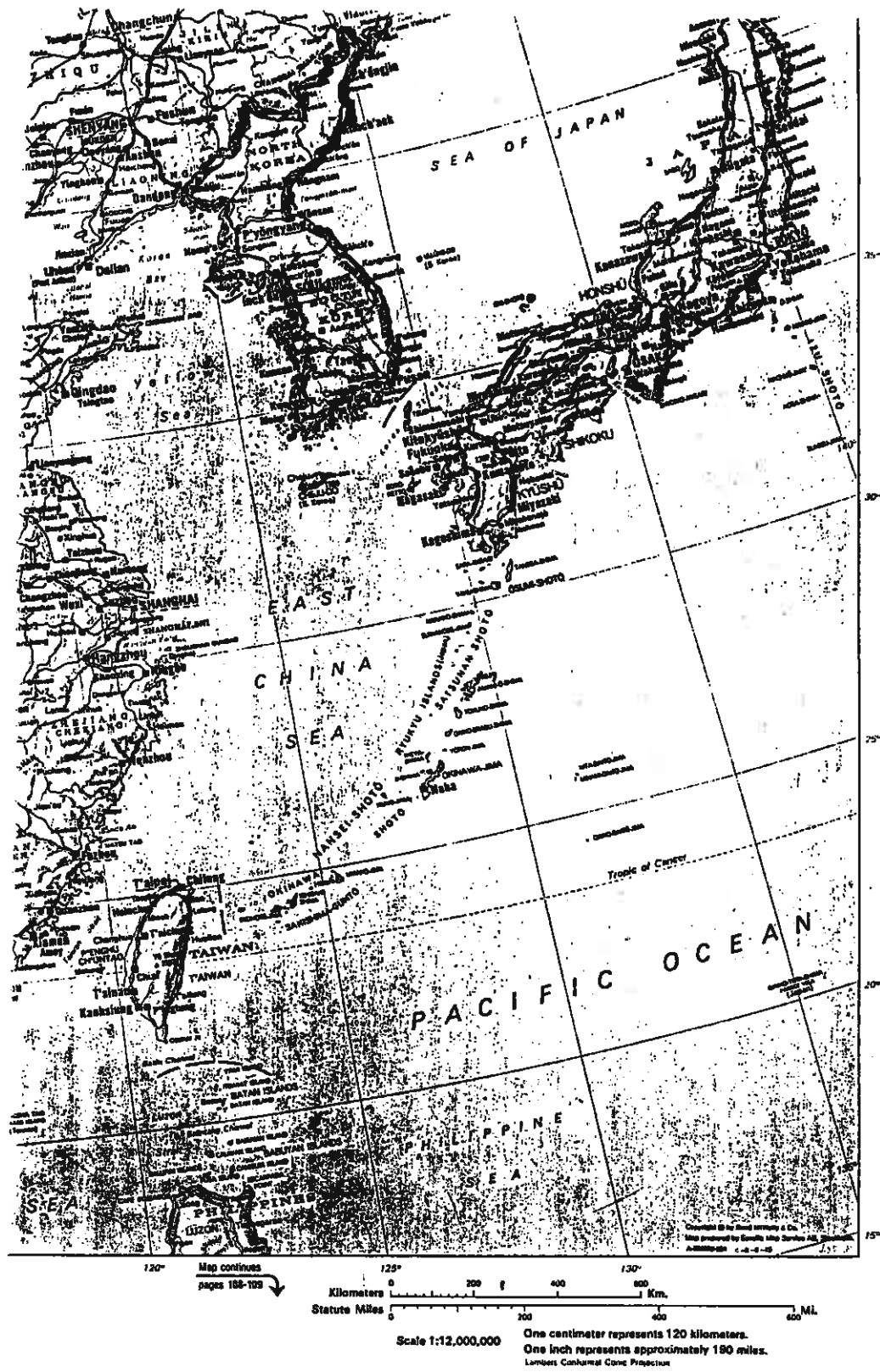


Figure 3. Map of Japan and Ryukyu Island Chain

With the Japanese Islands brushed by cold plankton-filled currents, fish has always been an abundant source of food for the Japanese people. Fish and other byproducts from the sea have always complimented the steady diet of rice. Fishing has grown into a very important industry in providing food for the Japanese people, since the amount of land available for cultivation of rice is limited by the terrain of the islands. This has forced the Japanese people to become a great sea-faring nation, fishing all over the world.

About 55% of Japan is covered by forests and another 8 to 9% is potential forest land. Japan has few other raw natural resources of its own. With the needs of a growing population, Japan must import most of the necessary raw natural resources. This forces Japan to be almost totally dependent upon trade with the rest of the world, from food to wood and energy products.

## **PART II - CULTURAL COMPARISON**

The origins of the Okinawan and Japanese cultures are difficult to ascertain precisely. It would appear that early immigrants from southern Japan drifted down the chain of islands to Okinawan; in a sense, "Island-hopping". Those early Japanese settlers were probably from China and Manchuria, by way of the Korean peninsula. The theory that is most accepted is that Chinese and Manchurians came to Japan, then continued in a southwestern arc all the way to the Philippine islands. This theory is supported by the fact



that some aspects of Okinawan culture are similar to those found in Formosa, the Philippine Islands and southeast Asia. It is also supported by the similar physical appearances of both Japanese and Okinawan people. They both have yellow-looking skin, straight dark hair, and the distinctive Mongoloid eyefold. But there are differences, such as the fact that the Okinawans are shorter and stockier than the Japanese. It can be speculated that the difference is characteristic of inter-racial marriages between Okinawans and the native Ainu. Some anthropologists think the Ainu are related to European peoples, but no one is certain about their history.

Okinawan culture notes the continuance of various aspects of early Japanese culture in the Ryukyu Islands. Therefore, the early Okinawan culture might serve as a mirror of the culture of ancient Japan. Other similarities include relations between the Okinawan language and that of early Japan.

Okinawa's location can be given credit for the interest shown to Okinawa by other countries. For example, some old coins and other archaeological evidence reveals contacts with China as early as the first century B.C.. China was not the only country that traded with Okinawa. In fact, China, Japan, Korea, Siam, and numerous other countries used Okinawa as a trading spot. Thus, Okinawa's importance as a trading nation grew. One reason for continued trade between Japan and Okinawa is that after the Chinese invented

gunpowder (or Black Powder, as it was known, a combination of potassium nitrate, charcoal and sulfur), additional sources for sulfur was required. The Ryukyu Islands supplied this needed source for sulfur. As time went on, China's influence over the affairs of the Okinawan people grew in order to guarantee the supply of sulfur. In fact, in the year 1392, thirty six families from China were invited to live in Okinawa. They were the families of skilled artisans and scholars( shipbuilders and teachers of Chinese classics). Through the influence of many other countries, Okinawa developed a "tolerance" of foreign cultures. Throughout the years, Okinawa has welcomed other people, religions and cultures, into their country. This is the result of their passive nature and desire for peace.

Japan on the other hand was not as passive in nature as Okinawa. The earliest known man was present in Japan around 5000 B.C.. Ancient Japan showed links with Korea, Manchuria and northern China. Around the second century B.C., bronze and iron implements were introduced from China. Swords, halberds and mirrors, along with bows and arrows, were introduced from China. This early introduction to weapons contributed to the militaristic attitude of the Japanese people.

The Chinese also introduced their culture and Buddhism during the Yamato Period (A.D. 200 to 646). They greatly influenced the development of art, literature and

government in Japan during this period. During the time of the Samurai, the Japanese excelled in swordmaking, sculpture and the art of battles.

Crime became a problem during the late Yamato Period. A system of crime and punishment was established. Crimes such as murder, arson and adultery were punished by death. Other lesser offenses were punished by banishment or flogging. The Japanese thought severe punishment would produce lower crime rates. The point is, no system of crime and punishment was yet established in Okinawa. There was no real reason to do so. The Japanese were more warlike and hostile, while the Okinawans lived in peace, and worried more about their crops.

### **PART III - GOVERNMENTAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES**

In this section, the governmental and social structures of both the ruling classes and the common people will be compared. Along the way, the family structure will be examined.

In Okinawa, the ruling class was patterned after the Chinese Court. Even Confucian ethics and Chinese ideas filled the Liu-chiu Court (Liu-chiu was also known as the Chuzan Kingdom, the first ruling body of Okinawa), and were passed on in the form of moral precepts to the people. The Japanese Sho Dynasty controlled the Liu-chiu Kingdom, telling them what was right and what was wrong.

After the Satsuma Invasion, the Okinawan government was changed, and was reduced in authority. The king was still ruler, and under him were three Chief Ministers. The three ministers were above hundreds of anji. Anji were local lords, the equivalent to the nobles of Eastern Europe. Each anji had a small group of armed followers to enforce their will on the common people. The common people were looked upon as infidels or serfs, and were made to serve the anji.

The typical family consists of the household head, his wife, the eldest son and his wife, and the young couple's unmarried children. Added to these living members are the ancestors of the household, who were just as important as the living members. They were periodically honored and prayed to in numerous ancestral ceremonies, as they still are to this day.

The Okinawan lived in simple houses grouped into village compounds, trying to make a living from the inadequate soil conditions. They usually had a town hall, a record building and a meeting hall or yard. The villagers tended to be endogamous; that is, a people who married from their own village or social group.

Villages would be located near a spring or a fresh stream for drinking water. Near the village would be a small grove of trees, a sacred place or "utaki", where the spirits of the village might be worshipped. Houses were separated from each other by stone walls

or rows of trees to afford a measure of privacy, as well as protection from typhoon winds.

Marriages were arranged by the parents. This arrangement was accepted by the two people involved as a traditional custom within their society. The method of marriage arrangement itself was recognized as part of the traditions forged by an ancestral link to the past.

Throughout Japan's ancient history, the emperor's seat had been sought after by the most powerful family clans. (See Figure 4.) Time after time, the family clan in power (the Imperial Family) would be replaced by another more powerful, and greedy, family clan. The emperor had many powers, much like the kings of Medieval Europe. He was given that much power because the Japanese people believed that " power is necessary to maintain peace, order, and security in a society". This idea, while good in merits, has obvious flaws. Many of the emperors acquired that power through bloodshed in their quest to overthrow the previous imperial family. When one became emperor, you were a virtual dictator. The people saw the emperor as a "tenno" ( or heavenly prince), a god/man.

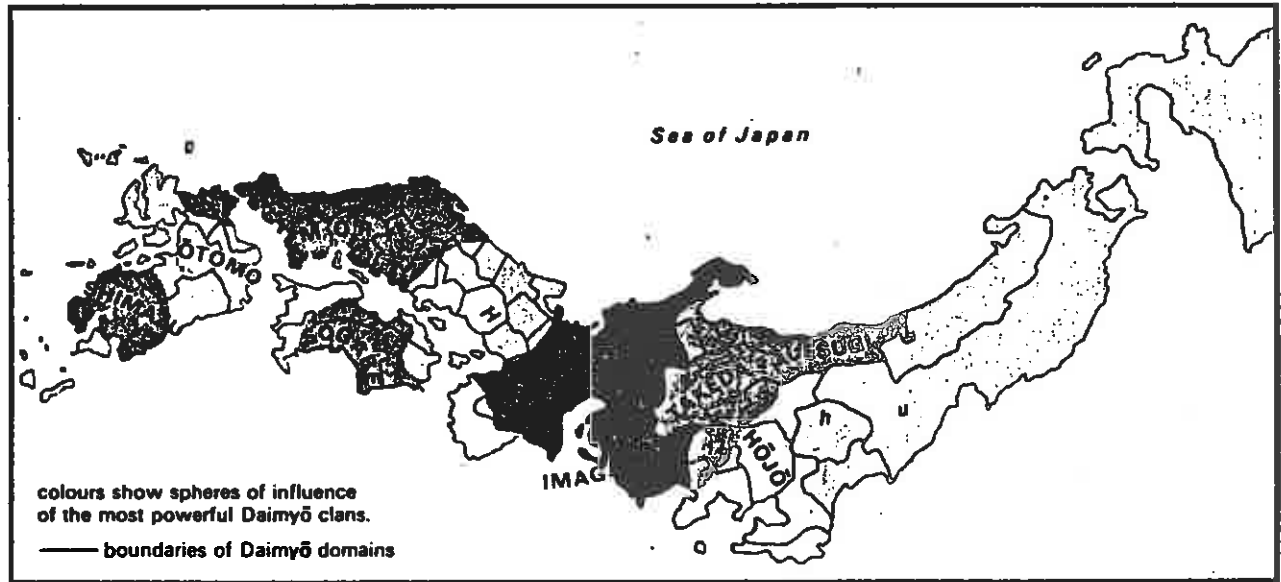


Figure 4. Spheres of Influence of Daimyo Clans

The emperor was supposed to be the supreme power, but found himself equal in power to the other family clans. The family clans were constantly at odds with each other and maintained small armies (no Samurai). Many family clans used their influence to widen and extend their land holdings, at the expense of the weaker family clans. They obeyed the emperor only when it fit in with their own agenda. Marriage into the imperial family was also practiced. This served to consolidate power and extend the influence of the imperial family, while serving the other interests of the family clans involved.

During the Heian Period (AD 794-1185), the government was split into organs - Kurado-dokoro, the Bureau of Archivists, and Kebiishi, the Police Commissioners. The Kurado-dokoro was the private Secretariat of the Emperor, assisting in the drafting of imperial receipts and decrees. While the Kebiishi served as the judicial and police agency.

Important posts were treated as hereditary possessions of the privileged families and some instances came to be occupied by children barely in their teens.

As the Japanese central government declined in power (9th to 12th centuries), large land owners (and governors) needed a way to protect their land and people. The size of their armies grew, as peasants and farmers joined them (out of a need for income). Over time and through many battles, the Samurai emerged. The Samurai's primary obligation was to his lord and to the domain of his lord, not to any form of the central government.

During the Kamakura Period (AD 1185 to 1337), nicknamed "the triumph of the Samurai", the different family clans virtually undermined the authority of the central government for their own gain. Each family clan claimed to be of the royal blood, with at least some member related to the royal family. Therefore, they each claimed the right to rule the country.

The Samurai was looked upon as a role model in society. They lived by the principals of duty, loyalty, integrity, honor, justice and courage. The entire Samurai

system was founded upon a reciprocal relationship of service and rewards. The reward system makes the Samurai look like a hired gun.

While the Samurai were looked upon as role models, the common people were looked upon as insensible sub-human creatures, and constantly referred to as "strange" and "grotesque". On the other hand, women in this society were treated as equals.

Family life determined one's status in the social order and molded one's outlook to a large extent. The entire society was seen as one big family with the Emperor functioning as the father figure, the family head. A familial structure also characterized the relationship between men involved in political, economic, social and cultural activities.

#### **PART IV - RELIGION**

The Okinawans have always been known to have great tolerance of other peoples, but even more so of other religions. This section will discuss the religions of the Okinawans and Japanese.

For the Okinawans, the creation of the world was as follows. God the father sent a son and daughter from Heaven to the barren land of Okinawa. In some miraculous fashion, five children were born. They were believed to have been solely procreated by God the father. Of those five, three were sons and two were daughters. From the sons came the royal family, the court nobles and the common people. From the daughters came



high priestesses and village priests.

The highest ranking official of this religion was the Chief Priestess. She was the King's sister. She was joined by other priestesses from various districts and towns for particular ceremonies associated with the court. To my knowledge, no men served as priests, only the women.

The spirit world consisted of worshipping many gods. Those gods are called Kami (or deities). They have superhuman and supernatural powers. Sanctity is attached to them and rituals are performed in their behalf. They can speak, be seen and give out punishments and rewards. The Kami are divided into five groups - Heaven and Natural Phenomena, Place and Location, Occupational of Status, Ancestral Spirits and Living person(s) regarded as possessing Kami spirit. The Okinawans believe that all living things possess indwelling spirits. and have a love for nature.

Each Okinawan house has a shrine to worship their ancestors. They are usually worshipped by the wife, who keeps the shrine in good order and may place before it offerings, such as food, that might be pleasing to the spirits of the ancestors. Other gods are related to sacred places, after groves of trees, near the village.

There are many religious festivals on Okinawa, particularly those associated with the sowing of seed and harvesting of crops, These festivals are based on the lunar calendar

which came originally from China. These festivals are conducted by the resident village priestess.

Compared to the religions of the western world, there is no Bible and no code of ethics, other than that handed down from parent to child (morals).

Compared to Okinawa with its one religion, Japan has many major religions. The original religion was Shinto. The name Shinto literally means "the way of the gods". Shintoist worship many gods called Kami (god). (This is the same name in Okinawan but has a different meaning.) The Japanese believe that the Kami are the basic force found in mountains, rivers, rocks, trees and other parts of nature. The Kami are believed to be the basic force in such processes as creativity, disease, growth and healing.

Shinto does not have an elaborate philosophy, but does emphasize rituals and moral standards. Unlike other major religions, it does not stress life after death. Approximately 3 million people practice Shinto in Japan today. They pay their respects to several shrines (in their homes, along the roadside and at public shrines.). Paying respect at the shrines is often in the form of reciting prayers, and offering gifts of cakes and flowers to the Kami.

The most important ceremony in Shinto is the "Great Purification Ceremony". You confess the sins committed by yourself, and the nation as a whole. This is followed by a request to the Kami to remove impure conditions caused by the confessed sins. The origin

of Shinto is unknown. Around AD500, the Chinese philosophies of Buddhism and Confucianism influenced Shinto. This influence developed such moral standards as honesty, kindness and respect for ones elders, and superiors.

Buddhism was founded in India about 500BC. Today it has about 300 million followers. All Buddhist have to have faith in Buddha himself, the teachings of Buddha (called the dharma), and the religious community of believers. Buddha preached that existence was a continuing cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Buddhist believe that your position in society was determined by your behavior in your previous lives.

Buddha believed that by eliminating any attachment to worldly things. The dedicated practitioner would be able to eliminate pain and suffering, attaining a state of perfect peace and happiness. Buddha called this state of peace "Nirvana".

During the time of the Samurai, Zen-Buddhism was adopted for the warrior's religion. This was due to the fact that a Samurai could not fail in combat. They only alternative was death. They trained their bodies very hard in Martial Arts. The mental composure of a Samurai was considered vital. This composure coincided with the behavior of the Zen Masters.

Zen profoundly influenced the technical evolution of swordsmanship under the Tokugawa Shogunate ( the third Tokugawa Shogun). After the sword techniques were

learned, the swordsman had to develop the state of "Mu-shin" (no-mind) in which the swordsman leaves behind all feelings of fear or pride. Being empty of thought, his sword would be wielded in a spontaneous, natural, way. Zen was interrelated with every Martial Art to attain the mental aspect of the art.

Japan had a short relationship with Christianity. In 1549, St Francis Xavier was given permission from the Daimyo of Satsuma to spread his religion in Japan. After two years, he left Japan leaving behind close to 1,000 Christian converts. European ships began trading with Japan and brought with them Jesuit missionaries. These missionaries worked hard to convert the Japanese to Christianity. They aroused great hostility with the Buddhist monks. The Jesuits were able to secure the patronage of the Daimyo and began ruthlessly overturning the native religious institutions, destroying ancient Shinto shrines and even forcibly converting the Daimyo's people. By 1582, it was estimated that there were over 150,000 Christians in Japan and about 200 churches.

By the 16th century, it was evident that the Japanese people were tired of the behavior of the Christian Missionaries. Suspected Christians were forced to step on a Christian symbol, such as a cross or bronze plaque of Jesus and Mary. Anyone who refused to walk on the symbols were executed or tortured to make them recant the faith. By the 1660's, Christianity had been all but obliterated from Japan.

In 1637, there was a Christian Rebellion. Thirty-seven thousand peasants were opposed by 50,000 Samurai. The peasants fought very hard and were successful in holding off the Samurai. Eventually though, the Samurai defeated these peasants in battle. The Samurai were humiliated at the initial successes of the peasants and suffered a loss of face. As a result of the near success of the Christian Rebellion, the Shogunde decided to close Japan from access by the outside world and for many years, Japan was called "Sankoku", the closed country.

Respectfully submitted by Matthew Dean.

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