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Constructing Idealised Okinawa

Projected Image of Okinawa and Okinawans in the Context of Tourism

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This Master's thesis examines the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans in the context of tourism. Projected image is a destination image that is constructed by tourism supply-side actors, such as a destination marketing organization. This study analyses the official Be.Okinawa tourism website using qualitative content analysis as the research method. As the website is affiliated with Okinawa Prefecture, its projected images are assumed to reflect how Okinawa Prefecture seeks to present Okinawa and Okinawans to Japanese and international audiences.

Okinawa is Japan's southernmost prefecture inhabited by Okinawans, originally an indigenous people with their own language and culture. Throughout history representations of Okinawa and Okinawans have been strongly shaped by external actors – most notably China, Japan, and the United States – rather than by Okinawans themselves. As today Okinawa is known as a popular tourist destination, it is important to understand contemporary representations of Okinawa and Okinawans in this context.

The findings indicate that while the projected tourism images of Okinawa and Okinawans are positive, they are mostly stereotypical. The focus on tropical paradise-like nature and unique culture is similar to the media representations of Okinawa during the Okinawa boom. Okinawans are portrayed to live an idealised, traditional lifestyle in communities with a high proportion of elderly people. Yet, Okinawa is also presented in a modern light with top-notch research and new business created by innovative Okinawans. Nevertheless, societal and politically sensitive issues remain largely absent.

The study concludes that although culture has an important role for Okinawans in multiple ways, cultural soft sell through tourism and media is unlikely to enhance Okinawans' political agency. Instead, it is suggested that Okinawa Prefecture could create a deeper sense of place by including more local Okinawans in the construction of its projected tourism image. This way Okinawa could promote greater plurality and bring visibility to currently neglected sociopolitical and environmental issues.

Furthermore, it is demonstrated that analysing projected images in historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts is particularly important in case of Okinawa. The image projected by Okinawa Prefecture may be influenced by surrounding power relations even today. These observations are in line with social constructionism as the guiding research paradigm of this thesis.

Finally, it is noted that a single actor like Okinawa Prefecture cannot fully control Okinawa's projected tourism image alone. Instead, multiple historical and contemporary constructions of Okinawa and Okinawans continue to coexist also in future.

Key words: Okinawa, projected destination image, tourism, Okinawa boom, Japan, sense of place, Okinawan, destination image, destination marketing organization, social constructionism

Acknowledgements to the content

Use of AI

I have used the artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT in small assisting tasks, such as translating Japanese texts with special vocabulary into English, proofreading brief text extracts, checking the correct use of the referencing style and confirming that my understanding of certain concepts is correct. All in all, AI played only a very minor role in producing the content of this Master's thesis.

Romanised Japanese

When writing romanised Japanese, I apply a modified version of the Hepburn system without macrons, i.e. write double vowels as double vowels instead of using macrons. However, commonly established names, such as Tokyo and *eisa*, follow the standard writing format in English language. The romanised Japanese words are written in italics only at their first appearance in the text.

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1 Introduction

When I first visited Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture consisting of 160 islands, I was struck by how different it seemed from the mainland Japan. This subtropical region of Japan was originally inhabited by an indigenous people called Ryukyans with their own language(s), customs and culture. Although these days the differences between Okinawans and Japanese are more subtle, Okinawa still has a distinguishable culture with local food specialties, music, architecture and even climate and nature. This exotic image is emphasized in marketing and media, as Okinawa is a popular tourist destination for mainland Japanese.

Part of Okinawa's uniqueness comes from historical external influences from China and other Asia from 15th to 19th century, Japan from the late 19th century to today, and the United States due to the U.S. occupation of Okinawa between 1945-1972. Okinawans have been treated as second-class citizens during forced Japanization after the Meiji Restoration (Gordon 2020, 75-76). They also had to endure the Battle of Okinawa during the Second World War, claimed as a sacrifice of Okinawa to protect the mainland Japan (Inoue 2007, 4). As Okinawa hosts 70% of the U.S. military bases located in Japan until today (Okinawa Prefecture), environmental issues, noise, crime and other dangers due to the U.S. bases are still common.

In contemporary times Okinawa and Okinawans have become cool in the eyes of other Japanese people – including Okinawans themselves – thanks to the Okinawa boom in the 1990s and 2000s when Okinawa-focused movies, TV shows and pop music became popular in the Japanese media (Hein 2010, Ko 2010, Kühne 2012, Cho 2015). Even I learnt to know Okinawa through a Japanese anime series with an episode about a class trip to the exotic islands with beaches, jungles and *habu* snakes. The new positive image of Okinawa strongly contrasts with the past experiences of Okinawans: up until the 1980s, Okinawan migrants on the mainland Japan tried to hide their heritage and culture for better chances of employment and acceptance in the Japanese society (Cho 2015, Cho 2020).

However, the Okinawa boom has been criticized for strengthening stereotypes about Okinawa and Okinawans (Hein 2010, Cho 2014) and for overlooking Okinawa's sociopolitical issues (Hein 2010). Nevertheless, the increased popularity of Okinawa has contributed to record number of tourists in Okinawa. As today the image of Okinawa and Okinawans is strongly shaped by tourism, I have chosen the tourism context for my research. The aim is therefore to gain a deeper understanding of contemporary representations of Okinawa and Okinawans.

1.1 Research problem

Historically and politically Okinawa has been positioned between various external influences, often without a capability to influence its own situation due to decisions made by the Chinese, Japanese, or the U.S. authorities. In a similar manner, Kühne (2012) suggests that Okinawans' own voice is forgotten while the more powerful media constructs an image of Okinawa and Okinawan identity, accusing the Okinawa boom for its "neo-imperial gaze". Superficially the Okinawa boom may be considered as a phenomenon that contributed to the popularity of Okinawa through cultural products. However, according to Kühne (2012, 237) the contemporary neo-imperial agenda means "to politically disempower the colonized indigenous minorities and maintain the status quo of social disparity". The author thus suggests that the Okinawa boom is not limited to culture only but also has political and societal consequences for Okinawans.

A good example of 'neo-imperial gaze' is the image of Okinawans in the media: Okinawans are depicted as gentle, laid-back and somewhat exotic people who like to sing and dance (Hook & Siddle 2003, 23; Hein 2010, 182-183; Ko 2006, 156). Despite these seemingly positive attributes, such image may have negative connotations due to Okinawans' historical status of being regarded as backward, simple people as the opposite of modern people in the mainland Japan (Barclay 2006). The characteristics attached to Okinawans may therefore be echoes from the past, reproducing the perceived inferior status of Okinawans compared to the mainland Japanese in a modern context. While Okinawa has generally not been recognized as a colony of Japan (Ziomek 2014, 497), before 1945 Okinawa was undisputably "clearly in an unequal economic, political and social relationship with mainland Japan" (Siddle 1998, 132).

The negative, discriminating view of Okinawans can be traced back to the historically dominant discourse of Japan as a homogenic nation (Hein 2010, 180) that is "monoracial, monolingual and monoethnic" (Seiger 2019, 404). Okinawans with their own ethnic, linguistic and cultural traits differed from the idealized image of the Japanese. The Okinawa boom could therefore be viewed as a positive sign of contemporary Japan entering a more multicultural realm that allows differences. Yet, Japan has been criticized for "cosmetic multiculturalism" with a perceived acceptance of diversity that, in reality, has very narrow boundaries for how diversity can be expressed (Morris-Suzuki 2002, 171). In fact, Hein (2010) criticizes the Okinawa boom for superficial soft sell: by highlighting Okinawan exoticism, the (mainland) Japanese people show that they are not yet ready to accept

“Okinawan difference” as part of real multiculturalist society. Moreover, the simplified representation of Okinawa ignores the fact that Okinawa Prefecture consists of multiple islands and people that have different traditions, cultures and dialects. The one-sided representation of Okinawan difference in the media ignores the plurality within Okinawa and among Okinawans (Hein 2010, 199).

In this Master’s thesis I seek to understand the contemporary image of Okinawa and Okinawans. Because the biggest Okinawa boom of the 1990s and 2000s has already been studied extensively (e.g. Roberson 2001, Tanaka 2003, Hein 2010, Ko 2006, Ko 2010, Kühne 2012), I have chosen a different context that has a considerable impact on Okinawa’s image today: tourism. Identifying tourist destinations and differentiating them from each other is crucial for being able to attract tourists to a specific destination. While today it is easy to receive information about far-away destinations online, destinations are facing a challenge of homogenization (Zins & Lin 2016). Therefore, destinations have more pressure than ever to stand out and stick in potential visitors’ minds. This is where destination marketers, whether from governmental organizations or private companies in the tourism sector, are involved: creating a favourable destination image through marketing activities (Blain et al. 2005, 337).

A tropical paradise image of Okinawa with friendly, happy Okinawans and interesting, exotic culture is obviously practical when attracting tourists and possibly even new long-term residents to Okinawa. However, as mentioned, it may simultaneously divert attention away from Okinawa’s political and societal problems. The contemporary image may also inadvertently reproduce the past image where Okinawa and Okinawans were considered inferior to the mainland Japan and Japanese. Studying their tourist image can therefore reveal hidden agendas and messages that reflect Okinawans’ position in the contemporary society.

1.2 Research questions

To understand the contemporary image of Okinawa and Okinawans in the tourism context, my research questions are divided into three:

1. What is the projected image of Okinawa on the official Be.Okinawa tourism website?
2. What is the projected image of Okinawans on the official Be.Okinawa tourism website?
3. How are these images of Okinawa and Okinawans positioned in the context of historical, sociopolitical, cultural, and tourism narratives of Okinawa?

Projected image (also known as *projected destination image* or *projected place image*) is described as “the ideas and impressions of a place that are available for people’s consideration” (Bramwell & Rawding 1996, 202). It is produced by the supply side, such as marketers and tourism related service providers. Projected image is therefore the counterpart of *perceived destination image* that is formed by the demand side (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig 2020, 229), such as potential tourists and other visitors. There can be a gap between projected destination image and perceived destination image for the same destination (Sibi & Unnikrishnan 2023), as potential tourists base their image also on other sources of information than the official projected image.

The selected website *Be.Okinawa* (<https://beokinawa.jp>) is one of the official Okinawa tourism websites affiliated with Okinawa Prefecture (Okinawa Story front page). The website was started in March 2013 with the aim of promoting Okinawa brand abroad (Voice Trails of Be.Okinawa 2023). After initial success at this, in 2017 Be.Okinawa was expanded to target promotion also domestically in Japan (ibid.). This website was selected because the Be.Okinawa website has lengthy articles that introduce Okinawa and Okinawans, unlike many other official Okinawa tourism websites that only introduce tourist attractions. Therefore, the materials on the Be.Okinawa website are considered more suitable for analysing the image of Okinawans and Okinawa also against historical, sociopolitical and cultural background.

Studying the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans that is produced in affiliation with Okinawa Prefecture contributes to an understanding of how Okinawa wants to present itself and its residents in Japan and abroad. The first research question about the projected image of Okinawa refers to how Okinawa should be perceived and experienced according to the representation on the Be.Okinawa website. It includes the main attributes that Okinawa as a tourist destination is known for, such as beaches, warm weather and the sea, and the activities connected to Okinawa. The second question refers to how Okinawan people are represented. In this study Okinawans refer to any people that are living in Okinawa, including both multi-generation native residents and migrants with or without Okinawan roots.

Finally, through the third research question, these projected images of Okinawa and Okinawans are analysed in the wider context related to Okinawa’s current and historical sociopolitical position as well as its representation through culture and tourism. Here also the Okinawa boom had a considerable impact on how Okinawa and Okinawans were represented in the media, playing a major role in the contemporary image of Okinawa and Okinawans.

1.3 Research paradigm: Social constructionism

My research approach in this Master's thesis is based on social constructionism. According to the constructionist world view, everything in the world is being produced and reproduced in interactions of people that are situated in a historical and cultural context (Iwashita 2003, 333). Whereas realism assumes that one objective reality of the world exists, social constructionism assumes that knowledge of the world is always context-dependent and constructed (Burr 2015, 9; 26). This means that numerous constructions of the world exist simultaneously. Moreover, these constructions are also closely related to power relations by indicating what certain people are allowed to do and how they are supposed to treat others (Burr 2015, 5). Hence, I aim to provide a comprehensive historical, sociopolitical and cultural background related to Okinawa and Okinawans within the limits of this thesis. A fuller context contributes to a better understanding of different constructions of the world, including the image of Okinawa and Okinawans, during various historical periods up until today.

As language is the key to gaining knowledge about these constructions of the world, analysing language and other symbolic forms is the main research method for social constructionists (Burr 2015, 28). At the most basic level, people use words to attach meanings to things and phenomena, which means that an understanding of the world is constructed, reproduced and negotiated through words. The texts and the visuals of the Be.Okinawa website is therefore a suitable focus of analysis to study how the affiliated Okinawa Prefecture constructs the image of Okinawa and Okinawans in the context of tourism.

1.4 Theoretical framework

1.4.1 Destination image, destination marketing organization and sense of place

In this section I define the main concepts that form the theoretical framework of this Master's thesis: destination image and its related terminology, including projected and perceived destination image and destination marketing organization (DMO), and sense of place.

Destination image is “the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton 1979, 18) according to this most commonly cited definition (Jenkins 1999; Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig 2020). Destination can refer to any area big or small that has defined boundaries, such as countries or cities. However, it is acknowledged that “destination image” is very complex as a concept and lacks a unified definition (Wang et al.

2023, 3; Stepchenkova & Morrison 2008, 549). This can also be seen in the multiplicity of terminology that specify a certain aspect of image – sometimes with very similar meanings – such as online destination image (Mak 2017), destination brand (Ritchie & Ritchie 1999), and place brand (Zenker et al. 2017). Whereas the target audience of destination brand is mainly limited to potential visitors, place brand has a wider target audience: not only tourists, but also potential and future residents, companies, and so on (Kerr 2006; see Zenker et al. 2017).

These days it is common that nations, states and cities have a *Destination Marketing Organization (DMO)* which main responsibility is to promote a certain destination to attract visitors (Pike & Page 2014, 204). Ideally DMO has a status as a credible and a legitimate organisation that is capable of leading the destination marketing strategically and operatively towards a future vision (Björk 2017). Yet, DMO is often dependent on funding controlled by political decision-makers (Pike & Page 2014), which may have an impact on the continuity of their promotion activities and their promotional content. The benefit of concentrating marketing efforts of a destination under a destination marketing organization is the ability to deliver a more consistent message, as the aim of destination branding is to “consistently convey the *expectation* of a memorable travel *experience* that is uniquely associated with the destination” (Blain et al. 2005, 337; original cursives).

In case of Okinawa, the destination marketing organization is clearly *Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau (OCVB)* that is “the only ‘unified public and private sector’ promotional body in Okinawa that integrates tourism and convention needs while aiming at rebuilding a strong and efficient system to promote tourism in Okinawa” founded in 1996 (OCVB). OCVB owns multiple websites focused on promoting Okinawa and therefore contributes significantly to the tourism image of Okinawa. In addition, it educates personnel for resort related industries and hosts various events (ibid.). However, OCVB does not own all Okinawa tourism pages: For example, the Be.Okinawa website is listed under the websites that are affiliated with the Japanese state and Okinawa Prefecture instead of OCVB (Okinawa Story front page). Due to this reason, I assume that the Be.Okinawa website represents the view of Okinawa Prefecture even more accurately than OCVB.

The example of multiple tourism website owners shows that a single destination marketing organization does not operate in a vacuum nor have a full control of the destination image. There are other important stakeholders who participate in creating the destination image in the minds of consumers, such as the host community, business stakeholders, local infrastructure

and the DMO staff (Pike & Page 2014, 216). The actions of the DMO might even conflict with other actors' wishes regarding the destination, as the stakeholders are diverse and may have different needs (ibid., 211).

Yet, one important group of stakeholders is typically neglected in the destination and place branding processes: the local residents, who could even act as brand ambassadors (Braun et al. 2013). García-Hernández and Garay-Tamajón (2022) introduce a *sense of place* concept where the locals are included as additional stakeholders in the destination marketing processes. Sense of place is defined as “an idea or construct used to characterise the relationship between people and spatial settings and which generates a noticeable identity that is deeply felt by these people” (ibid., 1). It is recommended especially to destinations that are highly vulnerable to environmental and social challenges (ibid., 2-3), to which Okinawa also belongs. Marketing strategies based on the destination's sense of place could balance tourism development, as in addition to residents' needs, respecting natural and cultural heritage of their territory is considered important. To create such a marketing strategy, marketers of a destination should include local voices in their promotion and facilitate encounters between residents and visitors. (ibid.).

As a conclusion, it is very difficult to create a single, aligned destination or place image due to the involvement of multiple different stakeholders in the image production. Moreover, as briefly introduced with my research questions, destination image is produced by two different sides: *projected destination image* is the image created and conveyed by the supply side, such as destination marketing organization, whereas *perceived destination image* is the image formed by the demand side, consumers (Govers et al. 2007). While tourists may adopt parts of the official marketing messages (Gunn 1972; see Hunter 2012), perceived image is additionally based on tourists' subjective evaluations and opinions of a destination (Hunter 2012). This means that each visitor and potential visitor of a destination forms their own unique *perceived destination image* of the destination. The projected and perceived destination image concepts have therefore a good fit with social constructionism: in the end, one destination has numerous different constructions that are context-dependent despite destination marketing organization's efforts to create an aligned tourism narrative. In this Master's thesis the focus is on the projected image produced by Okinawa Prefecture on the Be.Okinawa website. However, as the perceived image of Okinawa and Okinawans is affected by other sources available to consumers, it is important to analyse this projected image in tourism also in the historical, sociopolitical and cultural context.

1.4.2 Imagined community and identity

In this study it is assumed that Okinawans share a consciousness of belonging to the same group, an *imagined community* that is a concept introduced by Benedict Anderson (1986). *Imagined communities* refers to members belonging to the same nation that is limited through clear boundaries and conceived as sovereign, such as the Japanese in Japan (ibid.). Because normally it is not possible to know all those people personally, the connectedness between the members is imagined, yet real (ibid.). In my Master's thesis the 'imagined communities' concept is extended to cover also other types of political and cultural communities sharing a similar background, such as Okinawans. After all, Okinawans – or Ryukyans – have not always been part of Japan as a nation state, but yet have formed their own community vis-à-vis China, Japan, or the United States.

Sense of belonging to a community has been recognized as important in political contexts. Throughout different historical periods, the names used for Okinawa by political authorities have reflected attempts to align Okinawans with the politically preferred imagined community. 'The Ryukyu Kingdom' or 'Ryukyu' was originally used by China in the seventh century (Inoue 2007, 49). These terms were used of Okinawa throughout the Chinese-influenced period of the Ryukyu Kingdom from 1429 to 1879. However, Japan of the Meiji era began to use the name 'Okinawa Prefecture' to emphasize Okinawa's belonging to Japan since 1879 and to erase its earlier connections to China (ibid.). Yet, 'Ryukyu' was again used by the U.S. administration of Okinawa especially in the 1950s to highlight Okinawa's distinction from Japan (Inoue 2007, 49) and to idealize the past Ryukyu Kingdom era (Siddle 1998, 132). For clarity, in this thesis I use 'the Ryukyu Kingdom' and 'Ryukyans' for the period from 1429 to 1879 and 'Okinawa' and 'Okinawans' from 1879 onwards. To compare imagined community of Okinawans to the rest of the Japanese, I use 'mainland Japan' or 'mainland Japanese' to refer to Japan or Japanese excluding Okinawa and Okinawans.

Changing names to erase or strengthen past cultural ties has also been an attempt to influence Okinawans' sense of *identity*. According to Stuart Hall (1990, 223), *cultural identity* refers to a collective sense of one's true self within a shared culture and historical experiences. It is therefore related to *imagined community*, as both share the element of collective connectedness. Cultural identity is not fixed, but something that is always changing and being produced (Hall 1990, 222). This interpretation of 'identity' is therefore in line with the social constructionist assumption of my study. Whereas from Anderson's (1986) original point of view imagined

communities were more strictly tied to the nations, the fluidity of Hall's (1990) identity concept enables a broader definition of the limits of this political and/or cultural group of people. As identity is constantly being produced and negotiated, there is no one single Okinawan identity, but even the same person may change the perception of what being Okinawan means and to which extent one feels being part of the community of Okinawans. In this thesis I will use *cultural identity* and *identity* interchangeably when referring to Okinawan identity. To gain a better understanding of Okinawans' perceptions of their identity, Okinawan cultural products and Okinawans' relationship to them will be covered in the next chapter.

1.5 Thesis outline

In this first chapter *1 Introduction* I have introduced my topic and presented research problem and research questions. The research paradigm and the theoretical framework with the definition of the most important concepts in my thesis were also included in this chapter.

The second chapter *2 Okinawa and Okinawans in flux* begins with a description of history from the Ryukyu Kingdom until today, including multiple external influences throughout various periods. Next, I cover tourism development from the 1960s until contemporary times. Then I introduce several forms of Okinawan culture produced by Okinawans and their connection to Okinawan identity. Finally, I list the typical elements in the image of Okinawans and Okinawa based on the whole literature review in chapters 1 and 2. These elements are discussed in the context of representing Okinawa and Okinawans as 'the Other'.

In the third chapter *3 Methodology* I will describe my research methods, the process of data collection on the Be.Okinawa website and data analysis. Also, the limitations in my choices of research methods and research process are discussed. The chapter *4 Findings* introduces the main themes related to the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans based on my data analysis. These projected images are described through three main themes for each image.

The chapter *5 Discussion* will recap the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans based on the findings in the context of other Okinawa research, including neglected themes. Then these images are discussed in the historical, sociopolitical and cultural context by analysing the meaning of culture for Okinawans and the consequences of a soft sell image. Finally, it is discussed whether Okinawans themselves are able to influence the projected tourism image.

The final chapter *6 Conclusion* summarizes my main research findings and present my research contributions.

2 Okinawa and Okinawans in flux

This chapter provides a background for how Okinawans and Okinawa are represented throughout the history until contemporary times. To provide a comprehensive context, I cover history, tourism development as well as cultural products produced by Okinawans. The chapter is concluded with a discussion about Okinawa's representation as the 'Other'.

2.1 Okinawans under external influences throughout history

To understand the position of contemporary Okinawans better, it is necessary to cover historical events that have played a major role in defining who Okinawans are. What is very characteristic to Okinawan history is that Okinawans have always had to define who they are in relation to others and under the influence of these others, whether the Chinese, the mainland Japanese, or the U.S. Americans.

It should be remembered that history is always told in a context, possibly with a political agenda. Due to the strong involvement of politics in Okinawan affairs, there are multiple narratives of Okinawan history that emphasize different aspects. In this chapter I have tried to include different views, including also research from several contemporary scholars from Okinawa or belonging to Okinawan diaspora, to provide a more balanced image of Okinawa.

2.1.1 The Ryukyu Kingdom: Between Chinese and Japanese influences

1429 marked the birth of highly autonomous Ryukyu Kingdom with significant Chinese cultural, economic and political influence (Loo 2014, 11-12). This kingdom was paying tribute to China and had trade relations also with Korea, Siam (today known as Thailand), Southeast Asian polities and Japan (ibid.). Okinawa has thus been amidst different cultural influences in Asia already for centuries.

The era between two major influences of Japan and China truly started in 1609 when Okinawa was invaded by Satsuma Domain of Japan. Although the Ryukyu Kingdom was now incorporated into the Japanese system, the ruler wanted to keep this as a secret from the Chinese in order to maintain the tribute relationship to China. Whenever the Ryukyus had something to do with China, all participants were forced to hide any Japanese signs in their clothing, for example. (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 3.) This "period of 'dual subordination'" in the Ryukyus has often been depicted as one of hardship and suffering in the narrative of Okinawan victimhood (Siddle 1998, 118). Yet, Siddle notes that this was not

necessarily true, as a dynamic urban society was developed during this time with vibrant culture that marked the birth of the Ryukyuan performing arts that Okinawa is famous for these days.

Despite the complicated position of the Ryukyu Kingdom between the two forces, China and Japan, a general collective consciousness of a Ryukyuan identity in terms of imagined community (Anderson 1986) hardly existed yet throughout the population according to Siddle (1998, 119). Instead, each class from elite to peasants in Okinawa likely had more common with their counterparts in Japan or China, rather than with the Ryukyuan of other classes (ibid.). “Ryukyuan” referring to a Ryukyuan identity might therefore be a term that has become more widely used only afterwards, as according to Siddle (1998, 132) the Ryukyuan past was later idealized to build a populist narrative of a “a ‘national’ history of an oppressed people longing for freedom”.

2.1.2 Annexation to Japan as Okinawa Prefecture: Japanization of Okinawans

The period of dual subordination came to an end in 1879 when the Ryukyus were annexed to Japan as a new prefecture with an old Japanese name, Okinawa. This happened in the context of rising nationalism in Japan: The arrival of Commodore Perry’s fleet forced Japan to open trade for foreign nations, eventually making Western institutions and ideologies popular among many young rulers in Japan (Gordon 2020, 73-76). Japan as an aspiring modern nation had to define the borders of the state, who Japanese are and what differentiates the Japanese from the rest of the states and peoples: the imagined community called ‘Japanese’ that would have a shared consciousness about belonging to the same nation (Anderson 1986).

As a consequence of Western influence and rising nationalism, Japan first incorporated the northern island with its native Ainu people to Japan as Hokkaido prefecture in 1869 (Gordon 2020, 75). To make Japan a unified nation with a unified people, a strong Japanization program was imposed on the Ainu (ibid.). After the annexation of the Ryukyus to Japan in 1879, a Japanization program was also started in Okinawa in the late 1890s (Gordon 2020, 75-76). In practice this meant imposing Japanese language, education, military, and agricultural practices on Okinawans (Allen 2009, 188).

The response to the Japanization program was two-fold even in Okinawa (Siddle 1998). Among the mainland Japanese, Okinawans living in the resource-poor periphery of Japan (Allen 2009, 192) were regarded as backward and inferior with their different language and

customs compared to the mainland Japanese (Siddle 1998, 127-131). Therefore, some Okinawan elites saw assimilation to Japan as a way to become civilised and more equal with the Japanese (ibid.). The willingness to assimilate with the Japanese could also be witnessed among Okinawan migrants on the mainland Japan. For example, Okinawan migrants in Osaka tended to hide their Okinawan heritage because it often meant better possibilities for making a living and becoming part of the affluent modern world (Cho 2020, 282-283). According to this view, the annexation of Okinawa and the following Japanization measures could be seen as positive progress and modernization of Okinawa (Siddle 1998, 130).

On the other hand, according to the contradicting Okinawan victimhood narrative, the incorporation of Okinawa was considered “internal colonialism” (Siddle 1998, 120; Ueunten 2010, 108-115). However, whereas Hokkaido was generally recognized as a colony of Japan, Okinawa did not fulfil all the criteria of colonialism, such as Japan sending new settlers into the islands (Ziomek 2014). Yet, forcing Okinawans to adopt a different language, customs and culture through a new education system had a strong impact on Okinawans’ identity. Bhowmik (2008, 65-66) summarizes well the juxtaposition between the positive and negative sides of Okinawans’ Japanization:

By speaking Japanese, they assumed a different persona, one that would allow for greater economic advantage and less social stigma. Inhabiting another culture, however, necessitated a renunciation of one’s own.

Thus, despite the potential advantages of assimilation, the Japanization program was also restricting Okinawans from expressing themselves and passing on their own language and culture.

Finally, the Japanization efforts by the state forced Okinawans to compare themselves and their culture with that of the mainland Japanese. This position likely contributed to Okinawans’ awareness of thinking themselves as a different imagined community opposed to, or as part of, the imagined community of the Japanese. Thus, the very act of trying to replace the Okinawan language and culture was likely a trigger that enabled Okinawans to become more conscious of their Ryukyuan/Okinawan identity, no matter whether the (elite) Okinawans were in favour of or opposed to the Japanization program.

2.1.3 From war to reversion: Okinawans as pieces in U.S.-Japan power politics

Even if some Okinawans had been willing to “be even more Japanese than the Japanese in order to be treated as equals”, the Battle of Okinawa at the end of the Second World War made these Okinawans feel abused and betrayed by the Japanese state (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 23). As Japan started to lose its position in the war, Okinawa was strategically used as a buffer to slow down the U.S. military before the U.S. troops would attack the mainland Japan (Ueunten 2008, 163). In the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 up to one quarter or one third of the whole Okinawan population died (Allen 2009, 188). Among these were a significant number of civilians, as the Japanese Imperial Army was instructed not to save civilians, which to Okinawans was an indication of the disposable nature of their lives in Japan’s eyes (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 21).

In fact, the Japanese Imperial Army had a significant role in the painful war memories of Okinawans, as the military had also forced Okinawan civilians to commit mass suicides (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 25-27) and forbidden the use of the Okinawan language, treating locals who used the language as spies who should be punished (Ueunten 2008, 163). Against the background of Okinawans’ assimilation efforts during the past decades, it is easy to understand why some Okinawans may have felt betrayed by the Japanese state. On top of this, it was in the interests of the United States to emphasize the difference of Okinawans compared to the Japanese and highlight Okinawans’ earlier subordination to mainland Japan as a way to legitimize the U.S. rule on Okinawa (Bhowmik 2008, 67; Inoue 2007, 80).

After the war Okinawa continued to be occupied by the U.S. through a decision encouraged by the Emperor Hirohito (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 77). By 1947, around eight percent of the land in Okinawa prefecture was taken to build U.S. military bases, originally without any compensation to the Okinawan landowners (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 78). In 1951 the original version of U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was signed, forming the basis for the military alliance between the United States and Japan. The newer version of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty signed in 1960 justifies use of land for the U.S. military bases in Japan and promises defence support from the U.S. in case Japan would be under attack (MOFA).

Since 1950 Okinawa was administrated by the U.S. Civil Administration of the Ryukyus (USCAR) and the Government of the Ryukyu Island (GRI) (Ueunten 2010, 102). Yet, in decision-making power the Ryukyu government was subordinate to the U.S. administration (ibid.). Eventually Okinawans’ discontent with their lacking power to decide over matters in

Okinawa by themselves led to intense, island-wide reversion movements in the 1960s (Inoue 2007, 4). Okinawans were concerned about their own safety due to the presence of the U.S. military bases with nuclear weapons and nerve gas, but also because of the increasing numbers of crimes committed by the U.S. military personnel (Ueunten 2010, 105-106). In addition to accidents that involved U.S. military vehicles, numerous violent crimes were committed by the U.S. military, yet the Americans were often let go without a severe punishment (ibid). Okinawans believed that being part of Japan again would give them the long sought-after rights and guarantee a more peaceful future without the bases (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 7-8).

On May 15 in 1972 the long-awaited reversion of Okinawa back to the Japanese rule finally took place, but with disappointing conditions to Okinawans: The occupation of Okinawan land for the U.S. bases remained and the importance of the U.S.-Japan security alliance had the highest priority over local Okinawan matters (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 7-8).

2.1.4 Post-reversion: Okinawans in a status quo with the U.S. base issues

During the decades after the reversion up until today, Okinawans living close to the American bases continue suffering from noise, environmental pollution, crimes conducted by the military and accidents. Significant crimes conducted by the U.S. military personnel and base-related accidents have led to big all-Okinawan protests with tens of thousands of participants, for example in years 1995 (Inoue 2007), 2004 (Brooke 2004) and 2016 (Kapur 2016). In this sense history seems to keep repeating itself: When a considerable negative incident happens due to the U.S. military bases in Okinawa and leads to mass protests, the government of Japan proposes a solution, but in the end, there is barely any change.

A good example is the dangerously situated Futenma U.S. base that is estimated to be fully operational at least until mid-2030s (EDITORIAL: Henoko base plan remains mired in a quicksand of serious problems 2024), even though a plan to substitute it with another base was made already in 1996 (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 92). The substituting base Henoko is under construction despite its estimated environmental impact on the endangered Okinawa dugong species (Tanji 2008) and unsuitable land that has delayed the schedule and nearly doubled the budget (EDITORIAL: Henoko base work should halt after report of unstable seabed 2020). On the other hand, many local authorities and Okinawan citizens have accepted the new Henoko base and the base-related compensation (Tanji 2008). Therefore, it

needs to be remembered that not all Okinawans are part of the U.S. base opposition movements, but that there are always multiple sides of the story.

What seems clear, however, is that the U.S.-Japan security alliance continues to be the number one priority for Japan, no matter the consequences in many Okinawans' life. It has been suggested that the Japanese state is consciously trying to divert world's attention away from the negative issues. For example, Tanaka (2003, 429) claims that the G8 summit held in Okinawa in 2000 was "intended as a cultural device for reorganizing people's consciousness" because Okinawan culture was promoted in a festive manner to erase the post-war Okinawa memory and all the negative issues related to the U.S. bases. Okinawa hosting the international G8 summit can also be seen as a continuum of the narrative of Okinawans connecting Japan to the rest of the world since the Ryukyu Kingdom times. Even the Okinawan prefectural government has been promoting the image of Okinawans as "a people bridging the world" (Arakaki 2002, 130), which seems positive but hides the negative aspects.

2.2 Development of Okinawa as a tourist destination

This chapter begins with an overview of how tourism in Okinawa has developed historically. Next, more contemporary tourism statistics, events and trends in Okinawa are covered.

2.2.1 1960s and 1970s: A change from war tourism destination to Japan's Hawaii

Originally the post-war Okinawa's main tourist attractions included old battlefields and military bases, as the family members of those deceased in the war made a visit to Okinawa (Tada 2015, 293). Yet, already in the 1960s local travel agents from Okinawa became worried that the war tourism combined with cheap goods and seaside would fail to attract enough tourists in the future (ibid.). Although the significance of war memorials in Okinawa's tourism history was rather short-lived, it needs to be noted that the events of the war have not been completely ignored within Okinawa's tourism history. However, commercial pressure following the decline of war tourism made local travel agents to consciously choose a different type of tourism narrative (ibid.).

In the 1960s it was decided that Okinawa would be turned into an attractive holiday destination, "Japan's Hawaii", by importing palm trees and creating beaches with white sand (Figal 2008). In 1962 The Okinawa Tourism Association hired a tourism expert from mainland Japan to analyse and advise how Okinawa could become a tourist destination (Figal

2008, 89-90). In the following discussions about Okinawa's vision for tourism industry development that took place in 1969, many supported modelling Okinawa after Hawaii, up to the extent of having its own dance like Hawaiian hula or a local equivalent of the Hawaii shirt (Tada 2015, 293-294). Later these both wishes have been realized through the popularity of *eisa* dance and the abundance of Okinawan *kariyushi* shirts not only in souvenir shops, but also in government's campaigns to promote energy-saving in offices (Abe, cabinet ministers promote Super Cool Biz 2017).

To conclude, external influences on the image of Okinawa have been strong since the establishment of Okinawan tourism industry: hiring an expert from mainland Japan as well as choosing a paradise island model from the U.S. did not necessarily consider local residents' views on Okinawa's future tourism image. On the other hand, using a mainland expert and a location already popular among the mainland Japanese was likely a smart choice, as Okinawa was seeking to attract first and foremost tourists from Japan to Okinawa.

In addition to the chosen Hawaiian influence, the impact of the U.S. occupation should not be neglected when covering the history of Okinawan tourism. Before the reversion of 1972, people from mainland Japan needed a passport to travel to Okinawa and had to exchange Japanese currency to the local U.S. dollars (Tada 2015, 293). Many luxury goods from whisky to electronics were cheaper in Okinawa compared to Japan (*ibid.*). Thus, it is no wonder that Okinawa with its subtropical climate and beaches still have an image of an exotic destination, as Okinawa used to be 'abroad' for the mainland Japanese.

After the reversion, even Okinawans themselves had to redefine who they are: They were no longer Okinawans under the U.S. occupation who needed a passport to visit the mainland Japan, but Okinawans as part of Okinawa Prefecture belonging to Japan and the Japanese. Discovering 'Japaneseness' and maintaining traditional Japanese culture had been important as a counterforce to Westernization of culture in music, arts, theatres et cetera at the end of 19th century Japan (Gordon 2020, 110-111). Yet, old cultural forms were sometimes dramatically reshaped in this process, even though these modernized cultural forms became known as 'traditional' Japanese concepts (*ibid.*). Therefore, it was logical that after the reversion also Okinawans began to put more effort into building Okinawa's image as part of the tourism narrative. Yet, in a similar manner as in in the 19th century Japan, Tanaka (2003, 420) suggests that Okinawans may falsely believe that certain cultural products are part of

Okinawan traditions, whereas in reality those are part of the more recent commercial narrative.

Continuing the development of tourism industry was a lucrative option for economic growth in the post-reversion Okinawa that had two objectives: demilitarization and economic parity with the rest of Japan (McCormack 2003, 93-94). In 1975 a major effort was done to promote Okinawan tourism by holding the International Ocean Expo in Okinawa (Tanaka 2003, 422-423). Its success has been disputed, as it failed to reap significant economic benefits at first (ibid). Yet, the event contributed significantly to the typical way of travelling in Okinawa. For example, Okinawa's motorway National Route 58 was built for the Ocean Expo to model after a similar road park in Miyazaki that was a popular Japanese holiday destination at the time (Tada 2015, 295-296). During the drive, tourists could admire the tropical paradise with its hibiscus and palm trees that were planted next to the road (Miyazaki-shi Kankou Kyoukai; see Tada 2015, 296). Tada (2015, 295) even calls the Ocean Expo as the event that "established the Okinawan brand of tropical paradise". Holding the Ocean Expo only a few years after the reversion in 1972 has also received criticism about the whole event being an attempt to downplay political problems by highlighting nature and culture (Sinjo 2000; see Tanaka 2003).

2.2.2 1980s-1990s: Tourism development as a third pillar in Okinawa's 3K economy

At the end of the 1980s, Okinawan tourism development had taken a major leap forward with a huge holiday resort building boom ongoing in all Okinawa (McCormack 2003, 101). This building boom was mainly thanks to the 'Resort Law' of 1987 in Japan, the aim of which was to attract private investors to build resorts and golf courses in peripheral areas, thereby boosting economic growth (Funk & Cooper 2013, 124-126). In Okinawa this building boom led to construction of many theme parks and privatization of beaches, as these beaches would become part of the resorts visited by mainland Japanese (McCormack 2003, 101-102).

However, the development projects were not always economically sustainable: For example, the German Culture Village built on Miyako Island left the local village authorities with financial difficulties, as the operating expenses were too high to cover the investments (ibid.).

Overall, the tourism industry in the 1980s Okinawa was to become one of the main pillars of Okinawan economy described with "3 Ks" – *kichi* (bases), *koukyou jigyou* (public works) and *kankou* (tourism) (McCormack 2003, 107). As much as Okinawa has been dependent on tourists from mainland Japan that until 2010s constituted up to 95% of the total tourists on

Okinawa (Kakazu 2012), it also became economically dependent on Tokyo, the Japanese government, through subsidy public works system and the military base system. This was a vicious circle, as through bigger involvement it became more difficult for Okinawa to break free from these dependencies (McCormack 2003, 107). Moreover, the development projects have come with a high price at the cost of nature. McCormack (1999, 36) reminds that due to “development” in Okinawa during the two and a half decades after the reversion to mainland Japan, Okinawa’s nature resources had suffered because of unsustainable practices.

Whether tourism really became as large part of the Okinawan economy as originally expected is questionable. For example, as most major hotel resorts operating in Okinawan tourism have ownership in the mainland Japan – up to over 80% in the 1990s (Okinawa Roudou Keizai 1992; see McCormack 2003, 101) – Okinawans often have only low-paying jobs in the service sector thanks to tourism (Kühne 2012, 224). Moreover, in some high concentration of tourist facilities, only 12% of employees are locals (McCormack & Shikita 2000, 239; see McCormack 2003, 101). Overall, the unemployment rates in Okinawa Prefecture are still among the highest in Japan, especially among the youth. For example, the percentage of new college or university graduates not working in 2022 was as high as 24.4% in Okinawa Prefecture, whereas the rates for the following prefectures Oita (13.3%) and Kagoshima (10.2%) were already considerably lower (e-Stat).

2.2.3 Since 2000: Growing tourism despite challenges due to global events

In the end, the branding strategy of Okinawa and the investments into tourism industry over the years led to concrete results: Okinawan culture and Okinawa as a tourism destination boomed in the mainland Japan especially in the 2000s. According to Kühne (2012), the Okinawa boom had its origins in the popularity of Okinawan music in the 1980s and the 1990s, plus in the *iyashi* healing boom. The *iyashi* healing boom followed the burst of the bubble economy of Japan, as disillusioned Japanese started to look for a relaxing environment where they could heal also psychologically (ibid.).

In 2001 the NHK drama *Churasan* made Okinawa well-known by presenting typical Okinawan things, such as traditional *sanshin* instruments, bitter *goya* food, *awamori* liquor, creatures from Okinawan mythology like *shisa* lion, *ishigaki* stone wall architecture, American bars and street names, *bingata* kimono dyed in specific colours, and of course white beaches, coral reefs and tropical vegetation (Kühne 2012, 219-220). The drama also introduced the idea of Okinawan wisdom and spirituality through characters depicting

Okinawan grandmothers and traditional festivals, including *haarii* boat race and eisa with drum dancers (ibid.).

Despite the increased interest in Okinawa, the first decade of 2000s was overall rather difficult for Okinawan tourism as highlighted in the annual Tourism Overview 2020 Edition from Okinawa Prefecture (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). For example, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the start of the Iraq War had a large impact on the perceived safety of Okinawa as a tourist destination due to the large number of U.S. bases located there. The reputation damage following the 9/11 events led to the implementation of a specific campaign that stated that Okinawa is OK (*daijoubusa*-Okinawa), trying to convince travellers about Okinawa's safety as a tourist destination. Also the SARS epidemic in 2003, the global recession after the financial crisis of 2008 and the 3/11 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011 led to a temporary decrease in year-to-year growth for Okinawan tourism. (ibid.)

Yet, all in all tourism to Okinawa was still growing at a remarkable speed especially during the 2010s. In the Japanese fiscal year 2018 (Heiwa 30 in Japanese years) the yearly number of tourists peaked at 10 million, whereas only 11 years earlier in 2007 Okinawa had hit a 100 million accumulative tourists mark since the reversion of Okinawa in 1972 (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). Tourism revenue was growing together with the tourist numbers, reaching nearly 704,7 billion Japanese yen in the fiscal year 2018 (ibid.). In the fiscal year 2017 tourism had accounted for 14.9% of total income in Okinawa, reaching almost double compared to 6% share of income from the U.S. military bases (Mitsuzumi et al. 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic halted the growth again, leading to a -5.3% decrease in the number of incoming tourists to Okinawa compared to the previous year for the first time in the 2010s (Okinawa Prefecture 2020).

Even amidst the challenges caused by the global world events throughout the 21st century so far, Okinawa has continued investing in the development of tourism during the past decades: reopening of Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium as a major tourist attraction and several major infrastructure improvements, such as opening of Okinawa city monorail Yui Rail in Naha, a new international terminal at Naha airport and Naha Cruise Terminal in 2014. The investments in tourism infrastructure were needed, as since the mid-2010s the growth was mainly thanks to the double-digit growth in the number of foreign visitors. (Okinawa Prefecture 2020.)

When it comes to the Japanese tourists, a notable trend is repeat visitors: Their share has been increasing since 1983, remaining at around 86% since 2017 (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). Yet, the annual growth of incoming mainland Japanese tourists to Okinawa has barely remained on plus in the 2010s (*ibid.*). It would therefore be lucrative for Okinawa Prefecture to try to attract potential repeat visitors from Japan again and again by suggesting new places to visit and new activities to experience in Okinawa.

2.3 Okinawans constructing 'Okinawa' and 'Okinawans' through culture

This section introduces various forms of Okinawan culture and demonstrates how these forms of culture enable Okinawans to express, construct and challenge representation of Okinawa and Okinawans. Whereas the previous sections have introduced how various external influences have changed Okinawans, the focus of this chapter is on how Okinawans themselves construct and negotiate who they are. Throughout the history, Okinawans have had to change their representation and renegotiate what being Okinawan means and how it relates to being simultaneously Japanese or even being under the influence of another nation – whether during the dual subordination in the Ryukyu Kingdom era, the U.S. administration that started in the aftermath of the Second World War – or living abroad as Okinawans or Okinawan diaspora.

In other words, Okinawans belong to their own imagined community (Anderson 1986) of Okinawans that has its own distinct cultural, ethnic and historical background as well as geographical position. Simultaneously Okinawans are often part of the imagined community of the Japanese by living in the same nation and sharing major societal, political, cultural and economic influences. Finally, today geographical location has become less important: More and more Okinawans and Okinawan diaspora live outside of Okinawa either elsewhere in Japan or abroad, yet feel that they are part of the Okinawan community. Unlike in Anderson's (1986) original definition of people sharing a consciousness of belonging to the same nation that has clear physical borders compared to other nations, the modern definition of imagined community could be, in fact, becoming borderless. Therefore, Okinawans' identity is fluid and being constantly reproduced over time, as according to the cultural identity concept by Hall (1990).

However, despite the flexibility of identity, negotiating what being Okinawan means does not happen in a vacuum. For example, the increased interest in Okinawan culture brought by the Okinawa boom in the Japanese media had some consequences impacting the Okinawans: the

Japanese started increasingly take part in Okinawan cultural practices, such as Japanese without any Okinawan background learning to play sanshin or Okinawan diaspora in Japan and abroad learning eisa dances. While the interest in Okinawa has mainly positive aspects, in some cases this has also led to situations that have challenged Okinawans as the legitimate owners of their culture, as the later *minyou* folk music lessons example from Osaka demonstrates.

2.3.1 Uchinaa pop music

I will start with one of the most well-known elements of the Okinawa boom in the 1990s and 2000s, *uchinaa pop*. Uchinaa pop refers to Okinawan pop music that combines traditional Okinawan and Western pop music elements and often relies on ethnic appeal, contributing thus to the world music genre on behalf of Japan (Roberson 2001, 211-212). Often this Okinawan pop music seems to repeat the stereotypical markers of Okinawa that include highlighting the importance of nature to Okinawans as well as using Okinawan language and costumes, which can even lead to self-exoticization (ibid, 220). Yet, sometimes the themes of uchinaa pop may also include songs that protest the presence of U.S. military bases, for example, as well as songs that resist the Tokyo-dominant discourse of Okinawa, thus bringing the often-neglected problems in Okinawa to the surface (ibid, 229-233).

Roberson (2001, 217) suggests that uchinaa pop music creates an image of Okinawa and Okinawan identity that is characterized by the internal “*champurū*” (an Okinawan word that means “mixed”) hybridity within Okinawa and its differences compared to the dominant mainland Japan. This kind of mixed identity enables Okinawans to construct their identity in relation to “local, national, and transnational contexts” (Roberson 2001, 234), reflecting the diversity of Okinawanness. On the local level in Okinawa, various islands have their own distinctive culture, which, however, may have been impacted by historical Chinese influence on Okinawan culture, the U.S. administration and the presence of the bases in past and present Okinawan life. On the national level, Okinawans are, of course, also Japanese citizens and thus heavily influenced by the national culture. On the transnational level, the overseas Okinawan communities continue to practice Okinawan culture abroad throughout multiple generations. Thus, the reality of Okinawan life and cultures is much more diverse than the single Okinawan identity often represented in the mainstream media in Japan.

However, the impact of Okinawan pop music on the mainstream discourse of Okinawa in the Japanese media remains rather small. As the main appeal of this music lies in the Okinawan

stereotypes, it is likely that uchinaa pop mainly only reinforces the existing stereotypes. Yet, for Okinawans uchinaa pop may still be an important medium through which they can construct other sides of their identity, including mixed identity with local, national, and transnational dimensions, even if this expression of identity is not transmitted to the mainland Japanese. All in all, Roberson's (2001) view of Okinawans constructing their identity on multiple levels is very similar to what I describe as Okinawans negotiating their role as part of multiple imagined communities: Okinawans, Japanese, and Okinawan diaspora living outside of Okinawa.

2.3.2 Folk dance and music: eisa and minyou

Next, I am introducing eisa which is an Okinawan folk dance and music. These days it is known as one of the main symbols of Okinawan culture in the mainland Japan. Traditionally eisa was performed to honour the spirits of ancestors during the annual Okinawan Buddhist Obon ceremony held in the summer. In contemporary Japan, the distinctive rhythmic drumbeats and coordinated moves of a group of performers have made eisa popular also outside Okinawa. (Shirota 2002, 120-121.)

Shirota (2002, 120) suggests that by performing eisa Okinawans can reaffirm their identity, identify themselves with overseas Okinawan communities, and negotiate their identities in relation to the post-war occupation and the U.S. military in Okinawa. After the Second World War, eisa became an important medium at reuniting Okinawan people and reconnecting Okinawans with their ancestral lands and roots (Okinawa zentou 1998, 139; see Shirota 2002, 122). Eisa gained popularity especially in the city of Koza, known as Okinawa City since 1972, which was characterized by a strong presence of the U.S. military (Shirota 2002, 123). Later the dance helped to establish a relationship between Okinawans and other groups, such as Okinawan overseas communities in Hawaii and Latin America: even the spouses of the U.S. military personnel began to perform the dance through the RMD organization, the Ryukyu-koku Matsuri Daiko (ibid, 125-128).

The reverse side of the popularity of eisa is that when modern, more entertaining forms of the dance and music gain more ground, the regional differences and historical background tend to become less prevalent. These kinds of consequences are better demonstrated in the next example about minyou classes in Osaka.

Minyou is traditional Japanese folk music that has a distinctive style in Okinawa. It is thus another representation of traditional Okinawan culture through which Okinawans can express and construct their identity. Typical instruments used in Okinawan minyou include sanshin, a three-stringed guitar that is often covered with a snakeskin, and Okinawan *taiko* drums, as seen in the Okinawan minyou video examples introduced on the website of Okinawa Prefecture (Okinawa Prefecture 2024). According to a common anecdote, in early 20th century Okinawan diaspora in Osaka were playing sanshin covered under a blanket in a closet, as the pressure for assimilation with the mainland Japanese was high and thus the Okinawans tried to hide all signs of their Okinawan heritage (Cho 2020, 282-283). However, by the Okinawa boom in the 1990s and 2000s, even mainland Japanese had become interested in learning Okinawan minyou (ibid., 284-287).

Cho (2020) studied how Okinawan folk music minyou is taught to mainland Japanese in Osaka, one of the biggest cities in Japan with a significant amount of Okinawan diaspora. Cho observes that despite the increased popularity of Okinawan minyou taught to mainland Japanese by Okinawans, a certain power asymmetry remains between the mainland Japanese students and the Okinawan teacher. Okinawan minyou classes are considered more casual and easy-going, which is in line with the general stereotype of Okinawans, whereas the Japanese minyou instruction is considered more formal and standardized (ibid, 285). Therefore, even though Okinawan instructor is often regarded as more authentic due to the instructor's heritage, experience, and personal stories about Okinawa, especially in musical circles Okinawan minyou might be considered less respectable due its weight on accessibility and entertainment value rather than on standardized quality (ibid., 292-294). According to Cho (ibid. 294-295) this setting reflects the historically inferior position of Okinawans: mainland Japanese minyou class participants as appropriators of Okinawan culture have the power to choose whether to rely on the qualities of an Okinawan teacher, or switch to another, possibly a non-Okinawan teacher.

2.3.3 Literature from Okinawa

Finally, also literature from Okinawa – an expression used by Hein (2010) to avoid a strict definition of “Okinawan literature” – began to gain more attention during the Okinawa boom. Hein (2010) studied literature by four authors from Okinawa: Medoruma Shun, Matayoshi Eiki, Akahoshi Toshizou and Tefu Tefu P. The first two received the Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's most prestigious literary prizes, in the mid-1990s, whereas the latter two have won

major regional literary prizes in the beginning of 2000s (ibid.). The purpose of Hein's research is to analyse how the texts of these authors are positioned in the context of the Okinawa boom.

According to Hein (2010, 199-200), literature from Okinawa construct Okinawa as different from the mainland Japan, but through different methods than in the mainstream discourse, as literature from Okinawa positions itself against the Okinawa boom. For example, the images of Okinawa are "more complex and ambivalent than the usual representations of Okinawa from a Japanese main islands' perspective" (Hein 2010, 199). These constructions create plurality of Okinawan identity in contrast to the mainstream discourse of one unified Okinawan identity. The authors also write about the neglected themes, such as the Battle of Okinawa, the U.S. occupation and continuing military presence as well as the poor economic situation that provides few future opportunities for young people. (ibid.). Compared to the stereotypes of the Okinawa boom, literature from Okinawa seems to construct a more comprehensive image of Okinawa and Okinawans by focusing also on the neglected themes behind the common media narrative.

2.3.4 Okinawan culture club

Another example of Okinawans taking more control of their own identity comes also from Osaka, where Okinawan immigrants and their descendants have ensured that Okinawan diaspora have a chance to learn to know their roots and be proud of them. In 1978 Okinawan elementary school teachers in Osaka founded an Okinawan cultural activist group, the Taisho Okinawa Children's Club, to teach children of working-class Okinawan immigrants about Okinawan culture, such as *minyou* and *eisa*, as well as about social and historical issues in Okinawa (Cho 2015, 165-168). Remarkable was that even the children's parents, who had learnt to hide their Okinawan background in the past, could reflect on and reconnect with their Okinawan identity (ibid.).

Over time the minority agenda of the Club has become less prevalent, probably mainly due to the third generation of Okinawan immigrants being even closer to the mainstream Japanese and the families being wealthier in the 1990s and 2000s compared to earlier working-class families (Cho 2015, 169-171). However, Cho suggests that it is possible to discover different types of values that represent 'being Okinawan' in the activities of the Taisho Okinawa Children's Club: "voluntarism, spontaneity, fun, excitement, love of art and music, and a focus on family and community" (ibid., 176). Thus, according to Cho Okinawan identity has

moved beyond the ethnic identity to new meanings that are more universal human qualities, yet typical to Okinawans (ibid.). Interestingly, these human qualities are very similar to the stereotype of fun-loving, community-based Okinawans, even though in this context the values are presented only in a positive light.

To conclude, I have collected the common elements of Okinawanness that were emphasized in these various forms of Okinawan culture, despite usually being neglected in the mainstream image of Okinawa represented in the Japanese media:

- **Inferior position/minority status of Okinawans:** Historical and social factors that have had a lasting impact on Okinawans' status either in Okinawa, or as Okinawan diaspora elsewhere in Japan.
- **Plurality and diversity of Okinawan identity:** There is not only a single Okinawan identity, but many of them due to the historical and contemporary mixed influences in Okinawa, including overseas Okinawan communities.
- **Spirit of resistance:** The problems brought by the presence of the U.S. bases in Okinawa and their impact on everyday Okinawan life as well as the dominant view of Okinawa in the mainstream media create a spirit of resistance among Okinawans.
- **Significance of the memory of war:** The Battle of Okinawa and the following U.S. occupation in Okinawa that ended only in 1972 have left a significant mark on Okinawans, which should not be forgotten.

2.4 Synthesis: Image of Okinawa and Okinawans

I will conclude this chapter by listing the common elements associated with the image of Okinawa and Okinawans based on the literature covered in the chapters 1 and 2 so far. The elements listed in this synthesis section were therefore first introduced with their original references in the previous sections of this Master's thesis. This synthesis of typical Okinawan features covers representation of Okinawa during the Okinawa boom, the history of Okinawa from the Ryukyu Kingdom era to contemporary times, the development of Okinawa as a tourist destination and contemporary tourism, as well as culture produced by Okinawans. Where historically relevant, the elements are presented in an ordinal sequence from the oldest to the contemporary ones to reflect changes over time.

2.4.1 Typical elements in the image of Okinawa

Stereotypically Okinawa is known for its tropical paradise type of nature and rich culture that flourished already in the Ryukyu Kingdom era. The typical elements are listed below. The Okinawan nature elements in Table 1 are mainly from Kühne's (2012) list of "Okinawa-isms" in the Churasan TV series about Okinawa. The forms of Okinawan culture in Table 2 come from the same list of Kühne (2012) and history and culture covered in chapters 2.1 and 2.3.

Table 1. Okinawan nature elements

white beach
Seaside
coral reef
tropical vegetation
palm trees
hibiscus flower

Table 2. Forms of Okinawan culture

Ryukyuan performing arts
sanshin instrument
eisa dance
minyuu folk music
traditional festivals
mythological creatures

Table 3 and Table 4 contain typical Okinawan tourist attractions and tourism goods. The content is based the chapter 2.2 about Okinawa's tourist development and the representation of Okinawa in the TV series Churasan (Kühne 2012). These elements include also historical tourist attractions and goods, such as the old battlefields and cheap goods during the U.S. occupation before the reversion, even if these may not be the main attractions today anymore.

Table 3. Okinawan tourist attractions

old battlefields
Okinawa's motorway National Route 58
theme parks
American bars and street names
Japan's Hawaii / tropical paradise
healing, relaxing environment
Ishigaki stone architecture
Churaumi Aquarium
traditional festivals (e.g haarii)

Table 4. Okinawan tourism goods

cheap goods
electronics
whisky
kariyushi shirt
awamori
shisa lion

Finally, in Table 5 I have collected the negative aspects related to Okinawa's environment and society in general throughout history. As could be seen in the previous sections, these issues

are present but typically neglected in the media representation of Okinawa during the Okinawa boom. Yet, as seen in chapter 2.3 *Okinawans constructing 'Okinawa' and 'Okinawans' through culture*, the neglected themes are often brought to public's attention through culture produced by Okinawans, as collected in Table 6.

Table 5. Negative aspects in Okinawa

unemployment
unsustainable tourism development
environmental issues
challenging economic situation
issues due to the U.S. bases (noise, crime, pollution, safety)

Table 6. Neglected themes about Okinawa

Battle of Okinawa
U.S. occupation
U.S. bases/continuing military presence
poor economic situation
social and historical issues in Okinawa
complex and ambivalent nature of Okinawa

2.4.2 Typical elements in the image of Okinawans

Just like the image of Okinawa, also the representation of Okinawans differs based on the source. I will start by a collection of typical important values for Okinawans in Table 7 based on Okinawan culture introduced in the chapter 2.3. Tables 8 and 9 list typical characteristics of Okinawans as perceived throughout history, divided into positive and negative. “Exotic” is listed under both categories, as positive or negative connotation depends on the context.

Table 7. Okinawan values

importance of nature
honouring the spirits of ancestors
family- and community-centricity

Table 8. Positive characteristics of Okinawans

gentle
laid-back
love of art and music
liking for singing and dancing
fun, entertaining
fun-loving
spirit of voluntarism
spontaneity
authentic
exotic

Table 9. Negative historical characteristics of Okinawans

backward
inferior
own language and customs compared to mainland Japan
second-class citizens compared to mainland Japanese
exotic

Whereas *Table 2. Forms of Okinawan culture* introduced areas of culture that Okinawa is known for, *Table 10. Types and features of culture produced by Okinawans* lists the elements that rise in culture produced by Okinawans, as introduced in the chapter 2.3. Table 11 describes what kind of a role culture has played in Okinawans' life over time.

Table 10. Types and features of culture produced by Okinawans

traditional costumes
dances
instruments (e.g. sanshin)
language
music
ethnic

Table 11. Role of culture for Okinawans

reuniting Okinawans after war
reconnecting Okinawans with their ancestral land and roots
reflecting and reconnecting with one's Okinawan identity

Finally, Table 12 summarizes elements related to Okinawan identity throughout history from hiding Japanese signs during the dual subordination of the Ryukyu Kingdom to plurality of Okinawan identity in the contemporary world, including Okinawans outside of Okinawa as diaspora or migrants. Table 13 describes the spirit of resistance that Okinawans have had, mostly related to the consequences of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, as presented in chapters 2.1 and 2.3.

Table 12. Okinawan identity over times

hiding Japanese signs
idealized narrative of Ryukyuan
birth of Ryukyuan/Okinawan identity
Japanization: renunciation of one's own culture
assimilation to Japan as an opportunity
hiding Okinawan roots
champurū/mixed identity
Okinawans as a bridge to the world
local, national and transnational identity
plurality of Okinawan identity
power asymmetry between mainland Japanese and Okinawans
Okinawan diaspora

Table 13. Okinawan spirit of resistance

protesting military bases
opposition through reversion movements
standing for one's Okinawan rights
protesting Tokyo-dominant discourse of Okinawa
bringing problems of Okinawa to the surface through culture

All in all, it can be seen that the image of Okinawa and Okinawans is much more multifaceted than what Okinawa's tourism image and the media image via the Okinawa boom suggest. Hence, for the purpose of my study I find it important to cover both the history of Okinawa that has impacted how Okinawans negotiate their identity until contemporary times, as well as culture produced by Okinawans to receive a fuller picture of how Okinawa and Okinawans construct their own representation. The typical elements related to the image of Okinawa and Okinawans collected in this chapter are later used for comparison when analysing the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans produced on the Be.Okinawa website.

2.4.3 Image of Okinawa and Okinawans still as 'the Other'?

Before moving on to the data and analysis of the Be.Okinawa website, this part concludes the literature review by commenting on the different versions of Okinawa and Okinawans as presented in tourism, media or through culture produced by Okinawans. According to Murray (2012, 15), touristic representations of Okinawa are continued to be shaped by "the questions of cultural authenticity, exoticized otherness, and regional pride": All of these themes are visible through the examples of culture produced by Okinawans and the discussion about Okinawa's perceived otherness.

As mentioned earlier, Okinawa has made conscious efforts to brand itself as an exotic tourist destination within Japan, which has contributed to the Okinawa boom in the 1990s and 2000s. However, Tanaka (2003) approaches this tourist destination image of Okinawa critically: According to Tanaka, this "tropical fantasy land" (ibid., 420) image of Okinawa emphasizes exoticism through its distinctive culture, which is another form of presenting Okinawa as "the Other" in Japan. I share Tanaka's view that the exotic tourism image may not only be positive, despite Okinawa's efforts to create such an image. The tropical paradise image tends to focus only on the positive aspects of Okinawa, whereas the sensitive societal and political issues, like high unemployment rates and the negative consequences of the U.S. bases, are left out in the mainstream media coverage again.

On the other hand, especially in the post-reversion Okinawa this new and exciting image of Hawaii-like Okinawa might have felt like a positive change for Okinawans who were once again willing to become – and be accepted as – Japanese. The Okinawan culture club from Osaka introduced in the study by Cho (2015) demonstrates how Okinawan immigrants were able to reconnect with and be proud of their Okinawan roots, whereas the new generations of

Okinawan descendants learnt not only about Okinawan culture, but also about social and historical issues in Okinawa.

The origins of Okinawans being represented as ‘the Other’ is related to power politics, which again reminds how constructions of Okinawa and Okinawans are tied to a cultural and historical context. For example, for the United States it was beneficial to emphasize Okinawans’ difference compared to the Japanese during the U.S. occupation of Okinawa (Bhowmik 2008, 67). This claim is supported by Inoue’s (2007, 70-97) notion that especially American researchers’ focus was on the Okinawan difference compared to the Japanese, which has resulted in an Orientalist view of otherness. Overall, Inoue (2007, 70-97) criticizes that both American researchers and Okinawan scholars from 1920s to 1980s failed to include the impact of social change and politics but instead focused only on the cultural aspects of Okinawans. It is no wonder that the emphasis on culture, exoticism and other differences of Okinawa and Okinawans compared to the mainland Japanese are visible in Okinawa’s tourism representation even today.

Overall, the narrative of Okinawa and Okinawan people in tourism is suggested to have changed from “nature” and “culture” to include also “gentleness” and “comfort” (Tanaka 2003; Kühne 2012, 235). Mainland Japanese are nostalgic to find “all the good things Japan has already lost” in Okinawa (Kühne 2012, 235), including the kind and welcoming Okinawans. This popularity of nostalgia can be seen as part of the wider popularity of heritage tourism in the 1980s, as rural life was considered as the real, original Japan that still had its traditions and strong community ties (Funck & Cooper 2013, 90). Yet, in contrast to rapid industrialization and urbanization of mainland Japan that Okinawa did not experience (Tanaka 2003, 421), the nostalgia connected to Okinawa as a traditional Japanese place may have some negative connotations. After all, there is a fine line between a touristic ideal of a traditional rural place and the reality of Okinawa being one of the poorest prefectures in Japan. In a similar manner, whereas Okinawans depicted as kind people who lead a traditional community-based life may be positive for tourism, it can also be a modern echo from the beginning of the 20th century when Okinawan people were considered as ‘backwards’ compared to the mainland Japanese.

The image of Okinawa as ‘the Other’ is not only present in tourism, but also reproduced in the media. Hein (2010) suggests that the whole Okinawa boom is rather superficial soft sell; in reality the Japanese have not yet fully accepted ‘Okinawan difference’ – as Okinawans do

have their own ethnic, cultural traits, characteristics and customs that differ from the idealized homogeneous image of the mainland Japanese – because they continue to ignore certain problematic topics in Okinawa. Cho (2014, 293) shares Hein's (2010) view about the negative sides of the Okinawa boom: While the popularity of Okinawa contributed to the recognition of 'Okinawan difference' within the dominant discourse of Japan's cultural homogeneity, the cultural appropriation of Okinawa by mainland Japanese became more prevalent, leading to an increased commodification and exoticization of Okinawa and Okinawans in comparison to the mainland Japanese. This could be seen in the practice of Okinawan music and dance in Osaka, where the Okinawan entrepreneurs had to accommodate to the need of the mainland Japanese participants to help keep their business running (Cho 2014). Thus, according to Cho the mainstream discourse about Okinawa in the Japanese media may threaten Okinawans' sense of cultural autonomy, even up to influencing how Okinawans can construct their own identity. This reflects the old hierarchy of Okinawans in an inferior position compared to the mainland Japanese (ibid.).

Finally, Figal (2008, 107) suggests that eventually local Okinawan identity becomes interwoven with the tourism brand image of Okinawa, questioning how narrow the gap between the "real" Okinawa and the "tourist Okinawa" are. If tourism is an inevitable part of today's Okinawa, wouldn't it become part of the real Okinawa eventually? Thus, when even Okinawans start to reproduce this "Okinawanness" – also called "self-Orientalism" (Tanaka 2003, 427) – expected by tourists, do they eventually forget all negative issues connected to Okinawa? Whereas negative sides falling into oblivion might be true in the memories of mainland Japanese tourists, who mainly come to look for recreation in Okinawa, the locals still face everyday issues from high youth unemployment to environmental issues caused the U.S. bases and even tourism itself. This discussion will be continued after first introducing my research methods and main findings in the next chapters.

3 Methodology

This chapter introduces my research methods and the process of my data collection and analysis. Providing an adequate description of the research methods is important, as it allows research community to evaluate the feasibility of my choices and validity of my research.

3.1 Research methods: Qualitative content analysis

In this section I am introducing and reasoning the selection of my research methods, starting with content analysis. Content analysis is described as “a systematic method for examining the content of various kinds of textual and/or pictorial material” (Echtner 2002, 417, based on Berelson 1952). In destination image studies content analysis has been a common choice: It was identified as the second most-used method after questionnaires in a literature review of destination image research in esteemed academic journals published between January 2012 and April 2023 (Wang et al. 2023).

As the objective of my research is to produce a more holistic understanding of Okinawa and Okinawans, I have chosen to use qualitative content analysis. Qualitative methods contribute to obtaining more detailed and in-depth information about the subject studied (Picazo & Moreno-Gil 2019), which is a good fit with my research objectives. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, have traditionally been used in content analysis within the positivist paradigm (Albers & James 1988, 145). As positivist paradigm usually aims at generalizing findings rather than at producing a deep understanding of a single case, the significant number of quantitative studies especially in the field of projected destination image visuals has been criticized with a call for more qualitative methods (Picazo & Moreno-Gil 2019). Finally, qualitative content analysis is also a suitable method for my research paradigm of social constructionism with a constructionist world view (Iwashita 2003) where knowledge of the world is produced in social interactions (Burr 2015, 4-5).

A lack of standardized criteria is identified as one of the limitations in the field of projected destination image research (Picazo & Moreno-Gil 2019). If each study has their own methods for the analysis, it is more difficult to analyse the validity and compare the research results. To address this issue, I use Echtner’s (2002) 4A approach to content analysis as the basis for analysing pictures. It was originally introduced for the study of tourism marketing brochures of Third World countries (Echtner 2002). This approach is introduced in Table 14.

Table 14. Introduction into Echtner's 4A approach to content analysis

Echtner's (2002) 4As	Description of 4As	Text elements
attractions	natural and man-made attractions	nouns
actors	people, including both hosts and tourists	nouns
actions	how actors should feel and react	verbs
atmosphere	description of destination and actors	adjectives and adverbs

When analysing pictures, Echtner (2002) selects appropriate nouns and verbs based on the subjects and potential action depicted in the picture. Then the atmosphere of the pictures is recorded by noting things like facial expressions of the subjects or significant features of objects and settings using adjectives and adverbs.

Table 15 shows a short description of how I am applying Echtner's (2002) 4A approach in my analysis of visual materials. As can be seen, the division between Attractions and Actors supports well my first and second research questions of the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans. Echtner's original Actions has been renamed to Activities due to a better fit to describe the activities that actors are engaged with.

Table 15. Application of Echtner's 4A approach in my visual content analysis

Description of As	Image of	Elements in the pictures	Typical code type
attractions	Okinawa	an object or a place	noun
attribute/atmosphere	Okinawa	a description of the object or an atmosphere of the place	adjective
actors	Okinawans	demographic information and other descriptive information of people	noun
activities	Okinawans	a description of the activities that the people are doing	verb starting a phrase
attribute/mood	Okinawans	a description of the mood of the people, or the general atmosphere based on what the people are doing	adjective, noun, phrase

Originally my plan was to apply Echtner's 4A approach also in my text analysis. However, during a test coding round I noticed that this approach was too detail-oriented, as I did not want to reduce my aim of holistic understanding of Okinawa and Okinawans into lists of nouns, adjectives and verbs. Yet, Echtner's 4A approach was suitable for having a systematic way to code and analyse visual materials that had to be put into a text format for my analysis regardless.

3.2 Data analysis process

I start this section with a brief overview of the Be.Okinawa website content. Next, I will introduce my process of data collection, data coding and data analysis.

3.2.1 Data collection and selection

The Be.Okinawa website is divided into an English and a Japanese version. “Be” in the name of the website refers to “being there, to exist/to be present” (「そこにある、存在する」) that emphasizes action, whereas the phrase “Be.Okinawa” means “an island that allows you to return to your true self while being surrounded by beautiful environment and warm people” (「美しい自然とあたたかい人たちに囲まれて、本来の自分を取り戻せる島」) for people that visit Okinawa (Archives). On the English website version this is presented as a slogan-like text: “Okinawa Is A Place Of Beautiful Nature And Warm-Hearted People, Where You Can Be Your True Self.” (Be.Okinawa English front page).

The latest website version used as primary research data in my thesis was published in December 2024 with several weeks’ difference between the language versions (We have released Be.Okinawa English website 2024 & Be.Okinawa 2024 公開しました 2024). My data collection period took from January to the beginning of March 2025. As the nature of online environment is constantly changing, I downloaded the Be.Okinawa website and used a consistent naming convention with clear numbering to keep track of my data.

The English and the Japanese version of the Be.Okinawa website are structured mainly in a similar way: the front page is very visual with several video clips, the Be.Okinawa slogan, and links to different sections of the Be.Okinawa website. However, the visuals and the materials are completely different, which suggests that the English and the Japanese audience are considered two different target audiences. Also, the links at the bottom of the front page are different on the English versus the Japanese site. It is possible to access previous Be.Okinawa website editions through Archives.

Both language versions introduce Okinawan people, places and activities through articles, which constitute most of my data. Table 16 and Table 17 provide a brief introduction into the English and the Japanese articles. The theme categories that I created based on data are the same categories that I am using in my data analysis. Each article is assigned to a maximum of two categories. For further details, see the summary of all articles in the Appendix 1.

Table 16. Overview of the English articles on the Be.Okinawa website

#	Article series	Article	Main themes	Theme category
1	Journey through Yambaru: Where Life Rejoices	Articles #01 Food	Local food, local community	Food, Village
2	Journey through Yambaru: Where Life Rejoices	Articles #02 faith	Local religious beliefs and sacred sites	Religion
3	Journey through Yambaru: Where Life Rejoices	Articles #03 community	Local community	Village
4	Responsible Tourism	#01 Iriomote-Island	Iriomote island nature	Nature
5	Responsible Tourism	#02 miyako-island	Miyako island culture and sustainability strategy	Sustainability, Culture
6	Responsible Tourism	#03 yanbaru	Yanbaru nature, culture and eco-tourism	Nature, Culture
7	Experience - Tradition	#01 Curator James Pankiewicz	Karate and international connections	Culture, Outside connections
8	Experience - Tradition	#02 Curator Kevin Chaplin	Bullfighting and karate	Culture, Events
9	Experience - Tradition	#03 Curator Daniel López	Sailing on traditional fishing boats	Nature, Traditions
10	Experience - Adventure	#04 Curator Ludo Touitou	Diving and coral reefs	Nature, Sustainability
11	Experience - Adventure	#05 Curator Miltos Beratlis	Yanbaru National Park experience	Nature
12	Experience - Adventure	#06 Curator Hayato Maki	Iriomote island waterfalls adventure	Nature
13	Experience - Lifestyle	#07 Curator Mari Fujisawa	Beach yoga, lifestyle & collecting rubbish	Lifestyle, Sustainability
14	Experience - Lifestyle	#08 Curator Pamela Ann	Food tour in Naha	Food
15	Experience - Lifestyle	#09 Curator Christal Jade Burnette	Harvesting and picnic	Nature, Food
16	History	Takara: History	History of Ryukyu Kingdom and Shuri Castle	History, Outside connections
17	Art & Craft	#01 Okinawan Crafts	Okinawan textiles	Handicrafts
18	Art & Craft	#02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork	Mingu crafts and Okinawan handicrafts business	Handicrafts, Business and Economy
19	Art & Craft	#03 Yachimun	Yachimun potteries and ceramics	Handicrafts

Table 17. Overview of the Japanese articles on the Be.Okinawa website

#	Article series	Article	Main themes	Theme category
20	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Sesoko 2024a: #01	Yachimun potteries and ceramics	Handicrafts, Infrastructure for tourism
21	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Sesoko 2024b: #02	Traditional sailboat event	Events, Traditions
22	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Mieda 2024: #03	Coffee and tea cultivation in Okinawa	Food, Business and economy
23	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Mieda 2025a: #04	OIST research institution and its coral reef research	Education, Sustainability
24	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Sesoko 2025: #05	Okinawan stone art	Handicrafts
25	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Mieda 2025b: #06	A traditional family-owned miso brewery	Food, Traditions
26	BRUTUS meets Be.Okinawa	Mieda 2025c: #07	Karate and Karate Kaikan	Culture, Outside connections

To keep the focus clearly on Okinawa and Okinawans rather than specific tourist attractions and to avoid overlapping content, several parts of the website were left out of my analysis: Travel Spot images, a 45-page pdf brochure of Okinawa in the English version, and additional topics and external websites from the “Links” section in the Japanese version. Due to technical reasons the videos and online 360-degree-pictures were left out, as I could not access them in a file format to upload them to NVivo with the rest of my data.

3.2.2 Data coding

A systematic approach of handling, grouping and analysing data facilitates the research process, which is why I used data coding in my research. A code in qualitative research is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña 2009, 3). Essentially, a researcher tries to answer the question “what is this data about” (Alejandro & Zhao 2023) with the focus on the research questions.

I coded and analysed my data using NVivo, a well-known qualitative analysis software due to its data categorization and analysis possibilities. Reformatting data for NVivo and learning how to best import, categorize and code data took some time to learn, which is why I conducted several test coding rounds. In the end, I added data attributes to my files in NVivo to distinguish between texts and pictures and whether they are from the Japanese or the

English website version. Multiple languages in one NVivo project led to some limitations, such as automatic word frequency only being available in the main language of the project, in my case English. However, as a major part of my data consisted of visuals, this functionality was not essential, whereas having all files in one project made the analysis much easier.

During my coding process I created all codes inductively, which has been common for analysing destinations' projected image on photographs (Picazo & Moreno-Gil 2019, 18). A benefit of this approach is the possibility to use fewer codes, as one code can also be used to describe a longer unit of text (Weber 1990, 16-17), or in my study, also visuals. However, because I had started with my literature review, my choice of codes was likely somewhat influenced by codes used in previous studies, such as Echtner and Ritchie (1993) and Jenkins (1999).

Data coding often consists of multiple cycles, starting from first and second cycle and possibly requiring even more rounds (Saldaña 2009, 8). When beginning my first coding cycle, I initially used broader categories to make sense of the data. This helped me to get an overview of the content of my data before moving to a more detailed level. Despite my advanced Japanese skills, I used also translation tools, including AI-assisted ChatGPT, to check nuances of the words and translate articles with a considerable amount of specific vocabulary, such as miso production process. After coding several articles both in English and in Japanese, I moved on to recoding them into more detailed categories. When coding new articles that had different themes, I kept adding more main categories and more detailed codes based on need. Finally, I reviewed all my codes and grouped them into the main categories. In this phase I also reviewed the coded data to verify the fit with the code, resulting in joining some codes and adding some missing codes.

Coding pictures was more challenging than coding texts, but Echtner's (2002) 4A approach helped in this process. First, I identified the main element in the picture: a place/an object or a person/people. In case of place or object, I used the codes that I later grouped under the theme categories, such as nature, handicrafts and village. For people I used code categories under Actors together with Activities and Atmosphere: the demographics and other descriptive information to describe the actor, the activity/action that the actors were doing, and the general atmosphere or attributes related to the actors. In some rare cases I used both people and place codes if both seemed equally prominent for conveying the main message of the picture.

In coding of the visuals there might be small inaccuracies, as the codes are based on the researcher's evaluation. In very unclear cases, such as if the picture only depicted a person from behind, the category 'unknown' was used. 'Mixed' in multiple categories refers to situations where the picture had more than a few people with different attributes. In case of a bigger group, it was not sensible to code each person one by one to the categories, as often it was difficult to see enough details to clearly be able to distinguish the correct category.

Finally, assessing ethnicity based on people in the pictures is not only difficult, but also a sensitive topic. For me as a white researcher having lived most of my life in Northern Europe it was challenging to notice the nuances between, for example, indigenous Okinawans and mainland Japanese, not to mention that people's ethnicities are increasingly mixed today. Hence, the codes related to ethnicity may not be entirely accurate. If the articles mention the origin of the person in the picture, ethnicity is coded according to the origin. Otherwise, 'Okinawan' is a loose category that includes Asian-looking people who are assumed to be long-term Okinawans based on their activities in the pictures, whereas other Asian-looking people are 'Japanese' based on the context of the articles, or 'unknown' when fully unclear.

3.2.3 Data analysis

After the coding of all data was finished, I began going through all the main materials again. First, I wrote a summary of each article and marked down three quotes that represent the content the best. Then I created various tables, presented in the Findings chapter, to have a better overview of themes, the demographics of the actors plus the frequencies of occurrence for the codes. Finally, I reviewed text excerpts and pictures per category or even subcategory to have a holistic understanding about each main theme category. Through this process it was possible to group similar main themes and identify narratives about Okinawa and Okinawans that are also introduced in the next chapters. In the final step of my data analysis, I went through the narratives and reread relevant literature in an iterative process in order to place my findings as part of broader academic discussion.

All in all, my research processes have been designed to keep validity and reliability as the guiding principle. My coding guide and reiterative coding process enabled me to keep my coding methods and analysis as consistent as possible throughout the data analysis process. By reading and rereading my initial findings to identify the main narratives, I was able to examine themes and narratives from multiple perspectives, allowing space for alternative narratives and additional observations for the analysis.

3.3 Limitations

The image of Okinawa and Okinawans is a broad theme that overlaps many other fields than only tourism. I have tried to provide an overview of Okinawa and Okinawans in the context of history, societal issues, culture, and of course tourism. Yet, it is impossible to cover these areas in a comprehensive manner within the limits of this Master's thesis. Also, the tourism image remains limited to one official website in my analysis, which highly limits the breadth of my research materials. Despite the original plan to include several alternative tourism websites from different types of tourism actors, in the end this was not possible due to limited resources: Learning to use NVivo and analysing not only the English version, but also the Japanese version of the Be.Okinawa website required a considerable amount of time.

A second limitation is related to my position as a researcher: I am a white researcher that has spent most of my life in Northern Europe. Because we construct our understanding of the world in a historical and cultural context through language (Burr 2015, 10), my interpretation of the data and understanding of academic discussion is characterized by my Western world view. Most importantly, despite having lived two 3–5-month periods in Japan, I do not have specific connections to Okinawa and have only spent one week of vacation there years before starting my research. The COVID-19 pandemic changed my original plans of spending multiple months in Okinawa to interview the locals for my thesis, which is why I switched to using online sources as primary data. While missing an Okinawa insider view may contribute to objectivity of my research, my outsider position as a researcher may contribute to unconsciously reproducing 'the Other' view about Okinawa in this study. However, I have tried to avoid one-sided view through introducing also an Okinawan point of view by covering culture produced by Okinawans and including Okinawan scholars in my literature review.

4 Findings

In this chapter I introduce the main findings following the distinction between my two first research questions: the projected image of Okinawa as a place and the projected image of Okinawans as actors. The chapter follows Echtner's 4A approach to content analysis (2002) by applying the categorization into attractions, attributes/atmosphere, activities and actors.

Due to copyright reasons, I have not included pictures from the Be.Okinawa website.

However, I introduce the main themes in the pictures through tables that show frequencies of occurrence for code categories and include example descriptions of the pictures in a text format. When it comes to the texts of the Be.Okinawa website, the examples of them come more naturally in the form of citations and summaries. Finally, after introducing the main themes on the Be.Okinawa website via tables and descriptions, I describe the projected image of Okinawa and the projected image of Okinawans through three main themes that combine the findings from the texts and the visuals.

4.1 Okinawa: Attractions, attributes/atmosphere and activities

4.1.1 Attractions

Here I will describe Okinawa based on the attractions presented on the Be.Okinawa website: places, objects and events introduced through the texts and the visuals of the official tourism website. The main data comes from 26 English and Japanese articles on the Be.Okinawa website. The summaries of these articles can be found *Appendix 1*. This section is focused on introducing the findings about Okinawa as a place. Hence, the materials with the focus on people and their expressions are excluded here and analysed in later sections instead.

To describe Okinawa as a place, I identified 16 main themes based on the data. Table 18 shows the frequency of occurrence for each theme in three different ways: 1) article theme category: how many times a theme is present as one of the maximum two main themes assigned to each article, 2) text code category: how many text excerpts are coded under a theme, and 3) picture code category: how many times a picture is coded under a theme.

The most frequently occurring themes are nearly the same for all categories: Nature, Culture, Food and Handicrafts are found in the top five for all categories. Based on my literature review, these themes are line with the stereotypical image of Okinawa known for ocean and beaches as well as exotic culture compared to the mainland Japan. Because it can be assumed

that Okinawa Prefecture is ultimately responsible for the editorial choices of the Be.Okinawa website, these themes reflect the image that Okinawa Prefecture wants to convey of Okinawa.

Table 18. Frequency of themes in the articles, text codes and picture codes

Article theme category	Freq	Text code category	Freq	Picture code category	Freq
Nature	7	Nature	147	Nature	31
Handicrafts	6	Traditions	81	Culture	28
Culture	5	Food	80	Food	25
Food	5	Culture	78	Handicrafts	24
Sustainability	4	Handicrafts	74	Education	6
Outside connections	3	Outside connections	61	Village	5
Traditions	3	History	56	Tourism infrastructure	3
Business and economy	2	Lifestyle	48	History	2
Events	2	Sustainability	34	Outside connections	2
Village	2	Religion and spirituality	33	Sustainability	2
Education	1	Mind	31	Traditions	2
History	1	Village	25	Business and economy	1
Tourism infrastructure	1	Education	22	Events	1
Lifestyle	1	Tourism infrastructure	21	Lifestyle	1
Religion and spirituality	1	Business and economy	16	Religion and spirituality	1
Mind	0	Events	16	Mind	0

After the top four categories there is more variation when examining the frequency of categories in the article themes, texts and pictures. The ranking of the subsequent categories is not analysed here in detail because the frequencies are not directly comparable. For example, longer text excerpts (up to one paragraph) might be coded only once, which results in a lower frequency compared to coding only words or phrases; the length of the articles vary with some having 20 pictures around the same theme and others only a few; and some themes are easier to depict in pictures compared to texts or the other way round. Yet, Table 18 still provides insight into how much presence each of the themes have on the Be.Okinawa website.

4.1.2 Attributes and atmosphere

In Table 19 I introduce the most frequently used attributes related to objects and places that are shown in the pictures of the Be.Okinawa website. In total I created 22 codes inductively to describe the atmosphere of the pictures that depict objects and places. There is some overlap

between these code categories, as the same picture may be coded to several categories. Out of the 22 codes, 18 code categories are introduced in the table with the frequencies and examples. The remaining four categories (surprising, unique, social, worn-down) are omitted due to a very low frequency of less than three pictures per each category.

Table 19. Atmosphere of objects and places in the pictures

Code category	Freq	Examples
exotic	42	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tropical sea with turquoise colour and/or with coral reefs • traditional events from dancing to bullfighting • Chinese-influenced architecture • jungle-like nature • stone art and traditional pottery objects
beautiful	33	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tropical sea • green nature • Chinese-influenced distinctive architecture • handicrafts, such as stone art and mingu
traditional	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • handicrafts, such as textiles, mingu, stone art and pottery • traditional-looking buildings • black-and-white photos of the past karate masters
aesthetic	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • textiles and pottery • food arranged in a visually pleasing manner • architecture • nature theme, e.g. a forest with the sun shining between the green leaves while people in the distance are walking towards a light
natural	20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • food made of natural-looking, mainly green ingredients • handicrafts that seem to be made of natural materials with close-to-natural choice of colours
tropical paradise-like	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beach with a turquoise sea, often combined with a blue sky • coral reefs • palm trees
quiet, peaceful (not busy with people)	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty or nearly empty beaches • nature sceneries with zero or one to three people
authentic	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • empty streets from a village • quiet yards with some plant cultivation • handicrafts with long traditions, e.g. Chinese-influenced red pottery • Chinese-influenced gate at Shurijo Castle • miso-making in a traditional miso brewery
delicious	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delicious-looking food
fresh	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meals prepared from fresh-looking ingredients • food or drinks in the making, such as miso or coffee beans

Code category	Freq	Examples
mysterious	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ancient-looking building interiors • objects with characters written on them • an exciting peek through big rocks into beautiful nature
different sense of time	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • village that looks like as if time had stopped multiple decades back
top quality	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a modern building with high-quality research equipment • several exceptionally beautiful pieces of pottery
colourful	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a market with various shops that have colourful products • Chinese architecture • food with vegetables that have different colours
sense of community	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people from the villages and towns spending time together
spiritual	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • religious objects and sites
healthy	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fresh-looking food with various colourful vegetables and plants
sporty	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bullfighting arena with spectators, bulls and bull instructors • a house by the water with canoes and other water sport equipment • fitness equipment at a karate centre

Most of the attributes contribute to projecting Okinawa's image as an *exotic, tropical paradise-like* beach destination. Okinawa is also introduced as a *traditional* place with *beautiful* and *aesthetic* culture and *natural* products. *Authentic* describes Okinawa as something unique that has long, often Chinese-influenced traditions. *Quietness* guarantees that the visitors can have a peaceful get-away, while enjoying *delicious, fresh* and *natural* food.

4.1.3 Activities

Although visitors to Okinawa are not the main focus in my research, examining activities of the visitors indicate what are the typical things to do in Okinawa. Hence, Table 20 describes the actions that the visitors in Okinawa are participating in and encouraged to do based on the texts and the pictures of the Be.Okinawa website. As can be seen, the top activities based on the frequency of occurrence are again related to the earlier introduced most popular themes: Culture, Nature, Food and Handicrafts. The tourism image of Okinawa is therefore focused on these areas. In the texts the visitors are often encouraged to experience local activities in the guidance of locals who are experts about their villages and forests.

Table 20. Activities of the visitors in the texts and the pictures

Visitors' activities	Freq	Examples
experiencing local culture	26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participate in events: bullfighting tournament, sabani boat racing, local traditional rituals • handicrafts activities: visit a local textile production site, try on a kimono, admire pottery in a museum • watch Okinawan performing arts
experiencing nature	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participate in nature tours: hidden jungle tours in Yanbaru's subtropical forests, forest therapy roads, visits to the largest mangrove or the Mayagusuku waterfalls, or special activities like bird watching and canoeing • admire surrounding nature: greenery of the forests, the sunsets, impressive rocks
doing water activities	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dive or do snorkelling to see the coral reefs • paddle on kayaks on a dam • take a ride on a traditional sabani fishing boat • surf • fish
doing or getting familiar with karate	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practice karate in a karate institution that is open to all • get to know Okinawan karate at an interactive exhibition
eating	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participate in a hidden food walking tour in Naha • visit a restaurant with traditional miso in dishes
visiting local places	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participate in village tours • walk on forest therapy roads to see local sacred sites • visit a local coffee farm to harvest your own coffee and enjoy a picnic experience in a forest
interacting with the locals	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meet local and overseas karate enthusiasts • meet locals on a food tour in Naha
relaxing	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immerse yourself in the rich nature of Okinawa to get away from stressful everyday life • hang out with the local villagers and listen to their sanshin • do nothing special: be idle and look at green nature
doing yoga	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making yoga poses on a beach while looking relaxed
posing for camera	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a wedding couple on the beach • a group of karate practitioners • a calm-looking person standing still

4.2 Okinawans: Actors, attributes and activities

The Be.Okinawa website presents two different groups: 1) *long-term Okinawans* refers to local residents that were born and raised in Okinawa, and 2) *expats* are local residents that migrated to Okinawa either from the mainland Japan or abroad.

The terminology is used simply to distinguish these two groups in the findings and analysis, even though members from both groups may live in Okinawa for long-term. ‘Okinawan’ does not necessarily refer to Okinawan ethnicity or Okinawans as a people in this context. ‘Expats’ was selected because the articles usually introduce the migrant’s profession, although some of these migrants are from elsewhere in Japan instead of from abroad.

First, the blue-and-white tables introduce basic attributes of Okinawans who appear in the pictures on the Be.Okinawa website. Second, the green-and-white tables introduce only those local Okinawans who are mentioned by their name in the articles on the Be.Okinawa website. Whereas the Okinawans introduced by name usually appear in the pictures as well, the pictures may also include a collective mass of Okinawans who are not introduced in the texts in any way.

4.2.1 Actors: long-term Okinawans and expat Okinawans

This section introduces how Okinawans are depicted in the pictures on the Be.Okinawa websites. Table 21 depicts the demographics and clothing of long-term Okinawans, whereas Table 22 shows the demographics and clothing of expat Okinawans. Table 23 and Table 24 introduce the Okinawans who are mentioned in the articles by name, again divided into long-term and expat Okinawans. These tables include the demographics as well as a role or a profession and a skill or an area that the person is specialized in. There is some overlap between the pictures and the article texts: The people introduced in the articles appear often in the pictures as well. Because of this, the attributes of the people appearing multiple times may have more weight in terms of the frequency of occurrence, which somewhat distorts the overall numbers.

Table 21. Demographics and clothing of long-term Okinawans in the pictures

Ethnicity	Freq	Gender	Freq	Age	Freq	Clothes	Freq
Okinawan	41	male	31	36-59	24	normal	29
mixed	30	mixed	25	mixed	24	summer	17
Asian other	3	female	16	60-	18	traditional	14
unknown	2	unknown	3	unknown	7	other	13
white	0			16-35	2	adventure/outdoors	5
				0-15	0		

Table 22. Demographics and clothing of expat Okinawans in the pictures

Ethnicity	Freq	Gender	Freq	Age	Freq	Clothes	Freq
mixed	33	male	40	36-59	45	normal	24
white	20	female	17	mixed	16	summer	21
Asian other	18	mixed	14	16-35	10	other	18
unknown	1	unknown	0	60-	1	adventure/outdoors	9
Okinawan	0			0-15	0	traditional	0
				unknown	0		

Table 23. Long-term Okinawans mentioned by a name in the articles

Name	Occupation/Role	Speciality	Gender	Age
Akamine Hiroshi	Master of Okinawan karate	karate	Male	60-
Yamamoto Hiroaki	Divemaster & Tour guide	diving and teaching	Male	36-59
Higa-san	Veteran tour guide	nature, guiding tourists	Male	60-
Kikuta Ichiro	Artist, Tour guide & Bird enthusiast	drawing and art, guiding tourists, nature	Male	unknown
Kinjo Hifumi	Shopkeeper	shopkeeping	Female	60-
Sakuma Katsue	Herbal tea blender, Cook & Restaurant keeper	local Okinawan food and ingredients	Female	unknown
Taira Futoshi	Tour guide, Ex-village chef, Nature guide & Musician	village life, nature, music	Male	60-
Chinen Hiroe	Spiritual pathfinder	spirituality	Female	60-
Yoshihide	Villager & Sanshin player	village life, sanshin playing	Male	60-
Sayuri	Villager	village life, welcoming guests	Female	60-
Takara Kurayoshi	Historian, Ex-vice governor & Writer	history	Male	60-
Yonamine Ichiko	Museum curator & Researcher	Okinawan dyes and textiles	Female	60-
Shimabukuro Joei	Head of potter family	pottery, especially shisa lions	Male	60-
Shimabukuro Katsushi	Son of potter family	pottery, especially shisa lions	Male	36-59
Higa Ryuichi	Tea farmer	tea farming and productization	Male	36-59
Nose Kojiro	Sculptor	sculpting, concrete block art	Male	60-
Wakayama Daichi	Sculptor, studio artist	sculpting, stone carving, especially shisa lions	Male	36-59
Oshiro Yumiko	Head of miso family business	miso making, running a business	Female	36-59

Table 24. Expat Okinawans mentioned by a name in the articles

Name	Occupation/Role	Speciality	Gender	Age	Origin
James Pankiewicz	Instructor of Okinawan karate & Entrepreneur	martial arts	Male	36-59	England
Kevin Chaplin	Instructor of Okinawan karate	karate	Male	36-59	England
Daniel López	Filmmaker & Photographer	filmmaking	Male	36-59	Spain/ Switzerland
Ludo Toutou	Local Vitalization Cooperator	sustainable tourism	Male	36-59	France
Miltos Beratlis	English Teacher & Nature-Lover	English teaching, nature	Male	36-59	Greece
Maki Hayato	CEO, Surfer & Patagonia Ambassador	surfing	Male	36-59	Japan/USA
Sima Mari Asibi "Naga"	Nature and adventure tour guide	outdoor activities, canyoning and caving	Male	36-59	unknown
Mari Fujisawa	Online Marketer & Beach Cleaner	marketing, sustainability	Female	36-59	USA/Japan
Pamela Ann	Chef-owner of a Greek restaurant	cooking	Female	36-59	USA
Christal Jade Burnette	CEO/Founder of online store (Okinawan products)	e-commerce, Okinawan products	Female	16-35	USA
Koreeda Masami	Okinawan craftworks artist	Okinawan mingu textiles	Female	36-59	Japan
Suzuki Shuji	CEO of boutique shops	handicraft business, folk art distribution	Male	36-59	Japan
Takeda Makoto	Founder of Kagiishi craft speciality store	yachimun pottery, other crafts, store management	Male	60-	Japan
Tokuda Taijiro	Coffee farmer	coffee farming and productization	Male	36-59	Japan
Tokuda Yuko	Coffee farmer	coffee farming and productization	Female	36-59	Japan
Sato Noriyuki	Researcher and biologist	coral research, sea squirts research	Male	60-	Japan
Wakayama Eri	Writer, researcher, shop keeper	customer service, research about stone lions	Female	36-59	Japan
Nakanishi Takehisa	Owner of miso restaurant	miso making, restaurant business, miso sommelier	Male	36-59	Japan
Miguel Da Luz	Karate guide, staff member of karate centre	karate	Male	36-59	France

In terms of demographics, the ethnicity of long-term Okinawans is mostly Okinawan, whereas the expat Okinawans are white or Asian (other than Okinawan). 'Mixed' refers to occurrence of multiple ethnicities in the same picture: The majority of the images depict groups where the expats are usually presented together with a long-term Okinawan. Despite the long history with the U.S. bases, there are no black or latine. No one is introduced to have family or any other connection to the U.S. Americans. Similarly, no people with an Asian background other than Japanese is introduced, despite the proximity of other Asian countries.

In the pictures both long-term Okinawans and expats belong most frequently to the working age group of 36-59-year-old, although for long-term Okinawans mixed age group is equally common. However, whereas in the articles nearly all expats belong to this working age group – which further underlines their position as expats rather than regular tourists – most long-term Okinawans are part of the 60+-year-old category of 60 years or older. Either this is a conscious decision to highlight the high life expectancy of Okinawans, or a practical choice, as retirees have likely more time for interviews. High age and therefore long experience strengthen the image of long-term Okinawans as experts about Okinawan nature, traditions, community-based living and other matters. Overall, it is noteworthy that younger people are absent, even though younger people are often typical in promotional materials. Even more surprising is the absence of children, as Okinawa could be seen as a family beach destination.

For some reason the number of males in the pictures is double compared to females: Possibly the choice of activities made it easier to find male diving instructors, nature adventure guides and karate instructors, although there is no reason why it would not be possible to find female equivalents as well. In case of expats, a mix of genders is very uncommon, as this attribute had least appearances in the pictures. Instead, the pictures depict often both the local Okinawan guide and the expat who are of the same gender, such as a male guide and a male participant in a forest tour, or a female yoga instructor and female participants.

When it comes to clothing, normal cloths are seen most on both long-term Okinawans and expats. This is plausible, as people living in Okinawa are probably not wearing kariyushi shirts and other touristic clothes that could easily be recognized as typical summer clothes. However, summer clothes are nevertheless in the second place of most frequent appearance for both groups. What differentiates long-term Okinawans from expats is that long-term Okinawans are often presented doing a traditional activity and are therefore wearing traditional clothes, whereas the expats are not seen in traditional clothes at all. Instead, for

expats other clothes, such as karate outfits, research lab gowns or outdoors clothing, are common depending on the activity presented in the texts and the pictures. For long-term Okinawans these types of other clothes are equally common as traditional clothes.

Based on the activity in the picture or the profession introduced in the articles, all long-term Okinawans and many expats are specialized in the areas that have something to do with the tourist attractions in Okinawa. Instructors of karate and diving, nature guides, shop keepers, restaurant owners, potters – these areas are closely tied to what visitors to Okinawa could try out or visit and goods that they could purchase during their stay in Okinawa. These professions suggest that the people were selected to the articles with the goal of tourism promotion. However, among expats there are a few professions that require different type of expertise, such as an English teacher, a marketing expert, a researcher and a local vitalization cooperator. The variety of expertise suggests that these people were possibly selected to promote Okinawa as a potential location for other expats, not only for tourists.

4.2.2 Activities of long-term and expat Okinawans

The activities that the long-term Okinawan are engaging with in the pictures are shown in Table 25, whereas Table 26 shows the activities of the expats in the pictures. Among the most common activities for both groups are *doing sports*, *smiling and laughing*, *being close to nature*, *socializing* that refers to multiple people interacting and *posing for camera*. The main difference is that whereas doing a traditional activity is the second most frequent activity of long-term Okinawans, for the expats *traditional activities* are nearly at the bottom. The pictures of the expats engaged in traditional activities cover sailing on traditional *sabani* boats, and bullfighting or interacting with the bulls and the bull farmers. However, being part of traditional rituals and wearing traditional clothes are left to the long-term Okinawans only.

For expats enjoying nature is also seen in *admiring*. Compared to the long-term Okinawans, the expats seem to be enjoying nature as if it was rare to experience something like that. Relaxing among the expats is exclusively tied to nature, more explicitly to the beach. Having relatively few pictures about relaxing is surprising for Okinawa's beach destination status. However, usually relaxing is not the main activity, whereas the expats can still be relaxed while engaging another activity, as can be seen in the high frequency of relaxed in the attributes in the next section. The long-term Okinawans are often *eating* and *spending time as a community*, which demonstrates their traditional communal values. *Socializing* and *eating* in case of expats is again almost exclusively interaction between the expat and the local guide.

In activities like *presenting*, *showing to others* and *teaching*, the long-term Okinawans are presented in a role of experts who introduce something to others, usually the expats, who in turn have a role of a listener and learner in this activity. There are a couple of exceptions, though, where the expat is either explaining or showing something to the camera.

Table 25. Activities of long-term Okinawans in the pictures

Activity	Freq	Examples
doing sports	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diving • karate • hiking • rowing
doing a traditional activity	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drumming • fishing • rowing a boat while wearing a traditional costume
smiling, laughing	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • smiling • laughing
socializing	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eating together • engaging in an activity together • chatting with each other • facing to each other
being close to nature	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hiking in a forest • being surrounded by plants to do harvesting
posing for camera	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a portrait of the person introduced in the article • a local guide posing with an expat during an activity
presenting, showing to others	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • showing an instrument • pointing at a location in a market • explaining about local food
eating	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple people enjoying a meal, often smiling while seeming to enjoy each other's company
teaching	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a clear instructor, such as a karate teacher, or situation where hand gestures suggest that a local is explaining something either to the people behind the camera or to another person visible in the picture
spending time as a community	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people that seem to belong to the same community or group based on the perceived intimacy of the relationship, participation in the same traditional event etc.
admiring	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a local is introducing something to guests and both seem to be admiring the object, such as a special nature attraction or a traditional instrument
playing an instrument	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • playing a sanshin • playing a drum

Table 26. Activities of expat Okinawans in the pictures

Activity	Freq	Examples
being close to nature	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking, canoeing or climbing through a forest enjoying/admiring nature as if it was a rare experience trying out harvesting
doing sports	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> water sport: diving, surfing, rowing karate hiking yoga
smiling, laughing	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> smiling laughing
socializing	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> interaction between the expat and a local Okinawan chatting with each other being face to each other
eating	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> multiple people enjoying a meal, often smiling while seeming to enjoy each other's company
posing for camera	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a portrait of the person introduced in the article a local guide posing with an expat during an activity
admiring	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taking a photo of leaves taking in a view in a forest watching local things and places in an impressed manner
presenting, showing to others	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> looking at a long-term Okinawan showing something explaining about something to others
relaxing	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> being calm and relaxed while engaging in beach activities being surrounded by nature while looking relaxed
teaching	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a clear instructor, such as a karate teacher, or a situation where hand gestures suggest that an expat is explaining something to others
doing a traditional activity	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rowing a boat interacting with bull-raising family and participating in a bullfighting tournament

4.2.3 Attributes of long-term and expat Okinawans

Finally, Table 27 describes the attribute/atmosphere of the pictures with Okinawans. Unlike the demographics and the activities, the attributes and the atmosphere are overall very similar between both groups, which is why they are presented in one table. Both long-term Okinawans and expats have the same top three attributes: *focused on activity*; *happy, smiling Okinawans*; and *welcoming, warm-hearted, friendly Okinawans*. These are not very surprising considering the tourism context and the many articles where an expat tries out an activity under the guidance of a long-term Okinawan, therefore both focusing on the activity.

Table 27. Attributes of long-term Okinawans and expats in the pictures

Attribute/Atmosphere	Freq	Description/Examples
focused on activity	36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a long-term Okinawan introducing activities to expats or visitors • a long-term Okinawan engaged in a traditional activity
happy, smiling Okinawans	24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • smiling Okinawans • happy-looking Okinawans
welcoming, warm-hearted, friendly Okinawans	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a gesture or a posture that is welcoming combined with a smile
relaxed	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spending time on a boat • happy-looking Okinawans
traditional	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local elderly people in their long-sleeved clothing with a drum in their hands • several people in traditional red gowns with golden ornaments bowing in front of Shuri Castle • two karateka in a traditional-looking karate hall with pictures of kanji and a wooden shelf with some artefacts in the background
nature experts	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • locals guiding others in a forest or while canoeing • a person looking at a plant with a sense of expertise at a tea cultivation field
spiritual	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people in costumes engaging in ritual-looking festivities • two karateka looking very focused as if they were meditating before their next action

4.3 Projected image of Okinawa

This section combines the findings from the texts and the pictures from the Be.Okinawa website into three most representative themes around the image of Okinawa.

4.3.1 A tropical paradise with beaches and beautiful, yet vulnerable nature

Kühne (2012) suggests that Okinawa became known for certain “Okinawa-isms” thanks to the NHK TV drama *Churasan*, including the following attributes of a tropical paradise: “white beaches, coral reefs, the local tropical vegetation” (Kühne 2012, 219). There is no question about this: the majority of the texts and visuals on the Be.Okinawa website depict a paradise-like Okinawa with bright sun, blue sky, white and picturesque beaches, turquoise sea, and beautiful green nature. Nature is referred to as “wonderland” with “impressive scenery and precious biodiversity” where “lush green mountains rise majestically out of the water” and reefs are “home to beds of vivid coral and abundant sea life” (#01 Iriomote-Island). The lush, green nature looks extraordinarily beautiful. Based on the pictures with brilliant colours it is always sunny – even if clouds are sometimes visible, it never looks rainy.

Despite the popularity of Okinawa as a beach holiday destination, Okinawa's nature is depicted to be pristine. The meaning of this is best described by an expat Ludo, who introduces one of his diving excursion spots "as if the place was untouched by humans, and I was experiencing it all as the first person ever to have seen the corals" (#04 Curator: Ludo Touitou). In the pictures of the Be.Okinawa website it is common that the sea continues until the horizon. Neither the sea nor the beach has any people, except for occasionally one or two very relaxed tourists, who seem to have the whole beach only to themselves.

While multiple articles emphasize the large biodiversity of Okinawan flora and fauna with many of the species only found in Okinawa (e.g. #02 miyako-island, #03 yanbaru) as a positive aspect, they also remind the readers of the vulnerability of nature, such as the large but sensitive mangrove ecosystems (#03 yanbaru) and the endangered Iriomote Mountain Cat (#01 Iriomote-Island). This applies to the sea as well, as the diving instructor Yamamoto tells a very explicit reminder for divers: "You are a visitor in someone else's house, so you need to be conscious of behaving well and not touching or breaking anything. Leave the water as you found it." (#04 Curator: Ludo Touitou). The articles under Responsible Tourism provide concrete tips from carrying one's own refillable water bottle to driving carefully to avoid roadkill of animals (#01 Iriomote-Island).

The sustainability efforts related to Okinawa's coral reefs have been introduced in several articles. After all, coral reefs have an important role in the global ecosystem, yet suffer due to many environmental challenges, such as coral bleaching due to rising sea temperature (Mieda 2025a). The Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST) has already been successfully planting new coral fields that had originally disappeared due to a mass bleaching event (#04 Curator: Ludo Touitou). Now OIST is working on a research project which objective is to show where and what kinds of corals exist in Okinawa, as this would help to make a coral restoration roadmap in case of future bleaching (Mieda 2025a).

Sustainability covers also social responsibility. For example, tourists are asked to select local long-term residents who are knowledgeable about the island's unique environment and who have a harmonious relationship with nature as guides (#01 Iriomote-Island). When local festivals are introduced, the visitors are asked to show respect and avoid interrupting the sequence of the festival by keeping a certain distance (#02 miyako-island). Finally, sustainability is highlighted as a lifestyle choice by one of the expats, Mari, who is titled as

“beach cleaner” on top of her actual profession, online marketer (#07 Curator: Mari Fujisawa). Mari has picked up beach cleaning to help keep her beloved ocean cleaner (ibid.):

For my partner and I it is an opportunity to help shape our local environment and community as individuals. We consider it a form of community service, an expression of how we feel about the place we live.

The description of Mari’s sustainable lifestyle could be a source of inspiration for those who are planning to visit Okinawa to take more responsible actions during their stay.

All in all, Okinawa’s nature provides tourists with unique experiences. The visitors can discover something new and exotic that can hardly be experienced anywhere else. Offering an experience that is uniquely connected to a specific destination is an integral part of destination branding (Blain et al. 2005). Nature, from coral reefs in the ocean to waterfalls and rivers in the forests, are there for the tourist to enjoy, admire and explore in one’s own peace without any disturbing presence of other tourists. The depiction of pristine nature adds a nostalgic element to the destination image of Okinawa. However, potential visitors are reminded of their responsibility in acting in a responsible manner to maintain the biodiversity of Okinawa and to not disturb the locals’ daily life.

4.3.2 Unique culture with external historical influences and strong traditions

Based on the Be.Okinawa website, it becomes clear that culture in various forms is an integral part of Okinawa. The typical elements that are introduced as Okinawan culture are Okinawan music with sanshin, “a three-stringed instrument that is essential to Okinawan music” (Takara), as the special local instrument; eisa music and dance, and Lion Dance also referred to as *shishimai* (#02 Curator: Kevin Chaplin). The assumption seems to be that the reader is already familiar with these because there are no articles covering music or dance specifically nor description of what the Okinawan dances are like. Alternatively, it is expected that the visitor simply needs to go to Okinawa in order to learn to know them. Other commonly known Okinawan cultural elements include the alcoholic beverages sake and awamori, which are introduced as “products that represent Okinawa” (Takara) with awamori being “the drink still widely consumed in Okinawa today” (ibid.). These examples of Okinawan culture correspond well to the typical Okinawan cultural elements found based on my literature review.

The origins of the cultural elements that derive from the Ryukyu Kingdom with Chinese and other Asian influences is raised on multiple occasions. The pictures with red Chinese-influenced buildings and decorations depict the beautiful architecture of Shuri Castle while the text praises this “Ryukyuan aesthetic sensibility while incorporating Chinese and Japanese architectural culture” (Takara). Ryukyuan performing arts are told to be performed in important political instances even on the mainland Japan when the Shuri government of the Ryukyu Kingdom paid their respects to the Tokugawa Shogunate (ibid.). Overall, ‘Ryukyuan’ is often connected with beauty, aesthetics and cultural sophistication (Takara, #01 Okinawan Crafts), suggesting that Okinawan culture even today is based on a high culture with rich history. The prestige of Okinawan culture is also emphasized by introducing *gusuku*, consisting of old monuments like castle ruins and sacred sites, as UNESCO World Heritage sites (Takara).

The articles introduce also a wide variety of Okinawan handicrafts: stone art made of Ryukyu limestone (Sesoko 2025), concrete art that has roots in the post-war concrete buildings made for the U.S. soldiers (ibid.), stone lions that were originally made to protect the villages from fire (ibid.), Okinawan pottery “yachimun” (#03 Yachimun, Sesoko 2024a), and mingu craftworks that nearly vanished and is now being revived (#02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork). In addition, Okinawa has a wide variety of dyes and textiles, which large selection in a small geographical area is praised to be unique even on a global scale (#01 Okinawan Crafts).

In the pictures the craftworks are often depicted with bright, joyful colours and interesting patterns, such as asymmetrical patterns from the Ryukyu Kingdom era. Alternatively, the crafts may be in natural colours due to the use of natural materials like bamboo and hay (#01 Okinawan Crafts, #02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork) as well as artists’ inspiration from the colours of the nature (#03 Yachimun). The son of the pottery family describes his awakening to the colours of nature that he uses in his pottery work (#03 Yachimun):

When I came to Miyagi Island, I started seeing the color of nature. The green of the sugar cane fields, the color of the sky, and the color of the ocean. The rain hits the glass windows of the studio and pours down. The sun comes out and everything shines. It’s just for a moment, but it’s pretty. I started expressing the beauty of those colors in nature.

Therefore, also contemporary Okinawan handicrafts have been influenced by history and traditions as well as nature. Interestingly, the stone and concrete art is emphasized to be very

soft and even warming one's heart, despite the apparent opposite perception of these materials (Sesoko 2025).

Additionally, Okinawan culture is represented through local traditional events often tied to nature and spiritual meaning. Miyakojima is introduced as an island that offers rich culture with an ancient ceremony called *Paantu Punaha* to demolish evil spirits (#02 miyako-island). There three young men, who wear scary masks and are dressed up using products of nature – including smelly mud from a sacred pit – go around the village and bring good fortune to villagers through a swipe of mud (ibid.). The picture of these mud-covered men certainly conveys exoticism, reminding that old traditions and customs still flourish in Okinawa. On Iriomote island visitors can witness an annual fall harvest ritual, which “shows the villagers’ deep reverence for the cycle of life and veneration of sacred traditions” (#01 Iriomote-Island), whereas Ogimi village in Yanbaru has a cultural festival that has barely changed over the past 500 years (#03 yanbaru). A connection to nature and traditions is visible even in contemporary art: a nature guide is creating traditional sumi-e drawings with nature motifs on handmade Japanese paper (#03 yanbaru).

A completely different type of culture is introduced through sports: karate and bullfighting. Okinawa is said to be the birthplace of karate during the Ryukyu Kingdom, which is why karate is regarded as an essential part of Okinawan culture (#01 Curator: James Pankiewicz, Mieda 2025c). Visitors are encouraged “to discover the rich history of the art and its deep connection to the culture of these islands” by visiting karate institutions dedicated to introducing all forms of karate in Okinawa (#01 Curator: James Pankiewicz). Okinawan karate is described as “the martial art of peace” where spiritual strength may become more important than physical strength, as the idea is to avoid physical harm (#02 Curator: Kevin Chaplin, Mieda 2025c). A similar philosophy connects karate to bullfighting that used to be very popular in the rural Okinawa (#02 Curator: Kevin Chaplin). Nowadays bullfighting tournaments (bull against bull) take place in Uruma City, where according to the article bullfighting is not merely entertainment, but has become a significant part of the city's culture (ibid.).

Finally, Okinawa has a food culture that may seem exotic to the mainland Japanese and other visitors, as it has been influenced by China and other Asian nations during the Ryukyu Kingdom as well as by the U.S. military after the Second World War (#08 Curator: Pamela Ann). The pictures of food depict lots of green, fresh-looking ingredients from leaves to fried

fish and tea, which corresponds to the local, fresh ingredients provided by nature that are introduced also in the article texts (Articles #01 Food, #09 Curator: Christal Jade Burnette). Obviously, everything looks very delicious, including the haute cuisine type of small portions that are represented in a beautiful manner (Articles #01 Food, #02 miyako-island).

4.3.3 Always changing Okinawa with new sides to discover

Despite the stereotypical tropical paradise image and well-known Okinawan cultural elements strongly connected to traditions, Okinawa is also something else: There is always a chance to discover something new in Okinawa. The following text is stated on the front page of the current Japanese version of the Be.Okinawa website (Be.Okinawa Japanese front page), freely translated by me:

“Okinawa that is alive”

Beautiful sea, delicious food, a warm island nation.

When hearing “Okinawa”, you can immediately form a picture of it. However, that is wrong.

...

365 days a year, Okinawa is alive.

The Okinawa that you can discover only in that moment, once in a year, one time.

Okinawa keeps changing

...

The current main theme of the Japanese website suggests that even if one thinks that one knows Okinawa, this perception is wrong because Okinawa is always changing (Be.Okinawa Japanese front page). Therefore, the Okinawa that one visits can only be experienced once, as next time Okinawa will be different again (ibid.).

A similar message about new sides of Okinawa is repeated in several Japanese articles. An article about karate introduces facts about the origins of karate weapons and techniques from Okinawa and states that many Japanese likely hear about them now for the first time (Mieda 2025c). The article introducing Kagiishi craft specialty store begins by stating that it does not look that much different than other souvenir shops located on the popular shopping street Kokusai Dori in Naha – yet when stepping in, one will discover a world of Okinawan folk art (Sesoko 2024a). This could be a metaphor about Okinawa as a tourist destination: it is always

possible to discover new sides of Okinawa, no matter how familiar it already seems. The message is suitable for the mainland Japanese audience known as repeat visitors (Okinawa Prefecture 2020), encouraging them to visit Okinawa again and at different times of the year.

Although the comparison of English and Japanese version of the Be.Okinawa website is not in the focus of my research, the aspect of always changing Okinawa is something specific to the Japanese edition only. This fact demonstrates that the two website language versions have different content due to different target audiences: Japanese visitors are likely to be repeat visitors, or at least already have a certain perceived image of Okinawa in their minds as potential visitors, whereas the more international English-speaking audience are presented with a more stereotypical Okinawa.

4.4 Projected image of Okinawans

This section combines the findings from the texts and the pictures from the Be.Okinawa website into three most representative themes around the image of Okinawans.

4.4.1 Community-based lifestyle with traditions, nature and spiritualism

For visitors, the villages in Okinawa are like a mirror to the past world that seem to have a different sense of time: a community-based life that is strongly connected to nature and spiritualism. This lifestyle enables the residents – both long-term Okinawans who were born and raised in Okinawa as well as expats – to lead a more authentic life that is in tune with their own values (#03 Curator: Daniel López) and who they really are (#09 Curator: Christal Jade Burnette). The tightly knit communities are maintained through the act of sharing food and eating (Articles #01 Food). The slower pace of life ensures that family members have more time for each other (#07 Curator: Mari Fujisawa, #04 Curator: Ludo Touitou), whereas the proximity of nature, such as forests with calming sounds, offers a way to relax one's mind and forget the everyday stress (#03 yanbaru, #03 Curator: Daniel López). This idealized lifestyle shows a longing to the past times as the opposite of today's busy, individual-centred lifestyle. Okinawa is therefore the place where the Japanese longing for nostalgia can find the good old traditional values and style of life, which Kühne (2012) describes to be part of Okinawa's typical attributes in its tourism narrative.

At first glance Okinawa is described as very tradition-heavy, which fits well into the typical image of Okinawa with its culture deriving from the Ryukyu Kingdom. Traditions are

presented as customs, skills and events that are passed down from one generation to another and cover a wide range of different areas: bull raising and bullfighting, mingu craftwork creation, traditional sabani boat making and sailing, and pottery making, for example. While preserving and maintaining traditions from harvesting festivals to pottery-making traditions seems very important to the locals (Articles #03 community, #03 Yachimun), the communities are also evolving, such as new generations of family businesses adapting their business model to remain relevant in the modern world (Mieda 2024).

Overall, old myths and beliefs are still visible in the everyday life. For example, according to an old myth, the Asumui mountain is the birthplace of the Ryukyu Islands and considered as a deity (Articles #02 faith). In traditional events, nature-related spiritual objects are present, such as the decorations in a bullfighting arena that are believed to keep bad spirits away and bring good luck (#02 Curator: Kevin Chaplin). On the other hand, these kinds of objects are seen in traditional events held elsewhere in Japan as well. However, what is known as more unique to Okinawa, is veneration of ancestors that is presented as “the core of Okinawan faiths” (Articles #02 faith). A spiritual pathfinder from a local Okinawan village in Yanbaru explains that Okinawans consider their ancestors as “gods” to whom they can speak and make small requests, as the ancestors’ spirits are always present and watching over their descendants (ibid.). By introducing Okinawan mythology and everyday presence of ancestors’ spirits, the Be.Okinawa website adds a layer of mystification to Okinawans’ lifestyle.

In addition to customs, nature and spiritualism, food is an integral part of traditional life in Okinawan villages. Food contributes to people’s well-being as social glue and connects people to the cycles of nature. In traditional villages people cultivate their own vegetables and fruits to receive seasonal products that are shared within the community: “If you give your friend some dragon fruits from your garden, they might turn them into smoothies and give it back to you.” (Articles #01 Food). Sharing food is “the secret to true well-being”, whereas eating “connects us to nature and strengthens bonds between people” (ibid.). Healthy Okinawan food consisting of many fresh ingredients from nature is described as one of the Okinawans’ secrets to a long, healthy life (#09 Curator: Christal Jade Burnette).

Visitors can receive a glimpse into these good old times when escaping their own modern, busy life on their holiday in Okinawa. One option presented on the Be.Okinawa website is visiting a local Okinawan community, such as a village in Yanbaru with only 26 residents who are happy about the revival of their traditional events thanks to a tourist organization

(Articles #03 community). Visitors can also try out various activities in Okinawa, such as experience the relaxing influence of nature through hikes or sailing, practise karate that develops one's body and mind (#01 Curator: James Pankiewicz), or do yoga on beach that "captures the union of mind, body, and nature" (#07 Curator: Mari Fujisawa).

4.4.2 Top researchers and innovative business minds of a modern economy

To balance the touristic image of traditional Okinawa with beautiful nature, Okinawa is also represented as a modern economy with top researchers and locals with innovative business ideas. In the field of research, OIST stands for Okinawan Institute of Science and Technology that is a government-led private graduate university with a huge campus on Okinawa, including a Nobel prize winner and state-of-the-art research equipment (Mieda 2025a). In the lead of Professor Satou, originally from the mainland Japan, OIST was the first research institute in the world to decode the genome of coral (ibid.). This and the future coral related research projects help people in Okinawa to take more concrete measures for coral conservation to build a more sustainable environment.

People are one of the keys in the flourishing Okinawan businesses: the success is attributed to collaboration and mutual support within the Okinawan industry, high-quality products as well as the innovative approach of the business owners. Okinawan coffee is gaining popularity thanks to excellent coffee baristas and roasters in Okinawa (Mieda 2024), whereas the Kanigawa Seicha tea farm is turning its high-quality specialty black tea into new products with the help of ideas from local Okinawan chefs (ibid.). Despite the traditions of a multi-generation family business, the businesses have also adapted their product selection to the needs of the modern world. The now fourth-generation Kanigawa Seicha farm tried out black tea in addition to the traditional green tea, eventually dropping green tea completely from its production (Mieda 2024). In a similar manner, a traditional miso business dropped soy sauce from the product selection as unprofitable, deciding to focus fully on its miso that has maintained the original, unique taste since the end of the Ryukyu Kingdom (Mieda 2025b).

Despite Okinawa struggling with the highest unemployment of all prefectures among the youth based on the data from 2022 (e-Stat), the situation is not visible on the Be.Okinawa website. This is quite understandable, as the touristic image is usually only connected with positive attributes. Instead, one of the articles even describes an innovative approach of the CEO who has handicrafts boutique shops in Okinawa: Suzuki is organizing workshops for craft creators that help them make a living (#02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork). According to

him, not having to worry about money allows creators to focus on creating, which helps to pass down Okinawan craftwork culture (ibid.). Suzuki is not only contributing to individual artists' livelihood, but inventing ways to maintain traditions in the modern world.

4.4.3 Okinawans as a bridge to the world throughout history

Okinawa has not only been passively absorbing influences from others, as described in the previous sections. Instead, it has had an active role as a bridge between nations. Already in 1458, the Ryukyu Kingdom had announced its importance as a trading nation between Asian nations: "We, the Ryukyu, use boats to act as the bridge for Asia" (Takara). In the contemporary world this is visible in the context of karate: A karate instructor James opened a karate place that "became a bridge between locals and people from overseas", connecting visitors with the local experts in martial arts (#01 Curator: James Pankiewicz). The idea of Okinawa as a bridge to the world has remained until today, as this image has been promoted even by the Okinawan prefectural government (Arakaki 2002, 131). Hence, it is natural to find this narrative from the Be.Okinawa website that is affiliated with Okinawa Prefecture.

On a more local scale, the articles of Be.Okinawa describe encounters between the locals and the visitors. Local people from the villages enjoy meeting visitors who bring joy to the villagers that in turn provide local food and play sanshin to delight the visitors (Articles #03 community). Even the guides, *sherpas*, have established a close relationship with the locals and bring *ikigai*, joy of life, into the villagers' daily life (ibid.). In addition to face-to-face encounters, the contact between the locals and the visitors can take place in the online world: Through online lessons, karate teachers in Okinawa have a chance to learn from the international audience (#01 Curator: James Pankiewicz). Okinawa's role as a bridge between nations and cultures is thus reciprocal.

Finally, people in Okinawa are eager to make Okinawan culture known outside of Okinawa. This is especially important to both local long-term Okinawans and expat Okinawans creating crafts. The son of the pottery family is glad about the continuation of traditions on Okinawa and would be happy to "start delivering messages to the world from Okinawa" by introducing these traditions to people visiting Okinawa (#03 Yachimun). An expat, who is known as a film director, is described to work "as a bridge to invite the world to learn and understand the culture and traditions of Okinawa through his art" (#04 Curator: Ludo Touitou). Just like in the Ryukyu Kingdom times, it seems that people in Okinawa continue to be proud of their culture and feel important that the whole world would learn to know it better.

5 Discussion

In this chapter I analyse the findings as part of wider Okinawa discussion introduced in the literature review: the image of Okinawa and Okinawans throughout history with various external influences, during the Okinawa boom and through culture produced by Okinawans.

5.1 Projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans

5.1.1 Stereotypical Okinawa with a new, modern twist

At first glance the projected image of Okinawa on the Be.Okinawa website remains very stereotypical. Okinawa is represented as something that has been the objective of the Okinawan tourism industry since the 1960s: Japan's Hawaii through a tropical paradise tourism image (Figal 2008, Tada 2015). Nature – white sand, turquoise sea, lush greenery and the sun – is the most common theme in the texts and the pictures of the Be.Okinawa website. Idealized Okinawan nature known from the Okinawa boom (Hein 2010, 183) is seen in the form of pristine, beautiful green areas and exotic jungles where visitors can engage in activities like hiking and canoeing. Nature is also depicted as an environment for relaxation and healing, especially for people originally outside of Okinawa. This representation is similar to Kühne's (2012) observations about Okinawa's image during the Okinawa boom.

Not surprisingly, the second most important focus in the image of Okinawa is culture: traditional festivals, eisa dance, sanshin music, handicrafts such as textiles, and shisa lions were identified as typical forms of Okinawan culture already in the literature review. The introduction of various traditional festivals connected to ancient beliefs and old Okinawan mythologies contribute to presenting Okinawa as 'the exotic other'. Many studies about Okinawa's cultural and tourism image have criticized this kind of Okinawa's representation as "the Other" or "different" (Hein 2010, Ko 2010, Kühne 2012). Yet, for Okinawa Prefecture, which is affiliated with the Be.Okinawa website and therefore part of creating the projected image, exoticism seems to be only a positive attribute. After all, an exotic image contributes to differentiating Okinawa from other tourist destinations of Japan to avoid the modern challenge of becoming part of the homogenic mass (Zins & Lin 2016).

Finally, in several articles Okinawa is presented in a new and modern light: It has top-notch research with very modern research equipment even in global comparison as well as interesting business opportunities. This side of Okinawa is in stark contrast with the heavy

emphasis on the rural community-based life of the Be.Okinawa website that is more typical for the nostalgic representation of Okinawa (Hein 2010, Kühne 2012). In fact, it seems that the traditional and modern sides of Okinawa are connected according to the Be.Okinawa representation: the flourishing high-end coffee, tea and miso business in Okinawa is attributed to well-functioning collaboration within the networks of the industry. The importance of networks and mutual support suggests that the idea of community bonds is something that extends to the more modern world as well. Overall, Okinawa Prefecture is not only strengthening the stereotypes through the Be.Okinawa website but also fighting them to present new sides of Okinawa that are not commonly known. The message of always changing Okinawa on the Japanese Be.Okinawa website brings something fresh to the tourism image of Okinawa targeted to the Japanese audience. Yet, the English website introduces a more traditional and stereotypical Okinawa.

5.1.2 Expert Okinawans with an idealized, traditional lifestyle

Whereas in the past Okinawans have been regarded as backward with an inferior status compared to the Japanese (Siddle 1998, 127-131), the image of Okinawans projected on the Be.Okinawa tourism website is obviously mostly positive. Most importantly, despite the big proportion of smiling, laughing and gentle-looking Okinawans in the pictures, Okinawans are not merely represented as statisticians whose only purpose is to entertain visitors in the tropical paradise tourism land. Instead, Okinawans are local experts who can share their valuable knowledge from local ecosystems to spiritual guidance with visitors. Many of them have skills to produce high-quality goods both with traditional and more modern techniques. They are business-savvy, successful entrepreneurs who navigate effectively in the modern business environment. Representing Okinawans as skilled experts is important for balancing the rather one-sided view of Okinawans through the Okinawa boom: gentle, laid-back and fun people that enjoy singing and dancing (Hook & Siddle 2003, 23; Hein 2010, 182-183; Ko 2006, 15).

On the other hand, the image of Okinawans on the Be.Okinawa website often still reproduces the nostalgic, traditional version of Okinawa: Especially the long-term Okinawans, who are assumedly born and raised in Okinawa, are mostly introduced in the context of community-based life in small villages, participating in traditional activities or engaging in traditional craftsmanship. The representation of a traditional lifestyle is supported by a notable number of elderly people in the pictures and multiple long-term family businesses introduced in the articles. Interestingly, the expat Okinawans that have moved from abroad or elsewhere from

Japan belong mainly to the working-age group and represent a larger variety of professions more typical to the modern world. Unlike long-term Okinawans, the expat Okinawans are barely depicted in traditional clothing or activities. The difference between these two groups indicates that long-term Okinawans are more traditional compared to other people, although generally the representations of these both groups of Okinawans are positive.

Okinawans are pictured to live a life that other people are searching for in their nostalgia – the good things already lost elsewhere in Japan, yet still accessible in the more traditional Okinawa (Kühne 2012). The expats that now live in Okinawa are telling how living at a slower pace allows them more time with family (#07 Curator: Mari Fujisawa, #04 Curator: Ludo Touitou) and enables a more authentic lifestyle according to one's own values (#03 Curator: Daniel López). Longing for a slower, community-based and more natural lifestyle is a modern repercussion of heritage tourism where traditions and community ties were idealized and regarded as the real Japan (Funck & Cooper 2013, 90). What used to be considered somewhat backward, is now a popular trend projected on the official tourism website. Describing this lifestyle on the Be.Okinawa website is a promise of what visitors could get during their visit to Okinawa: a mini experience of a life that is more relaxing, connected to nature and allows more time for essential people like family.

Lastly, Okinawans are presented as people who have connected Okinawa to the outside world since the Ryukyu Kingdom trade until contemporary international karate connections. This image of Okinawans as a bridge to the world matches with the already existing narrative of Okinawans that was even produced by Okinawa Prefecture already earlier (Arakaki 2012, 130). The narrative is perfect for the tourism context: it indicates that Okinawa and Okinawans have 'always' been open to other cultures, which can be considered a welcoming gesture towards tourists and potential new residents from other cultures and countries. Of course, in this narrative it is not questioned how voluntarily Okinawans have been accepting the foreign rulers and hence the impact of new cultures on their own life throughout the history.

5.1.3 Neglected sides of Okinawa and Okinawans

The majority of the negative issues related to Okinawa remain hidden in the tourism narrative on the Be.Okinawa website. The ones exceptionally mentioned are politically relatively safe topics: bleaching of coral reefs, environmental damage related to overtourism and endangered species (Mieda 2025a, #03 yanbaru). All of these are caused by phenomena like climate

change and tourism that are universal issues. Raising environmental and social responsibility could therefore be a positive attribute of Okinawa's tourism image, showing that Okinawan tourism industry considers the surrounding ecosystem and society. However, politically more sensitive environmental issues caused by the U.S. bases are apparently not part of the acceptable issues that are safe to raise in the tourism narrative. As an example, the construction of the new Henoko base with its environmental impact on the already endangered dugong species (Tanji 2008) is fully absent. Yet, the Be.Okinawa website introduces ways to avoid roadkill of an endangered Iriomote mountain cat (#01 Iriomote-Island) and the coral-preserving research and actions of Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (Mieda 2025a). This representation of an environmentally friendly tourism Okinawa is somewhat in conflict with the real Okinawa.

The neglected issues in the projected image of Okinawa are politically more sensitive: there is nearly no mention of the Battle of Okinawa, the existence of the U.S. bases, the history of the U.S. occupation or the poor economic situation with high youth unemployment. These are the “inconvenient topics” that also Hein (2010, 199) noted to be absent from the mass media narrative of Okinawa. However, for Okinawans themselves these topics seem to be important, as many of them are often raised through culture produced by Okinawans (e.g. Roberson 2001, Hein 2010, Cho 2015). On the Be.Okinawa website the U.S. related topics are mentioned only few times in a very neutral tone in the context of food influences (#08 Curator: Pamela Ann), the origins of concrete block architecture (Sesoko 2025), and the ways how karate spread throughout the world (Mieda 2025c). In addition, the bombing and the devastation of Shuri or Shurijo Castle is mentioned in two occasions (Mieda 2025b, Takara). However, the emphasis is on the destruction of the buildings, whereas the loss of human lives during the Second World War is not mentioned in any way.

While the mixed culture of Okinawa due to various cultural influences from abroad is presented in a positive light, the negative flipside of Okinawans as “a people bridging the world” (Arakaki 2012, 130) is not considered. Hosting the U.S. bases and being a popular tourist destination means that Okinawa is especially sensitive to the impact of wars, pandemics and other similar global events, as covered in the annual Tourism Overview of Okinawa (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). In a way Okinawa acts as a modern buffer: It takes the heaviest toll of the negative consequences of global events instead of the mainland Japan, acting as a buffer in a similar manner as during the Battle of Okinawa (Ueunten 2008, 163).

Leaving these negative issues out of the tourism narrative likely has multiple reasons. Firstly, the objective of destination marketing is to attract visitors to the destination (Pike & Page 2014, 204). Because of this the image projected in the tourism context is expected to be mainly positive. Secondly, there could be a political agenda involved: Tanaka (2003) has criticized that the Japanese government and Okinawa have tried to reconstruct Okinawa's narrative by organizing events like Ocean Expo and G8 summit after politically sensitive periods in Okinawa. Part of the reason to avoid politically sensitive issues could therefore be related to Okinawa Prefecture's willingness to maintain good relations with the government of Japan and the U.S. After all, Okinawa is also dependent on the subsidies provided by the government of Japan (McCormack 2003, 107). Thirdly, a major reason for hiding negative issues is simply the fact that tourism is business. Emphasizing dangers brought by the U.S. bases, for example, could potentially scare tourists away. This has already happened after the 9/11 in 2001 when specific campaigns were required to attract tourists back to Okinawa (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). However, while keeping the dangers out of sight in the tourism narrative of the Be.Okinawa website, the reality still remains that Okinawans living in Okinawa must deal with the environmental, economic and societal issues in their daily lives.

Finally, one more important aspect of Okinawans remains hidden on the Be.Okinawa website: the plurality of Okinawan identity in contrast to a single Okinawan identity in the media (Hein 2010, 199) and its local, national and transnational levels (Roberson 2001, 234). The strong historical influence of China during the Ryukyu Kingdom and contemporary international influences through, for example, connections to the international karate community are well presented in the projected image of the Okinawans. Still, the mixed champuru identity that reflects internal diversity of Okinawa and its differences to the mainland Japan (Roberson 2001, 271) is not addressed clearly. Okinawans are presented more as stereotypical mass rather than people with diverse cultural backgrounds. Even among the expat Okinawans no one has an Asian background other than Japanese. The only aspect which omission is justified are the overseas Okinawan communities. The purpose of Okinawa's tourism image is to bring visitors to Okinawa rather than introduce Okinawans and Okinawan diaspora residing elsewhere.

5.2 Tourism image in the historical, sociopolitical and cultural context

The discussion in this section addresses my third research question about how the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans based on the Be.Okinawa website are positioned in the

context of historical, sociopolitical, cultural and tourism narratives of Okinawa. The first section focuses on historical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts, whereas the following two sections include also the tourism angle.

5.2.1 Significance of ‘culture’ for Okinawans throughout history

According to constructionist view of this thesis (Iwashita 2003, 333), history and culture are in a significant role when an image of Okinawa is constructed, be it a projected image in tourism or a perception of one’s identity as an Okinawan. By choosing several examples related to culture, this section discusses the importance of culture to Okinawans and how it may be linked to historical and sociopolitical context.

Beauty, aesthetic sensibility and sophistication of Okinawan culture are an essential part of the narrative around Okinawan culture on the Be.Okinawa website (Takara). These qualities are attributed to the rich history of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which indicates that Okinawans have been a culturally civilised people already for centuries. The strong emphasis on cultural sophistication in the projected image may suggest that Okinawans to date are still struggling to prove their worthiness in the eyes of others, or at least think that they need to prove something due to historical reasons. After all, the Japanization program imposed on Okinawans during the Meiji Restoration aimed at suppressing Okinawan traditions that were considered “backwards and inferior to those of the Japanese” (Cho 2020, 282). Highlighting Okinawa’s cultural sophistication on the Be.Okinawa website could be an attempt to demonstrate that Okinawans or Okinawan culture are not inferior to Japanese, but rather on the contrary due to the long history with rich culture.

However, more cultural credibility does not necessarily lead to more political credibility. In the article about the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom and Shurijo Castle on the Be.Okinawa website, Takara tells an anecdote about the Ryukyuan: The Ryukyuan used to travel to Edo to showcase their cultural sophistication to the Tokugawa Shogunate by performing and watching Ryukyuan performing arts (Takara). Yet, eventually the Ryukyu Kingdom with its people were annexed to Japan and considered inferior compared to the rest of the Japanese people despite having a long history of ‘sophisticated’ Ryukyuan culture. The anecdote is like a metaphor of the 21st century: Anti-base activist Okinawans have been struggling to prove to the Japanese state – which political lead is located in Tokyo, known before as Edo – that the new Henoko base for the U.S. marine would contribute to a significant environmental damage in Okinawa (Tanji 2008). Similarly to the Ryukyuan, the contemporary Okinawans did not

manage to reach their political goal in this matter, as the land reclamation work for the Henoko base is already underway (EDITORIAL: Henoko base plan remains mired in a quicksand of serious problems 2024). If ‘sophisticated culture’ did not make a difference in Okinawans’ position when the Ryukyu islands were annexed to Japan as Okinawa Prefecture, would it help Okinawans to advance their sociopolitical and environmental agenda today?

The examples of Okinawan culture introduced in the chapter 2.3 show that culture is very important to Okinawans. For example, the study about the Okinawan cultural activist group suggests that cultural activities are a way how Okinawans can reflect and reconnect with their Okinawan identity (Cho 2015, 165-168). The Okinawans introduced on the Be.Okinawa website are similarly proud of their culture as the Ryukyuan people earlier, as shown through the eagerness of an Okinawan potter and an expat film director to introduce Okinawan culture and traditions abroad (#03 Yachimun, #04 Curator: Ludo Touitou). The discourses around *reviving, preserving and maintaining traditions* in multiple articles demonstrate that cultural traditions are a significant part of Okinawans’ daily life. To keep the traditions alive in the future, some people living in Okinawa are even ready to *break the traditions*: Koreeda, originally from mainland Japan, is using unconventional materials in creating mingu crafts to make it more appealing to the modern taste (#02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork).

Therefore, while the popularity of Okinawan culture in the media and tourism may not bring more political power to Okinawans, one should not underestimate the meaning of culture to Okinawan people. The Be.Okinawa website projects an image of Okinawans as people who are proud of their unique culture that has long roots in the Ryukyu Kingdom. This narrative of Okinawans indicates a continuum to Murray’s (2012, 15) suggestion that “cultural authenticity, exoticized otherness, and regional pride” are important themes in Okinawa’s political history and tourism representation. Hence, also Murray acknowledges the connection between history, politics, tourism and culture in a similar manner as social constructionism keeps social interactions, historical and cultural contexts inseparable (Iwashita 2003, 333). Culture is therefore one of the important elements when Okinawans are constructing their identity and negotiating their membership in the imagined community of Okinawans.

5.2.2 Rippling soft tourism image of Okinawa and the actors behind it

Hein’s (2010) criticism about soft sell related to constructions of Okinawa in the mainstream Japanese media is valid also in the tourism context. When nearly all problematic issues have been neglected on the Be.Okinawa website, the remaining projected image of Okinawa is very

soft – so soft that even Okinawan artists’ concrete blocks are described to “give an aura of rippling softness” and stone lions “have soft expressions and create an atmosphere that warms your heart” (Sesoko 2025). Although the Be.Okinawa website is affiliated with Okinawa Prefecture, the projected image is not too much different from the positive image of Okinawa created by the media during the Okinawa boom. Despite some fresh exceptions related to Okinawan business and research, the majority of long-term Okinawans introduced are elderly people whose life revolves around their community, nature and traditional festivals that are tied to ancient myths and beliefs. All of this reminds of the spiritual and wise Okinawan grandmothers from the Okinawa drama *Churasan* in the 2000s (Kühne 2012).

However, interestingly Okinawan tourism industry itself has been the main actor in constructing the Hawaii-like tropical paradise image of Okinawa with exotic characteristics already since the 1960s (Figal 2008, Tada 2015). Many of the typical Okinawan elements highlighted during the Okinawa boom, such as beaches with white sand and Okinawan music with eisa dance (Kühne 2012), were reproductions of this already existing touristic image of Okinawa. The fact that Okinawa itself has contributed to the construction of this exotic image of Okinawa makes claims about Kühne’s (2012) “neo-imperial gaze” interesting: If the image was originally created by Okinawa, criticism towards other actors – such as media – for seeing Okinawa and Okinawans through the lens of ‘Otherness’ is less justified.

It is important to question who exactly is ‘Okinawa’ and which actors belong to ‘Okinawan tourism industry’ that are comfortable with reproducing the stereotypical positive image of Okinawa. After all, Okinawan tourism business has also been characterized by considerable involvement from the mainland Japan ever since a tourism expert from Japan was hired to make Okinawa a successful tourist destination in the 1960s (Figal 2008, 89-90). In the context of my research, the official projected image of Okinawa can be assumed to come from Okinawa Prefecture and the Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau (OCVB), who therefore represent ‘Okinawa’ and ‘Okinawan tourism industry’. Hence, the official Be.Okinawa website is assumed to project the image of Okinawa and Okinawans that Okinawa as a prefectural government and its associated organizations want to convey to the world.

It needs to be remembered that Okinawa Prefecture and OCVB alone cannot fully control destination image of Okinawa, as there are also many other stakeholders that participate in destination image creation (Pike & Page 2014). For destination marketing organizations

reproducing an already established destination image is an easy choice, as usually destination marketing organizations aim for a consistent destination image (Blain et al. 2005, 337). Hence, without coordinated actions it would be difficult for Okinawa Prefecture to start changing the established image of Okinawa considerably, as other stakeholders from TV to newspapers, tourism providers in Okinawa and local people also contribute to the construction of destination image. Yet, as Okinawa Prefecture and OCVB have prefecture-level resources to conduct marketing activities for the projected image of Okinawa, it can be questioned how much space remains for alternative constructions of ‘Okinawa’ and ‘Okinawans’. The next section discusses individual Okinawans’ role in this.

5.2.3 Sense of place: Inclusion of Okinawans in the tourism narrative construction?

Whereas Okinawa Prefecture and OCVB are responsible for the official projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans, it is important to evaluate this image also from the perspective of ordinary Okinawan residents. The image of Okinawa produced through tourism and the Okinawa boom has two sides: The new positive image has provided Okinawans an opportunity to be freely who they are and to renegotiate their past experiences as Okinawans (Cho 2015). This progress is positive compared to the time when Okinawans had to hide their culture because of external pressure in the 19th and 20th century (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012, 3; Allen 2009, 188). On the other hand, the critics claim that the positive image of Okinawa is hiding sociopolitical issues and making Okinawans change their representation to a touristic, self-orientalist image (Figal 2008, Tanaka 2003). Therefore, the positive image does not fully represent actual Okinawa, such as take the sociopolitical and economic situation of Okinawa into consideration.

However, Okinawans lack a channel to directly impact their own representation in the official tourism narrative. In comparison to the power of Okinawa Prefecture and the Japanese media, the possibilities for individual Okinawans to influence their construction at a larger scale seem quite small. One way to do this could be strengthening the *sense of place* approach by García-Hernández & Garay-Tamajón (2022) on the Be.Okinawa website and in other official tourism marketing channels. The current Be.Okinawa website already introduces several dozens of Okinawan people and their lifestyles in Okinawa as well as encourages tourists to choose local guides when visiting Okinawa. Yet, Okinawa Prefecture and OCVB could include even more local voices in the promotion and facilitate encounters between the locals and visitors in a more structured manner according to the sense of place construction (García-Hernández &

Garay-Tamajón 2022). For example, ordinary Okinawans could introduce locations and things in Okinawa that are important to them on the website, telling what kind of a role those have in their life as well as Okinawan history and culture in general.

Involving more Okinawans in the construction of Okinawa's *sense of place* could have multiple benefits. Firstly, it would address the issue of lacking plurality in the representation of Okinawans and bring complexity to the representation of Okinawa, as Hein (2010) had criticized the media narrative of Okinawa. Okinawans with different backgrounds and from various parts of Okinawa, including cities, could introduce variations of Okinawan culture, traditions and lifestyles in general. Secondly, the approach could help protect Okinawan natural and cultural heritage (García-Hernández & Garay-Tamajón 2022). If Okinawans were more involved in planning tourism activities in their local environment and possibly even accompanying tourists, they could raise awareness about vulnerable aspects of their locality or plan activities without compromising their own social and natural environment. Thirdly, a stronger relationship between the locals, tourists and Okinawa as a place would likely benefit tourism business as well. For example, having locals introducing new sides of Okinawa would contribute to keeping the place interesting enough for further visits. This way Okinawa could attract more repeat visitors from Japan, contributing to the already existing repeat visitor trend (Okinawa Prefecture 2020).

Whether Okinawa Prefecture would allow its residents more control over the narrative of Okinawa and Okinawans through sense of place strategy remains questionable. Despite the positive sides of better representation of Okinawan plurality, raised awareness of social and environmental issues and potentially increasing number of repeat visitors, the new narrative could bring more "inconvenient topics" (Hein 2010, 199) to light. As the coverage of Okinawan history in this thesis demonstrates, politics and international relations have been inseparable in the matters of Okinawa throughout times. Highlighting historical and current tensions between Okinawa and mainland Japan as well as the negative consequences of the U.S. bases might be less desirable in the wider sociopolitical context of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, for example. Therefore, even Okinawa Prefecture needs to be mindful of what kind of a presentation of Okinawa and Okinawans it is allowed to convey. Yet, the eagerness of Okinawans to introduce their culture the world based on the Be.Okinawa website suggests that the representation of Okinawa would remain mostly positive even with an increased inclusion of Okinawans in the tourism narrative of Okinawa.

Finally, it needs to be remembered that the projected image presented by prefecture-level actors like Okinawa Prefecture and OCVB is only one side of the destination image according to both social constructionist world view and destination image theories. Tourists form their own *perceived destination image* only partly based on the official projected image (Gunn 1972; see Hunter 2012), whereas the rest is their subjective evaluations and opinions (Hunter 2012) based on information from other sources. As the Okinawa boom demonstrates, also media has a big role in constructing an image of Okinawa and Okinawans. How media chooses to present Okinawa may not be aligned with the tourism image projected by Okinawa Prefecture: Even if ordinary Okinawans were more involved in the construction of the tourism narrative of Okinawa together with Okinawa Prefecture, the media might not pick up the whole story. While the sense of place approach could present a more multifaceted image of Okinawa, it may only have a limited impact on the mainstream image of Okinawa and Okinawans among the Japanese through media. Therefore, one actor like Okinawa Prefecture can never fully control the representation of Okinawa and Okinawans.

6 Conclusion

This Master's thesis has analysed the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans in the context of tourism. Based on a qualitative content analysis of the official Be.Okinawa tourism website it was concluded that the image of Okinawa and Okinawans is mainly stereotypical. Okinawa is presented through its tropical paradise-like nature, unique culture and communities where mostly elderly Okinawans lead an idealized, traditional lifestyle. These same elements were already present in the image of Okinawa through the Okinawa boom in the 1990s and 2000s (Kühne 2012). Additionally, Okinawans are seen as a bridge to the world between Japan and the rest of the world, similarly to the previously existing narrative of Okinawa Prefecture (Arakaki 2012, 130). However, there is also a modern side of Okinawa and Okinawans: expert Okinawans are innovative business-minded people in a modern, changing Okinawa with top-notch research and unexpected things to discover. This narrative of modern Okinawa can be seen as a counterforce to the historical narrative of backward Okinawans (Siddle 1998, 127-131).

Nevertheless, the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans is stereotypical also in the sense that nearly all negative and politically sensitive issues have been neglected. This is not surprising, as the media representation of Okinawa during the Okinawa boom has been criticized for focusing only on the positive aspects while hiding negative sociopolitical issues in Okinawa (e.g. Tanaka 2003, Hein 2010, Kühne 2012). The positive representation of Okinawa in the tourism context is understandable, as the goal of Okinawa Prefecture is to attract more tourists rather than scare them away, as has already happened in the past due to global events impacting negatively on Okinawa (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). Still, the image is one-sided because the plurality of Okinawa with different variations of Okinawan culture and various ways of Okinawan lifestyle is barely covered at all.

To overcome these shortages in the representation of Okinawa and Okinawans on the Be.Okinawa website, I have suggested that Okinawa Prefecture could apply sense of place approach introduced by García-Hernández and Garay-Tamajón (2022). To create a deeper sense of place for Okinawa, ordinary Okinawans should be provided with a bigger role in the construction of the image of Okinawa both through the promotional materials and real-life encounters between Okinawans and visitors. The sense of place strategy could have multiple benefits: increased plurality of Okinawan representation, better consideration of social and natural environment in tourism according to the sense of place principles (García-Hernández

& Garay-Tamajón 2022), and more repeat visitors from mainland Japan thanks to the new, interesting sides of Okinawa presented by the locals.

Overall, this study about the projected image of Okinawa and Okinawans has contributed to Okinawa and destination image research in several ways. First, it has been demonstrated that studying contemporary images of Okinawa and Okinawans is nearly impossible without placing the images in a historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context. Even when studying the images of Okinawa and Okinawans in tourism, the meaning of these images would remain quite superficial if they were only analysed within the context of tourism. According to Burr's (2015, 5) perception of social constructionism, various constructions of the world reveal also surrounding power relations. Therefore, in case of Okinawa it is important to analyse how historical and contemporary power relations, such as the U.S.-Japan security alliance, may impact the representation of Okinawa and Okinawans today.

Second, it was concluded that also tourism image of Okinawa reproduces the positive narrative of Okinawa: The strong emphasis on paradise-like nature, exotic culture, and traditional community-based life is already familiar from the Okinawa boom. While this positive narrative, criticized as superficial soft sell (Hein 2010), has reduced historical social stigma attached to Okinawans (Cho 2015) and contributed to Okinawa's popularity, it may also divert attention away from sensitive sociopolitical issues (Tanaka 2003, 429). Therefore, despite the perceived positivity of this representation of Okinawa, soft sell is unlikely to bring any true political power to Okinawans that would help them to solve sociopolitical and environmental issues on the islands. However, a positive image is naturally likely to attract more visitors to Okinawa. Because of this Okinawa Prefecture is assumedly comfortable with such a positive representation of Okinawa, as it is politically safe.

Thirdly, the discussion concluded that despite its official position, Okinawa Prefecture is not the only actor that constructs tourism image of Okinawa and Okinawans. This notion is in line with the common understanding that destination marketing organisation cannot control the destination image alone (Pike & Page 2014, 216). Even if Okinawa Prefecture aimed at constructing a different type of image of Okinawa and Okinawans – possibly one that considers sociopolitical and environmental issues more accurately – this representation might receive only limited attention if it was not conveyed to the general public by the media. Therefore, while Okinawa Prefecture's projection of Okinawa and Okinawans may be limited by the existing power relations, Okinawa Prefecture would also be unable to change and

reconstruct Okinawa's image on its own. After all, perceived image by tourists is always affected by their own evaluations and opinions about a destination, in addition to the official sources of information (Hunter 2012).

Finally, it needs to be remembered one single image of Okinawa and Okinawans does not exist, but people's perceptions are always constructed in the historical and cultural context (Iwashita 2003, 333). Throughout history, the image of Okinawa and Okinawans has been constructed in many ways. Each of these narratives present one side of historical and contemporary Okinawans: proud and sophisticated Ryukyans as a bridge to Asia and victimized Ryukyans during the dual subordination of the Ryukyu Kingdom; gentle and laid-back Okinawans who like singing and dancing; oppressed Okinawans during the Japanization program imposed on them and educated Okinawans with better economic chances through assimilation to the Japanese; sacrificed Okinawans in the Battle of Okinawa; exotic Okinawans who happily welcome tourists and politically active Okinawans who resist the U.S. bases; diverse Okinawans with overseas Okinawan communities; wise and spiritual Okinawans who know the cycles of nature and business-minded Okinawans who are adapting their family businesses into the modern world.

Constructions of Okinawans are as multitude as there are historical and political interpretations, different variations of Okinawan culture and, most importantly, individual people who regard themselves as Okinawans – each in their own way.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Summaries of the main articles on the Be.Okinawa website

Table 28. Summaries of the English Be.Okinawa articles

#	Article	Summary
1	Articles #01 Food	Food brings authentic encounters and connects people in a small village called Hedo in Yanbaru. A local cooperative store reopens every evening only for the sake of social gathering. Cultivating vegetables and fruits and sharing them fresh within the community are also common practices.
2	Articles #02 faith	Okinawa has preserved the tradition of honoring nature and ancestors. Futoshi Taira, born and raised in Hedo village, guides visitors through spiritual sites closely connected to nature on a village tour. Veneration of ancestors and worship of nature are the core of Okinawan faiths even today.
3	Articles #03 community	In a small village in Yanbaru there is an organization that connects visitors and locals through guides, sherpas. The villagers are happy to interact with visitors who may see spontaneous sanshin performances and receive fresh food. The organization has provided new purpose of living, ikigai, to the villagers.
4	#01 Iriomote- Island	Iriomote island is known for its outstanding nature. Its 2,500 residents live in villages at a relaxed pace in a harmonious relationship with nature, still celebrating traditional harvest festivals. When visiting Iriomote, one needs to be considerate to respect the local life and contribute to sustainability.
5	#02 miyako- island	Miyako Island has clear coastal waters with vivid gradients of blue, white sand beaches and the largest coral reef of Okinawa. The island also offers rich culture in the form of ancient ceremonies. As the island is vulnerable to climate change, the local government has created a sustainability strategy 2.0.
6	#03 yanbaru	Yanbaru represents the geological history of the Ryukyu Archipelago with its limestone sea cliffs, karst landforms and mangrove forests. For local inhabitants it is a place of abundant resources and a home to spirits. They celebrate local harvest festivals, while pioneering in eco-tourism due to a threat of overtourism.
7	#01 Curator James Pankiewicz	Okinawa is the birthplace of karate. Many foreigners want to visit it to deepen their knowledge about karate. James, a karate teacher, is building a bridge between Okinawans and foreigners who have karate as the common interest.
8	#02 Curator Kevin Chaplin	Uruma City holds bullfighting tournaments (bull against bull) that were traditionally popular in rural Okinawa. Kevin, a karate teacher, discusses bullfighting with the local Kochi family and finds common elements between bullfighting and karate. He's also very impressed about the passion of this multi-generation bull raiser family.
9	#03 Curator Daniel López	Okinawan fishermen used to build and ride traditional Sabani fishing boats until the war. In 2000s the Sabani boat building and sailing tradition has been revived through Sabani races. Daniel praises the sense of gratitude to sea and nature as well as the generosity of the local people on Okinawa.

#	Article	Summary
10	#04 Curator Ludo Touitou	Okinawa is an exceptionally good destination for diving, as it has diverse corals and multiple dive spots in the same area. Ludo is thrilled about spotting turtles during his dive thanks to the knowledgeable guide. He enjoys slower life on Okinawa, and both works and volunteers in sustainability projects.
11	#05 Curator Miltos Beratlis	Yanbaru National Park with its mountains, sea and various water areas is home to many animals and plants found only there. In the beautiful nature Milton forgot the sense of time and felt his soul refreshed after absorbing wisdom of the forest.
12	#06 Curator Hayato Maki	Iriomote Island is 90% covered by subtropical jungles, including also mangroves and nearly 40 rivers. Hayato, a professional surfer, moved to Okinawa because of its seas and nature. On a demanding trek to Mayagusuku Falls, he felt so much energy from the jungle with still untouched nature.
13	#07 Curator Mari Fujisawa	Beach yoga reflects well Okinawan values of harmony and peace. Beach is also an integral part of Mari's "ocean-friendly lifestyle": She collects rubbish from the beach in her free time. As a digital marketer and an ex-digital nomad, Mari now enjoys being close to nature and a more relaxed pace of life on Okinawa.
14	#08 Curator Pamela Ann	A famous Okinawan dish "Champuru" refers to "mixed" ingredients. It reflects also Okinawa's mixed cultural influences. Pamela, a cook with a Greek restaurant, compares Okinawa to Greece with both having a healthy and laid-back lifestyle by the sea with friendly locals.
15	#09 Curator Christal Jade Burnette	Yanbaru nature provides many healthy products from organic vegetables, fruits, spices, honey, seafood and stock farm products. Okinawa is known as an island of longevity thanks to its residents' healthy diet and lifestyle. Christal, a CEO of an e-commerce, feels healthier physically and mentally due to her relaxed lifestyle on Okinawa.
16	Takara: History	A historian Dr. Takara explains Okinawan history from the Ryukyu Kingdom – known then as "golden age of maritime trade" acting as a trade hub for many Asian countries with many cultural influences – to Okinawa Prefecture of Japan. He also introduces Shurijo Castle, one of the five Okinawan castle ruins with an UNESCO heritage site status.
17	#01 Okinawan Crafts	Ms. Yonamine is an expert of Okinawan dyes and textiles. Okinawa has exceptionally rich and wide variety of dyed textiles in a limited area. Beauty was considered important in the Ryukyu Kingdom. Visitors can learn about textile production processes and buy small items.
18	#02 Okinawa's Mingu Craftwork	Okinawan mingu craftwork – making everyday necessities of local ingredients – tradition is revived as contemporary craftworks. Koreeda from mainland Japan uses her outsider perspective to break traditions when creating mingu. Suzuki is a CEO of handicraft boutique shops and advances creators' economic situation.
19	#03 Yachimun	"Yachimun" is Okinawan for pottery. The Shimabukuro family is one of the traditional potter families from Tsuboya. The father Joei creates large shisha lions. The son Katsushi also creates pottery and hopes that pottery traditions will be passed on also in the future. Both talk about their ways of creating pottery art.

Table 29. Summaries of the Japanese Be.Okinawa articles

#	Article	Summary
20	Sesoko 2024a: #01	A regular tourist shop at a first glance, Kagiishi, has in fact a wide range of Okinawan pottery ("yachimun") from affordable shisa lions to high quality collector pieces. The history of yachimun dates back over 600 years with Chinese roots. Today yachimun is an integral part of Okinawan culture and local tradition.
21	Sesoko 2024b: #02	Haarii is a traditional boat race from over 600 years ago, praying for safety at the sea and abundant bounties. The haarii events around Okinawa have distinctive features, but usually also include food stalls and socializing among the locals. Visitors can feel Okinawan culture and history and get a glimpse into the daily life of sea-loving Okinawans.
22	Mieda 2024: #03	High-quality coffee and award-winning black tea are now cultivated in Okinawa. This is thanks to the pioneers who have had the courage to experiment with new types of cultivation and production methods, as well as their effective collaboration with others in the industry, such as chefs and roasters.
23	Mieda 2025a: #04	OIST, a government-led private graduate university, is a top-ranking research institution in Okinawa. With the lead of Professor Sato, it was the first in the world to decode the genome of coral. The future goals of OIST are researching the diversity of corals in Okinawa and scientifically prove corals' contribution to biodiversity.
24	Sesoko 2025: #05	Ryukyu limestone and concrete are widely integrated into the Okinawan landscape. Nose creates public art from concrete blocks familiar from his childhood. De-jin makes stone lions: also the traditional shisa lions, known as village protectors, were made of stone.
25	Mieda 2025b: #06	Tamanaha Miso Soy Sauce's "Ocho Miso" has kept its recipe and taste for about 165 years. The brewery used to produce soy sauce and miso for the royal family in the Ryukyu Kingdom. Now it is still going strong with miso thanks to loyal fans of their taste and the recent popularity of Japanese cuisine and fermentation culture.
26	Mieda 2025c: #07	Okinawa is the birthplace of karate and therefore visited by many karate enthusiasts from abroad. Karate Kaikan acts as a bridge between visitors and Okinawan dojos. Everyone is welcome despite their country of origin or the style of karate. The purpose of karate is to avoid conflicts by practicing one's body and mind.