



Takarajima: A Treasured Island Exogeneity, folkloric identity and local branding

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Received 15 October 2013; revised 25 March 2014; accepted 27 March 2014
Available online 22 May 2014

KEYWORDS

Takarajima;
Exogeneity;
Folklore;
Identity;
Local branding;
Captain Kidd;
Treasure hunting

Abstract This article examines the manner in which local identity can be constructed on small islands from the selective prioritisation and elaboration of exogenous elements that become localised by this process and can subsequently function as a brand within contemporary tourism markets. The particular analysis of identity motifs on Takarajima island that we expound examines aspects of the relationships between folklore and contemporary media and references contemporary debates concerning archaeology's interface with folklore and popular culture in the context of (non-scientific) 'treasure hunting'.

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Introduction

Takarajima is the southernmost island of the sparsely populated Tokara group of islands that stretches between the Amami islands, to the south, and Satsunan islands, to the north. The population of the island has declined significantly over the last sixty years from a peak of around 560 in the mid-1950s and now numbers around 115 on an island of about 7 square kilometres.¹ In this article we consider aspects of the

culture and folklore of the island, the prominence accorded to exogenous elements in this and the manner in which local identity – or, at least, the local identity that islanders currently chose to represent to outsiders – manifests itself in the early 21st Century. Much research on island cultures is premised, to varying extents, on perceived indigeneity, specific local character and/or and localising enterprises as the defining aspects of local identity. At its worst, this can lead to a romanticism and/or exoticisation of 'island difference'. This chapter provides an alternative perspective by examining a contemporary island society – and its various folkloric inscriptions – that emphasises exogeneity as a defining attribute of its history. While Takarajima is not unique in this regard, such an emphasis on exogenous elements and events as (interrelated) historical/folkloric 'pivots' and contemporary identity markers merits discussion and merits the island's placement in a spectrum of identities that is often perceived within a more restricted bandwidth.

Along with folklore, archaeology offers an important perspective on island histories and, fittingly in this regard, discussion of the relationship between folklore and archaeology

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Peer review under responsibility of Mokpo National University.



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¹ The earliest population figure available for the island is 352 in 1884 (aggregated with the population of nearby Kodakarajima (*Toshima-sonshi*, 2005: 785).

(as separate but intersecting evidential accounts of the past) has been a minor current in the latter discipline over the last two decades (as evidenced by the contributors to Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf's anthology *Archaeology and Folklore*, first published in 1999 and re-published in a second edition in 2012). John Collis's contribution to the anthology is particularly pertinent to the subject of this chapter through its consideration of the relationship between archaeology and popular culture. One of his main concerns is to consider the manner in which "popular beliefs, including folklore" have entered into archaeology "at a number of different levels"; variously forming the basis of paradigms, providing "parallel interpretations" or, most troublingly for him, providing "ideas which are completely antithetic" to the discipline (1999: 126). Whilst acknowledging that archaeologists "cannot pretend we are some sort of neutral arbiter without our own cultural baggage and without our own ideology" (*ibid*); he noted that reconciliation between the folkloric (and other popular cultural fields) and archaeology is not always possible; before asserting that "dialogue with those holding different views and approaches can enrich our presentations of the past" (*ibid*). Underlying his discussion is an unease about the impact of archaeology on the folkloric/popular histories of communities, especially when archaeological evidence and interpretation function to debunk or diminish prominent local beliefs in past events and/or myths of origin. Pointing to the manner in which contemporary popular culture often tends to selectively interpret and represent aspects of folklore in order to provide representations of the past (which, in turn create a new contemporary folkloric 'layer' with a sometimes disjunctive fit with its predecessors); Collis identifies that:

The distinction between folklore and popular culture thus becomes muddled. Those transmitting the oral tradition may not be aware of the origin of what they are assuming to be some sort of accepted truth (*ibid*: 128).

Collis's ruminations are relevant for our discussion with regard to two 'muddles' concerning Takarajima. The first is the interrelation of local folklore and popular culture and the infusion of the former by elements of the latter. The second is more oblique and concerns the problematic *absence* of unambiguous archaeological evidence to support various folkloric accounts of local history and – simultaneously – the prominence of hidden, lost and/or concealed material artifacts as key elements of the identity narrative of Takarajima's contemporary society. The majority of our discussions in this chapter weave their way through the relationship between artifacts and the artifice of folkloric memory re-inscribed, re-interpreted and reconstituted by popular culture and made manifest in contemporary treasure hunting practices (despite the lack of any archaeological evidence to encourage the activity).

Locale, history and lore

While archaeological evidence suggests that the present-day island of Tokara was inhabited around 5000 years ago during the Jomon (Neolithic) period,² when sea levels were lower and the land area of the Tokara and Amami islands was more

extensive; it is unclear whether habitation of the islands has been continuous since then. The earliest written records of any detail are those compiled by the Satsuma officials who were sent to the region during the Shimazu clan's expansion from Kyushu southwards in the mid-late 1500s but reference to the population of Takarajima date back to around 700 AD. This date is significant as the local population currently has a distinct account, 'folkloric perception' and/or 'myth of origins' that identifies the current population as descended from the Heike (also known as Taira) clan of main-island Japanese samurai who fled south through Kyushu and the Tokara archipelago³ in the late 1100s after being defeated by a rival clan in a naval battle in 1185. The historical veracity of their *being* such a clan and of their being defeated is well established. What is open to question however is the particular account that identifies that they relocated to Takarajima (and/or perhaps, some other of the Tokara, Amami and Okinawa islands). The reason for this uncertainty is that information is taken from a famous Japanese saga *Heike Monogatari* ('The Tale of the Heike'). This saga is not so much a measured historical account as an impressionistic narrative that may – at least in the version that exists today – have been serially embellished and adapted; since prior to its first written versions it comprised an oral tale that was disseminated and historically perpetuated by itinerant *biwa* (Japanese lute) playing bards known as *biwa hōshi*. The written version most commonly used as a basis for modern reproductions of the text was compiled in 1371, close to 200 years after the actual events occurred.

Given that archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the northern Ryukyu region (comprising the present day aggregations of Okinawa, Amami and Tokara) shared a distinct and viable culture – known as Ryukyu Jomon – in the period between c5000 BC and AD 900 (Ito, 2005) and that an active network of inter-island trading of *kamuiyaki* stoneware was evident in the period between 1000 and 1300 AD (Pearson, 2007); it seems likely that Takarajima (of all the Tokara islands) might well have been inhabited at the time of the alleged Heike arrival, since it has fresh water, areas of relatively flat arable land and abundant marine food resources close to shore. This raises various questions. Even if we take the arrival of the Heike on Takarajima in the late 1100s as a historical fact, several issues and ambiguities occur. The first is that if the island was inhabited, what happened to the populace when the Heike arrived? Were they entirely displaced? Or killed? These scenarios are possible but somewhat unlikely as the samurai were, by definition, samurai (rather than farmers or fishers) and would presumably have needed some support (or at least training and knowledge transfer) to survive in their new location. So, again, speculating, it is likely that under scrutiny the local 'foundation myth' might at least need modification to identify the origin of the present-day community and cultural identity of Takara as that of a combination of Heike and pre-existent Takarajimans. (And here we are putting 'on hold' the question of whether any Heike did in fact arrive and/or whether it may have only been a few stragglers) (Fig. 1).

Whatever the nature of the origins of the present-day Takarajiman community, its minimal contemporary inter-connection with Amami is striking. Linguistically – and with specific regard to dialect patterns that have progressively

² See Kumamoto Daigaku Koukogaku Kenkyu-shitsu (1994), Ito (2003) and Pearson (2007) for further discussion.

³ And, in some accounts on to the southern Ryukyu islands.

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