

SHARDS OF THE SHATTERED JAPANESE EMPIRE THAT FOUND THEMSELVES AS TEMPORARY MICRONATIONS

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Abstract

In this short research note, I present a couple of instances in the 20th Century when some Japanese islands temporarily became tiny independent political entities not because of a conscious push to make them so, but because the islands went overlooked in the midst of international political maneuvering. In a manner of speaking, the islands were small and insignificant (and, being islands, not part of mainland Japan) isolated enough that when world leaders drew broad sets of lines on a map, it was easy to overlook the fact these islands had fallen through the cracks.

Keywords

Micronations, Japan, Bonin/Ogasawara, Izu islands

Accidental Micronationality

As the introduction to island micronations elsewhere in this issue outlines, these quasi-autonomous entities have been established for a variety of reasons, most of which are either commercial (aiming to avoid taxation and/or other restrictions on enterprise) or else political, intended to variously establish 'utopias' and/or refuges or else to make a specific political point. By contrast, there are incidences whereby micronationality can be created by accident, the examples below being cases in point.

a. The Bonin/Ogasawara Islands

Unoccupied until the mid-1800s, the Bonin Islands were initially peopled by settlers from various Western (including US and English) and Pacific Island cultures before being taken over by Japan in the 1870s. The descendents of the original settlers took Japanese citizenship and acquired the language whilst retaining their separate linguistic and cultural identity. During World War II all civilian islanders were evacuated to mainland Japan and after the war only the (so-called) 'Western' islanders were allowed by US Naval administrators to return to their island. The USA may well have intended to keep the islands free of any civilian population (as is still the case with neighboring Iwō-jima) in order to make their activities less hindered. But the 'Westerners' living on the Japanese mainland had experienced racial bigotry during their one year evacuation there and petitioned the Navy to let them return home. For the almost quarter century until the islands returned to Japanese administration in 1968, over a hundred and

Long – Shards of the Shattered Japanese Empire

islanders lived with a few dozen Navy men and their families. (Further historical information is included in Long 2007 and Eldridge 2003.) At no time from 1946 to 1968 were the islands ever declared a sovereign nation but neither were they considered part of either the United States or Japan. When islanders petitioned the island Navy commander to let them travel off the island (to go to Guam, for example), they were provided with a passport-like photo ID card which listed 'Chichi-jima' in the space for 'nationality'. (Further discussions of this topic and a copy of this ID can be seen in Chapman and Long, 2012 and in Chapman, 2011).

A five man Bonin Islands Council was established. Members were selected by adult islanders and the president of the Council was chosen by its members. We do not have a complete list of the Council presidents but piecing together information from US Navy documents and interviews with islanders, we know at least of the following, Clark Gonzales 1946-1948, Jerry Savory 1953, Richard Washington 1956, Jerry Savory 1958, Raymond Savory c. 1965, Kazuo Komata 1968. While it would be ludicrous to place their leaders on the same level as heads of state, neither can anyone claim that these men had to answer to any higher authority, except for their ill-defined relationships to the island's US Navy commander. In these senses, the Bonin Islands could be seen as a micronation (population less than 200) for a quarter of a century in the latter 20th Century, not by design as is the case with other places termed 'micronations' but rather because a quirk of history.

Does this status of the Bonin Islands have any significant relevance for historians or is a just an interesting piece of trivia? I offer one piece of evidence to support the former view. In December 1999, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* ran a cover story entitled 'Where the nukes were' (Norris, Arkin and Burr 1999) analyzing documents newly declassified at the time relating to the post-war locations of US nuclear weapons. This publication is not an obscure newsletter; it is the magazine that originated and maintains the infamous 'Doomsday clock' that, since 1947, has calibrated the perceived danger of worldwide nuclear war. In spite of the declassification of the document as a whole, there were still parts that were blacked out for various political reasons. The article stated its one weakness thus: "The names of 18 other locations were blacked out, but because the list is alphabetical it is not terribly difficult to identify them – with the exception of one mystery country listed between Canada and Cuba." (ibid. 26-27). Historians worldwide pored over the documents but could not figure out what "country" this could be. To make a long story short, it was "Chichi-jima" (the only occupied Bonin Island at the time). This discovery warranted a second cover story "Still mad about the Nukes/ How much did Japan know?" (Norris, Arkin and Burr 2000: 11-13, 78-79). It even triggered a reconsideration of whether the information for a country beginning with "I" was indeed that of "Iceland"; it turned out to be "Iwō-jima", the island chain south of the Bonins. Thus whether one bothered to consider Chichi-jima a "country" or not was the key factor in solving this puzzle about 20th Century world history.

Long – Shards of the Shattered Japanese Empire

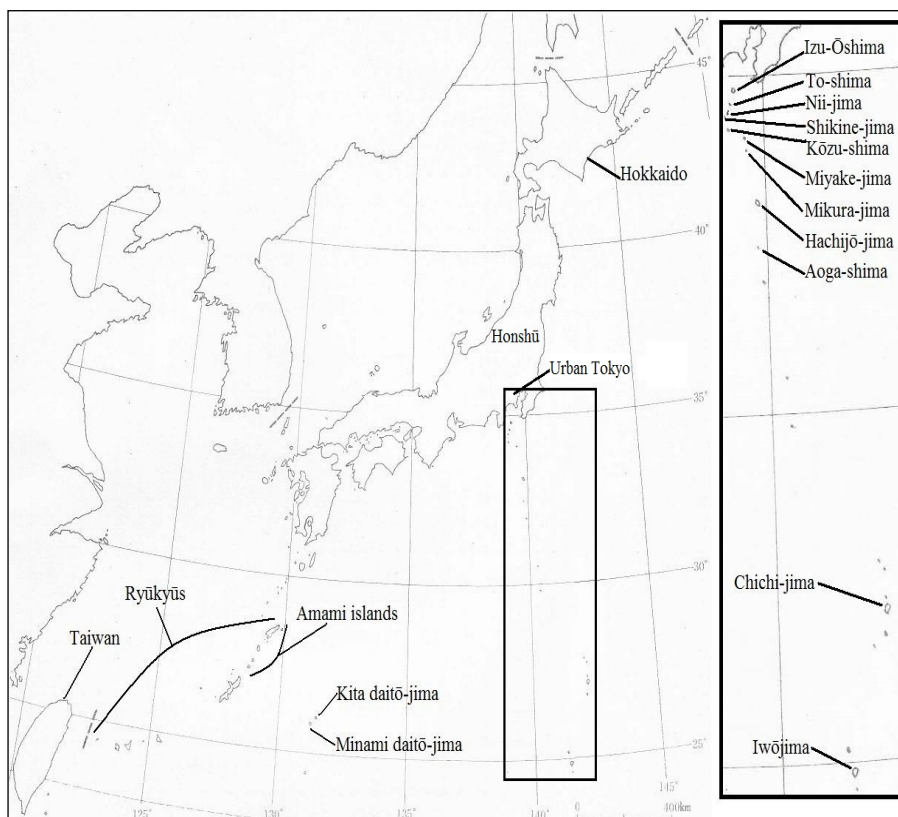


Figure 1 - location of temporary micronational islands discussed in article

b. Iwo-Jima

The second examples occur in the Izu archipelago. In January 1946, the archipelago's main island, Izu-Oshima found that the ruling American army had politically separated it from mainland Japan. This may seem strange but the Japanese had acquired a huge, sprawling empire over a period of many years and the aim of the American military was to beat Japan back to its former borders within the 'home islands' and to separate from Japan those lands which had been acquired in the colonialist expansion years. But it was by no means a clear-cut decision where to draw the line between the 'home islands' and the colonies. Japan had taken the Philippines and Guam only years before during the War; those were not part of Japan. Japan had acquired Saipan and Palau in 1914, Korea in 1910 and Taiwan in 1898; those were not part of Japan. But Japan had acquired the Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands in the 1870s; Japan had toppled the Ryūkyūan government by arresting the Okinawan king in 1879. Were those parts of Japan or colonies? It was not until the seventeen and eighteen hundreds that the Japanese mounted their political conquest of the island of Hokkaido. The Amami islands had only been conquered by Japan in 1609. For that matter, the entire northern half of the main Japanese island of Honshū (the region known as Tōhoku) had not come under Japanese control until the 9th Century. I mention all this, because a knowledge of this history makes it less surprising that a degree of arbitrariness was involved when the US military

Long – Shards of the Shattered Japanese Empire

General Headquarters (GHQ) ended up inadvertently lopping off Izu-Ōshima and several other islands in the process of attempting to separate the historical possessions of Japan from its more recently acquired territories like the Ryūkyūs and Ogasawara. Although the division was considered an oversight that needed to be resolved, many islanders realized, and understandably so, that it was nonetheless a temporary reality that had to be faced.

Izu-Ōshima was not the only island affected by the GHQ's decision. Ōshima is the first of a chain of islands that includes To-shima, Nii-jima, Shikine-jima, Kōzu-shima, Miyake-jima, Mikura-jima, Hachijō-jima and Aoga-shima (see Figure 1). In an excellent paper based on not only written records but interviews with islanders, scholar Yukihiro Enosawa (2013) reveals that the reactions to the news varied greatly from one island to the next. On Shikine, the lack of verifiable information meant that the news was treated as nothing more than a rumour. On To-shima, islanders planned to actively protest for their return to Japan. On Hachijō, a small group advocated for independence from Japan but were looked upon as eccentrics. (Hachijō's geographical distance from mainland Japan has historically resulted in independent developments in cultural aspects like language, and its islanders have carried their culture to other islands like the Bonins, Daitō-jima, Saipan and Palau as well.ⁱ

On Miyake there were islanders who supported independence from Japan and established an island governing committee toward that end. Although they did not oppose Japanese rule per se, they realised that mainland Japan was going to be ruled by US overlords for the foreseeable future, and viewed autonomy as a possible way to avoid such US military domination (Enosawa, 2013).

On Izu-Ōshima, the largest island in the Izu Islands chain and also the closest to mainland Japan, islanders took it upon themselves to draft the *Ōshima Kenshō*. *Kenshō* is the same word used to translate terms like the *Magna Carta* and the *United Nations Charter*, so this is translatable as the *Ōshima Charter*. The Charter was written by a carpenter named Seijiro Amamiya and his friends, a group that had managed to avoid being arrested under the pre-War series of laws enacted to suppress political dissent collectively known as the 'Public Security Preservation Laws'. The document includes the *Ōshima Oath*, which resolves, "to protect and promote the peace and well-being of islanders". Article One states that, "the sovereignty lies resides in the islanders". The GHQ realized its oversight and on March 22, restored the island to Japan. Nonetheless, for 53 days it had existed as the Republic of Izu-Ōshima (*Izu-Ōshima Kyōwa-Koku*). While the official validity of such a nation-state name is not verifiable in any real sense, neither can anyone dispute the facts of the situation; that some such autonomous political entity existed outside the realm of the Japanese (or any other) government during this period of almost two months.

Endnote

ⁱ See Hayward and Long (2013) for a discussion of Hachijō's acquisition of Minami Daito as (effectively) a plantation colony and of the US occupying force's role in decolonising it and giving equal citizenship rights to Okinawan workforce.

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