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Okinawan Coral Politics, Henoko Base Construction and a Japanese Political Strategy of Ignorance

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Abstract: *On July 28, 2021, Okinawa Prefecture's governor authorised coral transplantation at the construction site of the controversial Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) in Henoko. Two days later, he revoked this authorisation. The coral have become a contested political issue, linked to the larger conflict between the Japanese government and Okinawa Prefecture. Diving into the waters of Ōura Bay and the history of the base issue, this article explores how Japanese authorities have ignored Okinawan protest, science, and the life of other species during the construction. This political strategy of ignorance aims at frustrating opposition and framing the FRF as inevitable.*

Keywords*: Okinawa, Henoko, Ōura Bay, Coral, Dugong, Protest, Ignorance*

"As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before … Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality (Gan et al. 2017: G6)."

The Coral of Ōura Bay

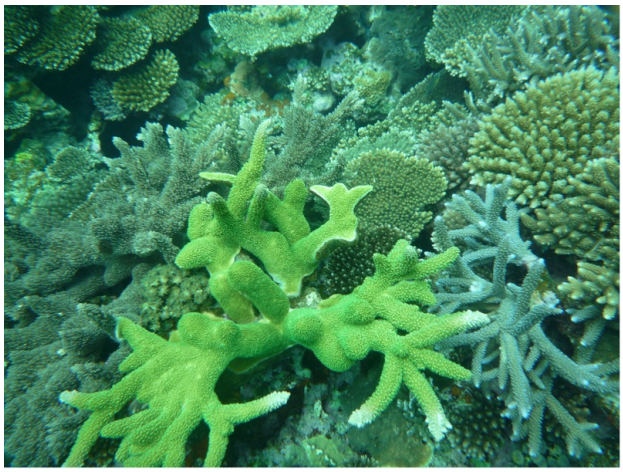
It is hard to describe the feelings one has when first seeing the coral of Ōura Bay. Looking down from the railing of a boat, they are covered by a turquoise veil of shimmering waves, blurring the different species into one. It is beautiful, but it makes it difficult to envision what it really looks like down there. To get a real understanding you need to jump into those turquoise waters. So let's jump in and dive down!

**Coral of Ōura Bay close to the construction site.
Seen from above, their diversity is hard to grasp, © Palz 2021.**

Beneath the surface, a new colour spectrum discloses itself in front of your eyes. Different shades of blue remain the dominant colour, but the coral also form a mix of greens, yellows and

even reds stretching their arms in all directions or forming cloud-like structures, some larger than a small car. Others form round tables, big enough for sea turtles to take refuge beneath. Different species of *Achropora*, *Poritidae* and *Montipora* form the dominant coral in this part of Ōura Bay, but there are places where much rarer species such as blue coral (*Heliopora coerulea*) grow as well. Fish in shimmering silver, orange and purple chase each other, others barely move, hiding in this forest of colours. Blue parrotfish are crunching on the coral beneath you. A black and white striped sea snake winds itself to the surface and goes down again, disappearing in one of the many cracks and holes. Where coral thrive, other species do too. Jumping into Ōura Bay is like jumping onto a painter's palette, one in which the colours are filled with life.

It is not just the richness of coral that makes Ōura Bay ecologically significant. It also brings together many other environmental features, such as mangrove forests, tidal flats, sandy beaches, and waters up to thirty meters deep. With over 5,300 different species, including 263 endangered ones, the Bay is a hotspot of biodiversity (Okinawa Prefectural Government Washington D.C. Office). Some of these species have only been confirmed in the bay, such as small crabs (*Paralbunea takedai*) and shrimp (*Rayllianassa rudisculcus*) (Daibingu chīmu snakku snafukin 2015: 113). Also, the critically endangered Okinawan dugong, a charismatic marine mammal, used to visit the bay in the past although recently there have been no confirmed sightings.



Lively coral in the northern part of Ōura Bay, © Palz 2021.
Diving down makes one realise the richness of Okinawan waters.

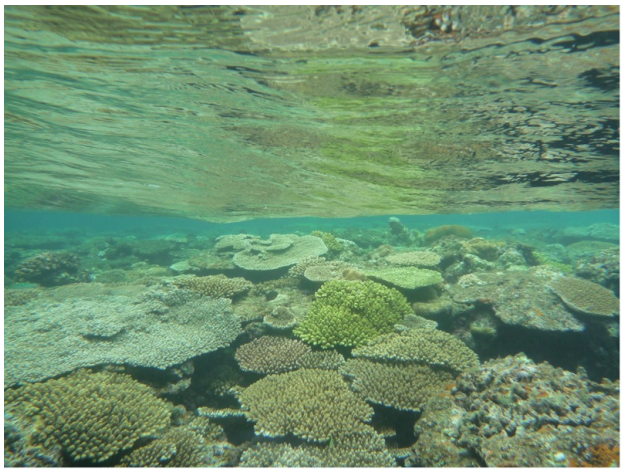
I had come to Okinawa as an anthropologist researching the changing relationship between the Okinawan dugong and the human inhabitants of the Ryūkyū Islands. Living in Ōura Village, I not only swam in the waters of the bay, but I also interviewed many of its (human) inhabitants and scholars regarding questions of environmental change. In the last decade, the largest of these changes has been the construction of a new military base known as the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) in the waters of Henoko Village. The new base is supposed to replace the dangerous Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, situated in the densely populated city of Ginowan, where noisy helicopters and accident prone MV-22 Osprey aircraft fly over apartment blocks, universities and elementary schools on a daily basis, often ignoring night flight curfews or even causing accidents.[1] The Government of Japan insists that adjoining the FRF to existing Camp Schwab in Henoko is the only solution for closing the base in Futenma. However, for many Okinawans — including the current Prefectural Government — the construction of

the FRF at Henoko is intolerable, not just because it destroys the precious and unique marine life of Ōura Bay but also because the new base would imprint the American military presence onto Okinawa for decades to come. A finished base in Henoko would also mean that large military vessels could enter the deep waters of the bay. This would be an upgrade to the current air station in Futenma, which is lacking access to the sea.

To make all this happen the waters around Henoko have to be land filled. Waters similar to those we explored in the opening section. Enclosed by a floating line of orange buoys, the construction site itself is off limits. Nobody except personnel authorized by the Okinawan Defense Bureau (ODB) is allowed to dive where landfill is being planned. Although much soil has been dumped into the ocean already, there is still a lot of work to be done. According to the *Okinawa Times*, only around 5% of landfill work has been completed by April 2021 (Okinawa taimusu 2021). On the northern side of the construction site, where the sea floor has been found to be as soft as "mayonnaise" (see Lummis 2018), it remains to be seen whether the project is even possible. What is certain is that construction would be lengthy, costly and destructive. Here, where construction has not yet commenced, that colourful coral is still alive.

Although my academic focus is not coral per se, as a fundamental part of the ecosystem of Ōura Bay, coral was ever-present during my research. In 1962 and 1969 the coral reef of Ōura Bay was blasted, to enable military drills (Ryūkyū Asahi Broadcasting & Norimatsu 2010: 4). At that time, the U.S. military already was planning to build a base with a military port and runways at the tip of Cape Henoko. However, the war in Vietnam consumed too much of the defence budget. The project was thus shelved, but it was not forgotten (McCormack & Norimatsu 2012: 93). Today, soil for landfill is brought through this opened up reef by ship all the way from the Motobu Peninsula on the other side of Okinawa Main Island. Older generations in particular also reported how in other parts of the island coral reefs and their inner shallow waters (referred to as Inō in the native language of Uchināguchi) were filled in to create infrastructure and housing projects, or to construct seawalls. As a result, according to Giovanni Diego Masucci and James D. Reimer, both marine researchers at the University of the Ryūkyūs, already 63% of Okinawa's coastline has been altered by humans, cutting the remaining 37% into fragments (2019: 8). Not all of these developments have destroyed coral, but many have. The Henoko project will continue the pattern.

Much has been written about the protest movement against American military presence in Okinawa and the new base in Henoko (see for example Tanji 2006; McCormack & Norimatsu 2012; Inoue 2017) and some of it will be mentioned on the following pages. However, in this article I would like to explore how the Government of Japan reshapes imagined possible futures of Ōura Bay's residents through what I call a political strategy of ignorance. Thinking with the coral of Ōura Bay in this context not only helps to understand how the central government employs ignorance to exercise power over the opposition, but also how the construction of official knowledge by the state is used to justify questionable environmental harm mitigation methods.



Lively coral in the northern part of Ōura Bay, © Palz 2021.

Coral Politics

To mitigate the adverse effects of the landfill project in Ōura Bay the Japanese government proposes to move roughly 40,000 coral colonies, replanting them in areas outside of the construction site. When transplanting coral, smaller fragments are taken from the colony and moved to a different place, where they are attached to rocks with cages, wires and hooks. If the conditions are right, the relocated coral can thrive again. Many privately and publicly funded coral restoration programs in the Okinawan islands and beyond do exist (see Claus 2020: 183).

The current Okinawan Prefectural Government, which opposes the base construction, withheld its authorisation for replanting the coral colonies until it was forced through by the Japanese Supreme Court in July, 2021 in compliance with orders from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The Supreme Court's decision was based on the grounds that governor Tamaki Denny is abusing his power if he does not give his authorisation. It is important to mention, however, that the court's decision was a close one as two of five justices sided with Tamaki (Abe 2021) in the protracted legal confrontation between Okinawa Prefecture and the central government. The Okinawa Prefectural Government was left with little choice but to comply, asserting certain conditions, such as the promise to avoid moving the coral during the hot summer months. Hot water temperatures during summer make coral prone to bleaching a widely known issue in coral science (Okubo et al. 2005: 340). Coral get their colour from microscopic algae with which they live in symbiosis. If water temperatures get too high or other stress factors occur, coral expel the algae and turn white. In case of hot water temperatures over a long period of time, the coral eventually die. Another factor that has to be taken into account is that coral reproduction is much higher for coral transplanted in February then for those transplanted in July (Okubo et al. 2009: 444f). Also, a manual published by Okinawa Prefecture as early as 2008 explicitly states that the summer month are not suitable for coral transplantation not only because of high water temperatures, but also because typhoons during this time of year are likely to damage the fragile replanted coral (Okinawaken bunka kankyōbu shizen hogoka 2008: 12). Examples of these effects already exist in Okinawa. During maintenance work on the Taketomi southern sea route (*taketomi minami kōro*) coral were transplanted in August and September 2014. Due to hot water temperatures during these months over 30% of the transplanted coral colonies died of bleaching, while only 4% of untouched coral were affected (Tamaki et al. 2021: 4).

In spite of the Prefectural Government's asserted conditions, after gaining authorisation from the governor on July 28, the ODB immediately started the replanting process on July 29, whereupon Tamaki immediately revoked his authorisation the following day. Ignoring the will of the Okinawan Prefectural

Government as well as the tenets of basic science accurately reflects a long history of ignoring the voice of a majority of Okinawa's citizens and is consistent with the flawed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) conducted in preparation of the base construction.

At the construction site in Ōura Bay, © Palz 2021.
Every weekday ships and trucks bring soil for landfill.

A Political Strategy of Ignorance

In his work on forest fires and the state in Mexico, anthropologist Andrew S. Mathews explains that "state power may depend upon a management of ignorance and of knowledge by officials and their clients (Matthews 2005: 796)." In his study Matthews examines different forms of ignorance by mid-level and field-level forest service officials in dealing with forest fires to be able to navigate conservationist state policies and strengthen local networks among communities that conduct swidden agriculture. By concealing local forest fires used in a controlled way from their superiors and the state, these officials manage to balance state policies and realities on the ground. It is important to notice, however, that this navigation is only necessary because the federal government condemns the use of fire by rural groups in the first place. Focusing their argument on the damage from forest fires, the government and high-ranking forest service officials ignore the interest of local farmers and cater to urban Mexicans who make up the most influential political constituency. In so doing they exercise power by ignoring alternative worldviews, such as traditional and controlled use of fire in swidden agriculture. Several levels of officials on local and state level have employed similar strategies of ignorance towards alternating worldviews in the Henoko context to frustrate the coral preservationist and anti-base sentiments of local inhabitants.

In 1997, then mayor of Nago City Higa Tetsuya (Liberal Democratic Party, LDP) originally opposed the base construction in Henoko. However, after pressure was applied by the central government (Hashimoto cabinet) to accept the base he ignored the outcome of a municipal referendum opposing it by 52%, making way for the construction. In 2019, the central government again ignored a prefectural referendum in which 72% of participating Okinawan citizens opposed the construction. Now, in its attempts to replant coral amidst high water temperatures of the summer months and with typhoons approaching, the ODB has again violated basic science.As an outsider looking at these practices of ignoring, I am not surprised that some of the inhabitants of Ōura Bay who are not active in the anti-base movement but opposed construction in the referendums, convey a deep feeling of powerlessness against a decision that was made over their heads between the governments of Japan and the United States. Some have even started to question Japan's

constitutional democracy. Talking to one of my interviewees (a regular citizen of the Ōura Bay region who is not involved in the protest movement) about the potential threat of Chinese aggression[2] and therefore on the legitimation of U.S. bases in Okinawa, he concluded that the Chinese and Japanese governments are not so different from each other. Reflecting on the Henoko construction, he said: "The government is ignoring the voice of the local people, so in this there is no difference from China (*chūgoku to kawaranai*)." It has long been Japanese government strategy to confront Okinawa prefecture and local residents of Ōura Bay with a rhetoric of inevitability: no other solutions are on the table, so live with it. This is the message that has been arriving in the villages of Ōura Bay for several decades. It seems to some people who oppose the base but do not protest openly, that all they can do is to make the best out of it by adapting to this "inevitable situation".

It is not only that opposing voices of the Okinawan people have been ignored, the production of official knowledge by the state has also played an important role in presenting the base construction as justifiable. An EIA published in 2011 concluded that the construction would have no adverse effects on the endangered Okinawa dugong, a species that was confirmed to visit the bay proper and surrounding waters frequently to graze on the sea grass growing close to its shores (see also Yoshikawa 2020). Despite this conclusion, no dugongs were spotted in the bay since construction began in 2017. According to surveys conducted by the ODB, no feeding trails, which are indirect signs of dugong presence, were found around the construction site either (Okinawa bōeikyoku 2020a:12). In spring 2020, sounds that were potential dugong calls were recorded by the ODB (Okinawa bōeikyoku 2020b: 12), but the Ministry of Defense refuses to release the data or to get a second opinion on the matter from neutral researchers. As an observer, this leaves me with two possible conclusions: Either the sound sensitive dugongs refrain from entering the bay where heavy construction work is progressing and sound waves of ship engines prevent their peaceful grazing, or dugongs were able to visit the site despite construction noise, but the ODB is ignoring their presence as a release of data could cause construction to stop. It seems clear that the EIA was conducted to enable the base construction in the first place, rather than to protect the environment.

A similar question arises when looking at the Environmental Monitoring Committee, purportedly an independent scientific entity created by the ODB to monitor and advise on the impact of base construction on the environment. Considering the scientifically unjustifiable timing of coral transplantation, it seems clear that the committee is facilitating the Japanese government's standpoint by not advising against coral transplantation in summer in the face of scientific evidence. Furthermore, some members of the committee submitted a scientific article to the platform Research Square declaring the critically endangered dugong to be extinct around Okinawa (Kayanne et al. 2021). Although the article has not yet undergone peer review and is therefore categorized as a preliminary report, declaring the dugong extinct could have political consequences for environmental mitigation measures at the base construction site. The article's conclusion is therefore highly political and even as the ODB insists that the authors wrote the article as independent researchers and not as committee members, questions arise of official knowledge production.

Protesters at the gate of Camp Schwab, Henoko, © Palz 2021.

Like the EIA, the replanting of coral seems to be a cosmetic, rather than a mitigative intervention. If the ODB were really concerned about coral survival, it would not have replanted in the hot summer months immediately after gaining authorisation from governor Tamaki. Furthermore, a final decision on whether successful construction of the FRF will actually be possible in the untouched areas of Ōura Bay has still yet to be made. If construction is not possible, coral transplantation itself will become meaningless.

Bringing all these threats together, it becomes clear that the Japanese government is practicing a political strategy of ignorance with grave consequences. Ignoring its own citizens (a majority of the inhabitants of Ōura Bay and Okinawa Prefecture), ignoring natural obstacles (the "mayonnaise" sea floor), ignoring the habitat of fellow inhabitants of Ōura Bay (such as the dugong and other marine life) and ignoring basic scientific advice on coral transplantation and requests by the Okinawa Prefectural Government. I would like to connect this thought on a political strategy of ignorance with the quote that began this article: "As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before … Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality (Gan et al. 2017: G6)." For residents of Ōura Bay this connection is relevant in two ways. Firstly, with its political strategy of ignorance the Japanese government is reshaping the landscape of Ōura Bay in very physical ways (filling up water with land and transplanting coral for example). By doing that it is creating a new reality for future generations, a reality in which a sea filled with concrete and the sound of V-22 Osprey are normalized. Secondly, the political strategy of ignorance is reshaping mental landscapes of local citizens into one in which the new base is inevitable. In other words, imagined possible future landscapes are reduced to one option: a bay with a base and a base one must live with.

This does not mean that the knowledge constructed by the state and its political strategy of ignorance are unchallenged. The protest movement against the base is continuing both on a very local level in front of the gates of Camp Schwab and the waters of Ōura Bay, and at the level of official politics as shown by governor Tamaki's opposition to coral transplantation. However, it is worth looking at how the central government's strategies of normalizing the base construction by exercising both ignorance and power over knowledge production arrive in local contexts and how they impinge on those who are most affected by the construction: human and non-human inhabitants of Ōura Bay.

It has yet to be seen how the revocation of Governor Tamaki's authorisation will play out, but at the time of writing, transplantation of coral is continuing without his permission. After the revocation of approval, the ODB filed a complaint to the Ministry of the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which decided to continue the transplantation. If the issue ends up in court again, the judges will likely side with the Japanese government rather than

Okinawa, as they have done so many times in the past. If this comes to pass, the political strategy of ignorance will have proven, once again, to result in further damage to physical and imagined landscapes.

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Notes

[1] Accidents include the crash of a helicopter into a building of Okinawa International University in 2004 and the drop of a helicopter window in 2017 on the sports field of Daini Futenma Elementary School while kids were playing outside.
[2] The topic of a "Chinese threat" has been employed frequently by the Japanese government to justify further militarization, not just at Henoko and Okinawa Main Island, but also other islands of the Ryūkyū Archipelago, such as Yonaguni and Miyako Island and in policies toward Taiwan and other areas of US-China conflict.