



Pacific Newsbytes

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4th Coconuts College Open Seminar convenes in Yaeyama Islands

Japan's SPINF, PECC and Pacific Society sponsors international seminar



By Christina Higa



The Sasakawa Pacific Islands Nation Fund, Japan National Committee for Pacific Economic Cooperation Council and the Pacific Society hosted the 4th Coconuts College open seminar entitled, "Beyond the Sea: History and Future of Islanders — Globalization and Pacific Islands."

I was fortunate to participate in the Coconuts College as one of the lecturers along with Ambassador Masao Salvador, Republic of Palau, Dr. Yoshiko Sinoto, Senior Archeologist of Bishop Museum and President of Coconuts College and Mr. Takeshi Miki, CEO Ryukyu-Shimpo. Coconuts College is an idea and vision of Ms. Rieko Hayakawa, Program Officer, Sasakawa Pacific Islands Nation Fund. Ms. Hayakawa is well known in the Pacific Islands for her work and promotion of information technologies and telecommunication development, journalism, history and archeology projects to name a few. The idea of Coconuts College was developed as a venue for Japanese people to learn about the Pacific Islands and to foster International cooperation.

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among the participants. The participants included around 100-200 people of Ishigaki and Iriomote Islands of Yaeyama, Japan Proper, the State of Hawaii and the Republic of Palau.

Common similarities are the Island issues and challenges of finding the proper balance between economic development and environmental and cultural preservation. Island people are very resourceful and have an innate ability to work collaboratively. This seems to be a result of living on an island with limited natural resources and where it is so small that you know everyone. Some of us were of the same heritage and looked very similar but did not speak the same language. Many people including myself have a family history of immigration from another island.



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The event was well organized with a good combination of activities such as island tours and seminar/lectures that allowed the participants to interact with local experts such as Mr. Eisho Tomoyose, Yaeyama journalist and chair of the college executive committee. Mr. Tomoyose took us around Ishigaki Island and explained the history of the migration to Yaeyama from mainland Okinawa, Japan Proper and Taiwan. Some were forced immigration by the Ryukyu government. As we drove past sugarcane and pineapple fields, I could not help to think of my grandparents who migrated from mainland Okinawa to Hawaii over 80 years ago to work on the sugarcane fields. I thought of how little I really know about both their home and voyage to a new land. I am inspired to learn more about my own heritage.



The next day we took a boat to Iriomote Island. We were guided by Mr. Kabira, originally from Iriomote Island and now works as Deputy Mayor in Ishigaki. Mr. Kabira is one of five people in this world that know where a special religious site was resettled in Iriomote Island. Mr. Takeshi Miki gave us a lecture on the history of the Iriomote coal mining. He recently published *Photographs of Iriomote Coal Mine* a book depicting the difficult history of this past industry.

Mr. Miki is coining the term, “Okinesia” as a new region to be known for its rich cultural heritage. Since having gone through extensive travel in Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia the term “Okinesia” seems appropriate for his island home. His lecture left a serious impact on the audience to remember and document difficult histories in order to learn from the past and avoid discrimination. I think the story that Mr. Miki has to tell is quite appropriate to share with other islanders that can empathize.



In the Pacific Islands there is a similar history of being ruled by so many different governments, going through wartime and scarcity of resources.

Finally on a lighter note, I have to say that one of my most my favorite cultural experiences is eating local cuisine and the women of Iriomote islands know how to throw a party. We closed the Coconuts College with delicious homemade food (sashimi, seaweed, wild boar, rice dishes, bamboo sprouts, etc.) prepared by the women of Iriomote, we danced, sang and shared an experience of learning about each other and developing new friendships and ties.

Upon returning to our boat, Mr. Kabira stopped to show us a newly formed island that does not yet have a name. It emerged only about 20 years ago. I looked at the island and wondered about our future. Will we see each other again? As globalization reaches out to the most remote areas will we as a Pacific Region work together to help the areas that still have special needs such as the development of basic infrastructure? I hope so. My sincere appreciation to the Sasakawa Pacific Islands Nation Fund for the invitation and to the hard working people of the Coconuts College. *Mahalo Nui Loa!*