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[Book Review]

Stewart, Frank and Yamazato, Katsunori (Eds.). (2011).  
*Living Spirit: Literature and Resurgence in Okinawa (Mānoa 23:1)*  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (282 pages)

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If English translations of Okinawan literature are rare, full anthologies in English are rarer still. The first collection of Okinawan literature in English translation, *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa* (Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, eds.) appeared in 2000. This was followed in 2009 by *Voices from Okinawa* (Frank Stewart and Yamazato Katsunori, eds.), an anthology of literature by Okinawan Americans. *Living Spirit*, intended as a companion volume to *Voices*, is the third anthology, and only the second in English translation, to emerge to date. As such, this collection is of immeasurable value. What gives *Living Spirit* even greater significance is the sheer variety and scope of the collection when compared with its predecessors, and arguably literary anthologies in general. Indeed, this collection could be said to transcend the boundaries prescribed by the term “literature,” even in its broader application. For in *Living Spirit*, not only do we find English translations of typical examples of literary works such as poetry, fiction, drama and essays by Okinawan writers, but also translations of ancient Okinawan shaman and folk songs and, interspersed throughout, the remarkable images of the ancient and sacred Ryūkyūan rituals and festivals captured in the lens of photographer Higa Yasuo. Together, these present a rich, multifarious view of Okinawa via which the reader can acquire a more complex, global appreciation than would otherwise be possible of the creative works, cultural traditions, and spiritual life of the Okinawan people and the many facets of Okinawa’s past and present.

An interesting and refreshing feature of *Living Spirit* lies in its structure; with the exception of the contents page, which divides the literary works according to type, typical framing devices such as genre or chronology have been largely dispensed with in this collection. Instead, the editors have chosen to create a more fluid structure, interspersing short works of contemporary fiction with ancient and modern poetry, song, essays, and drama, all of which are very loosely tied along thematic lines. This gives the reader a sense of freedom to open the book and start reading from whichever work captures his or her fancy. It is when the works are read in order of appearance, however, that this proves to be a particularly effective structuring device as each work resonates with the preceding one, amplifying certain themes, adding new dimensions or a different perspective, and providing further insights.

Woven between and amongst the literary works are Higa Yasuo’s striking images from his “People of Compassion” exhibition—the photograph of an old woman with traditional *hajichi* tattoos, for example, that frames the opening page of Sakiyama’s short story—and the “Maternal

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Deities” collection, including images of the sacred festivals of *Kami-nkē* (“Inviting and Greeting the Gods”), *Kami-agami* (“Worshipping the Gods”), and *Kami-ashibi* (“Dancing with the Gods”). As the editors point out, these images greatly enhance our understanding of “even the most contemporary prose and poetry in *Living Spirit*.” They do not, however, simply supplement the literary texts. Rather, they play a vital role in their own right, visually capturing aspects of Okinawan spiritual life and a worldview not easily conveyed via the medium of language. I found myself continually drawn back to these images to reflect on the worlds contained within. An appreciation of the images is aided by the editors’ informative essay “Images of the Sacred” and Takara Ben’s discussion of the life and photography of Higa Yasuo in “Maternal Deities and the Ancestry of Humanity.”

*Living Spirit* opens with Sakiyama Tami’s short story “Round Trip over the Ocean.” Sakiyama is among six award-winning novelists featured in this collection, including three recipients of the Akutagawa Award, Medoruma Shun, Ōshiro Tatsuhiro, and Matayoshi Eiki. She herself was twice nominated for the same award and is generally regarded as one of Okinawa’s preeminent contemporary novelists. “Round Trip over the Ocean” is an ideal starting point as it draws the reader into Okinawa’s realm, taking us on a journey with the protagonist across the sea to one of Okinawa’s outlying islands. While presenting fleeting snapshots of the spiritual and physical landscape of a seemingly idyllic island, Sakiyama simultaneously confronts her readers with the harsher realities of life there. Although depicted entirely through the eyes of the female protagonist, Akiko, this work echoes with multiple voices telling of many differing experiences that span generations, gender, class, and ethnicity. It touches on themes that are explored in more depth or appear in different guises later in the collection, including questions of identity, nostalgia for an idealized past and homeland, broken homes and communities, poverty, and discrimination.

Nakawaka Naoko’s novella “The Dog Snatcher” features a protagonist who, like Akiko and her aged father in “Round Trip over the Ocean,” is returning “home,” this time from mainland Japan, where she had gone some twenty years earlier following her grandmother’s death and, with it, the inevitable loss of the family home and severing of family connections. This story explores some of the more oppressive traditional family values in Okinawa from a female perspective.

With Medoruma Shun’s short story “Mabuigumi” comes a new direction in subject matter as the focus shifts not away from the earlier themes so much as to include war-related themes. Medoruma’s novels are acclaimed for their innovative, well-crafted stories characterized by distinctively Okinawan socio-cultural and physical landscapes. Readers will find that “Mabuigumi” is no exception. In an approach similar to that of magic realism, a gigantic native *āman* crab’s invasion of a middle-aged villager’s body provides the imaginative setting in this award-winning work for exploring both colonial influences on indigenous Okinawan culture, lifestyle, and memories and the on-going effects of the Battle of Okinawa. The theme of war is also taken up in Ōshiro Tatsuhiro’s “Riding a Bus in a Castle Town.” The remaining two short stories in the collection are by Matayoshi Eiki and Nagadō Eikichi and capture life in post-war Okinawa under American rule. Matayoshi Eiki’s story, “The Wild Boar That George Gunned Down,” is narrated through the eyes of a white American soldier and graphically captures the violent, inhumane, and deeply offensive treatment of Okinawan women at the hands of (caucasian) GIs stationed in Okinawa during the

Vietnam War.

Among the plays featured in *Living Spirit* is a rare translation of a *kumi odori*, or aristocratic dance-drama, created by Tamagusuku Chōkun (1684–1734) in the early eighteenth century. *Kumi odori* formed part of the Ryūkyūan court performances for entertaining the Chinese envoys sent to the Ryūkyū kingdom at the time of the ritual investiture of the monarch. This traditional performance art almost died away after the dissolution of the Ryūkyū monarchy in 1879 and the subsequent disappearance of the cultural milieu from which it emerged, but it now stands alongside other traditional theatrical arts in Japan such as *Noh* and *Kabuki* as an officially designated “intangible cultural asset.” In an accompanying essay, Kathy Foley and Nobuko Miyama Ochner provide a fascinating and informative overview of the historical development and aesthetics of the *kumi odori*.

Also featured are two plays by Ōshiro Tatsuhiro. The first, titled “Gods beyond the Sea,” is an imaginative retelling of the love story between fifteenth-century monarch Shō Toku and the priestess Kunikasa. Ōshiro’s writings display an enduring interest in the indigenous Okinawan religion and the role of the priestess or “female element” in Okinawan cultural traditions. In “Gods beyond the Sea,” he sets out to “depict how the history of Okinawa reflects the gradual dismantling of cultural practices in which the female element is held to be supreme” in favour of male cultural practices. The second play, “Cocktail Party,” is a dramatized version of Ōshiro’s 1967 award-winning novella of the same title. The play, like the original story, revolves around the rape of an Okinawan girl by an American soldier, capturing the injustices sanctioned by American rule in the early postwar years when Okinawa was occupied by America. “Cocktail Party” also highlights the complexity of the issue and the blurring of the demarcation between victim and aggressor in an Okinawan context when, in a surprising twist to the story, the father of the raped girl is forced to confront his own former acts of violence and complicity with Japanese imperialism during the war. The world premier of this play took place in Hawai’i in October, 2011.

Contemporary poets included in the collection are Okinawa’s preeminent modern poet, Yamanoguchi Baku, whose terse yet powerfully evocative poetry appears first in the collection, and outstanding contemporaries Kawamitsu Shinichi, Yonaha Mikio, Makiminato Tokuzō, and Takara Ben. Ōshiro Sadatoshi’s interesting essay on the development of modern Okinawan poetry, “A Living Legacy,” provides a context to and informs our understanding of the contemporary poetry in the collection. Alongside the contemporary poetry are the centuries-old *ryūka* lyrics and shaman and folk songs, the majority of which are anonymous. Appreciating the classical poetry and songs in translation might prove too challenging for contemporary English-speaking readers were it not for the highly informative cultural and historical detail in the accompanying notes. Readers will also find that the editors’ essay “Images of the Sacred,” though primarily intended to elucidate aspects of Higa Yasuo’s images, greatly assists our understanding.

In the Editor’s Note prefacing the collection, guest editor Yamazato Katsunori declares *Living Spirit* to be another important step in “a resurgence of Okinawan literature,” which he conceives of as being part of world literature, standing alongside as opposed to being a subcategory of Japanese literature. The editors should be commended for their role in helping realize this conception of Okinawan literature by bringing together in the one anthology this strikingly diverse range of

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outstanding creative works from Okinawa for the appreciation of readers of English around the globe. This is a truly remarkable achievement.

Finally, this review would not be complete without due mention of the translators who should be lauded not only for making these literary treasures accessible to the English speaking world but for the outstanding quality of their translations and accompanying introductions and notes.