

**ARTICLE**

# Decolonial encounter with neo-nationalism: The politics of indigeneity and land rights struggles in Okinawa

Hidefumi Nishiyama 

Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

**Correspondence**

Hidefumi Nishiyama, Geography Research Unit, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland.  
Email: [hidefumi.nishiyama@oulu.fi](mailto:hidefumi.nishiyama@oulu.fi)

**Funding information**

Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Number: 321755

**Abstract**

This paper aims to make a contribution to ongoing debates in decolonial, indigenous, and island geographies through a case study of the Okinawan indigenous movement and its recent encounter with a neo-nationalist, and in effect neocolonial, movement. The Okinawan indigenous movement emerged against the backdrop of the continuing US military presence on Okinawa Island, which is the direct result of the post-war American military occupation and continues to be maintained by Japanese post-colonial policies. In the early 2000s, the movement achieved indigenous recognition by United Nations human rights bodies, which have since issued recommendations to the Japanese government to implement protective measures for the islanders, including indigenous land rights measures that are hoped to alleviate the militarised colonial situation. Not only does the Japanese government continue to ignore the recommendations, but the Okinawan indigenous movement today also confronts a new form of neocolonialism. In the past few years, a group of neo-nationalists and conservative politicians have initiated a countermovement against the Okinawan indigenous status. They have mobilised the unpopularity of the term ‘indigenous people’ in Japanese (*‘senjūmin’*) among Okinawans as a pretext for demanding the retraction of the recommendations. The case study shows that the different conceptualisations of decolonisation and indigeneity represent not only an analytical usefulness but also an empirical importance for they create a space in which these ideas can be (ab)used to both promote and hinder a decolonial pursuit of the reappropriation of colonised (is)lands. It illustrates a particular geopolitics of knowledge in which different actors mobilise different understandings of decolonisation and indigeneity for a decolonial or neocolonial end. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges for decolonial geographies that arise from the present study.

**KEYWORDS**

decolonisation, demilitarisation, indigeneity, islands, neo-nationalism, Okinawa

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The introduction of decolonial approaches in the field of geography is a relatively new intervention (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019; Naylor et al., 2018; Radcliffe, 2017a; Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020) but has immense importance. The importance of these approaches lies in their implications for the understanding of geography as well as for the existing political and geographical organisation of global space. Epistemologically, decolonial geographies are, as this journal's 2017 themed intervention highlights, about 'decolonising geographical knowledges' (Radcliffe, 2017a). They challenge the primacy and dominance of Western/modern/colonial knowledge production by encouraging 'rethinking the world *from* Latin America, *from* Africa, *from* Indigenous places and *from* the marginalised academia in the global South' (Radcliffe, 2017a, p. 329). It is to be 'attentive to multiple and diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world' (Naylor et al., 2018, p. 199). Decolonial geographies are also about land and people. As Michelle Daigle and Margaret Marietta Ramírez underscore, bringing a decolonial vision is 'a politic[s] of refusal [which] fundamentally repudiates colonial dispossession and violence on Indigenous lands and bodies' (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019, p. 80). Relatedly, there is a growing discussion on indigenous peoples and indigeneity among geographers that explores not only places of indigenous struggles but also how the concept of indigeneity is understood and practised across time and space (Coombes et al., 2012; Grydehøj et al., 2020; Radcliffe, 2017b).

This paper aims to make a contribution to the geographical studies of decolonisation and indigeneity through a case study of the Okinawan indigenous movement and its recent encounter with a neo-nationalist, and in effect neocolonial, movement.<sup>1</sup> Okinawa Island is one of many islands where islanders have long been defying the colonial rule of mainland states. Islands across the world were invaded by imperial powers during earlier colonial periods and many of them remain virtually colonised to this day (Davis, 2015; Grydehøj et al., 2021; Lutz, 2009; McCormack & Norimatsu, 2018; Shigematsu & Camacho, 2010; Vine, 2019). In light of persistent colonial struggles across islands, Adam Grydehøj and others characterise island studies and island geography as a decolonial project that poses various questions of indigeneity (Grydehøj et al., 2020; Grydehøj et al., 2021; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016). On Okinawa Island, in particular, such ongoing colonialism is manifested in the heavy US military presence, which is maintained by Japanese post-colonial policies. In consequence, Okinawan activists have been engaging in various resistance movements to demilitarise and re-appropriate their own (is)land (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009; McCormack & Norimatsu, 2018; Nishiyama, 2022a, 2022b). The Okinawan indigenous movement is one of their resistance movements, which, as the paper will show, has important implications for contemporary debates in the fields of decolonial, indigenous, and island geographies.

The Okinawan indigenous movement, which eventually led to the recognition of Okinawan indigenous status by United Nations (UN) human rights bodies in the early 21st century, highlights a particular decolonial struggle that brings an important question concerning the conceptualisations of indigeneity and decolonisation. The UN human rights bodies have recurrently issued recommendations to the Japanese government to implement appropriate measures for the indigenous islanders, including the protection of indigenous land rights, which is hoped to alleviate the militarised and colonial situation of Okinawa Island. Despite the international recognition, the Okinawan indigenous movement continues to struggle not simply because the Japanese government persists in ignoring the recommendations. The indigenous movement has also come to face a new form of neocolonialism that goes beyond an act of ignoring. In the past few years, a group of neo-nationalists and conservative politicians have initiated a countermovement that demands the retraction of the UN recommendations. They have mobilised a lack of unanimous support for the term 'indigenous people' among Okinawans to claim that Okinawans do not identify themselves as 'indigenous people'. They have also drawn on a particular, decontextualised, understanding of the Okinawan indigenous movement that reduces the movement solely to a push for political independence, an idea that is equally unpopular among the islanders (Ginoza, 2015, para. 16). The case study highlights the contested nature of the idea of indigeneity within indigenous islands, and how this comes to be (ab)used by neo-nationalists and conservative politicians who try to maintain the existing colonial geopolitical structures. It also shows that the understanding of decolonisation solely as a path to formal independence can be (ab)used to refute a decolonial attempt to gain indigenous land rights.

The paper discusses the empirical case through the different conceptualisations of decolonisation and indigeneity debated in recent geographical studies of decolonisation, indigeneity, and islands. As Radcliffe and Radhuber (2020) point out, decolonisation can mean two things, which might be closely connected but not necessarily so: a path to formal independence that can be characterised as Decolonisation (with upper case 'D') and decolonisation (with lower case 'd') that focuses more broadly on undoing the multiple effects of colonisation including the denial of indigenous land rights. Grydehøj et al. (2020), for their part, differentiate the generic and abstract idea of indigeneity from the relational and contextualised idea of indigeneity. Drawing from the case study of Okinawa, I will show that these different understandings not only serve an analytical and conceptual usefulness but also represent an empirical importance. They are important because the gap between the two conceptualisations

creates a space in which the ideas of decolonisation and indigeneity can be (ab)used to both promote and hinder the very same decolonial project. This is also a particular ‘geopolitics of knowledge’ (Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2002; Walsh, 2007) that is more complicated than the dichotomous understanding of Western/modern/colonial knowledge and decolonial/indigenous knowledge. For instance, the stereotypical image of ‘indigenous people’ as ‘barbarians’, which some Okinawans subscribe to (Siddle, 2003, p. 143), in part explains the unpopularity of the term among Okinawans. On the one hand, this indicates their struggle with, or rejection of, the coloniality of epistemic power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) over the term. On the other hand, a number of Okinawan activists appealed to the institutionalised, arguably Western, idea of indigenous peoples as prescribed by the human rights bodies of the UN in their decolonial attempt to demilitarise the island. Such complex entanglements of de/coloniality can be constructively articulated with the help of Lindsay Naylor’s (2019) study of fair trade as experienced by *campesinos/as* in Chiapas, Mexico, which will be discussed in the paper. After a note on method, data, and positionality, the paper reviews existing decolonial scholarship with particular attention to relevant concepts and debates in the fields of decolonial and island geographies. I will also briefly note some postcolonial theories pertinent to the present study. The paper then moves on to the analysis of the development of the Okinawa indigenous movement and the recent neo-nationalist countermovement. The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges for decolonial and island geographies that arise from the present study.

## 2 | A NOTE ON METHOD, DATA, AND POSITIONALITY

Textual analysis is used for the empirical study of the Okinawan indigenous movement and the neo-nationalist countermovement against the UN recommendations. The analysed texts are chosen to show the localised ways in which the indigenous movement was developed and how the countermovement emerged. I analyse the texts with particular attention to how the ideas of indigeneity and indigenous rights are mobilised and appropriated by different actors for decolonial or neocolonial ends in this specific geographical setting. In doing so, I aim to tell a story of the politics of indigeneity in which the ambiguous and contested nature of the idea of indigeneity proves to be pertinent to a contemporary decolonial struggle and that feeds back into the existing theoretical discussion on decolonisation and indigeneity. The texts range from transcribed oral statements, published reports, and proceedings, to media texts; most of them are accessible online. Existing literature is also used as supplementary material, particularly regarding earlier Okinawan indigenous activism for which original texts are unavailable online. Japanese texts are translated by the author. Careful attention is given to both the contents and contexts of the texts. In doing so, the present analysis aims to offer a situated perspective on the decolonial struggle and thereby reduce the risk of becoming a form of colonial knowledge production (cf. Grosfoguel, 2007, pp. 213–214). This is particularly important in light of the author’s positionality. I was born into a Japanese family, raised in a mainland Japanese city, and educated at British universities. My positionality, as a scholar from outside and/or a person of Japanese origin, may always entail a risk of (re)producing colonial knowledge production. I do not pretend to represent, or speak on behalf of, Okinawans (or Japanese neo-nationalists for that matter).

## 3 | DECOLONIAL (ISLAND) GEOGRAPHIES

Decolonial geographies, and decolonial scholarship more broadly, challenge ongoing colonialism, or what Aníbal Quijano (2000) calls ‘the coloniality of power’ that plays out in various ways, such as land dispossession and knowledge production (Naylor et al., 2018; Radcliffe, 2017a), both of which are crucial to understanding the context of the Okinawan indigenous movement. First and foremost, decolonial geographies are about decolonising land that was stolen and continues to be occupied by an imperial state. ‘If settler colonialism is the conquest and ongoing occupation of land and erasure of Indigenous peoples from and their relationships to that land’, Ramírez writes, ‘the decolonial then is ultimately the re-appropriation of land in a way that centers Indigenous resurgence and confronts the hauntings of coloniality’ (in Naylor et al., 2018, p. 205). Similarly, the inaugural issue of the journal *Decolonization* proclaims, ‘we must re-emphasize the primacy of land and materiality in the decolonization struggle’ (Sium et al., 2012, p. v). For a decolonial approach, the primacy of land is crucial as colonisation and coloniality continue to have very real effects on people, including people on Okinawa Island. If one fails to recognise this importance, the decolonial runs the risk of becoming an intellectual commodity to be circulated only in Western academic spaces or ‘an empty signifier’ (Jazeel, 2017, p. 335; Noxolo, 2017, p. 343; Ramírez in Naylor et al., 2018, p. 205). Decolonial geographies are also about decolonising knowledge. They challenge what Walter Mignolo (2002) characterises as the (Western) ‘geopolitics of knowledge’, that is, a singular, hegemonic, and Eurocentric form of knowledge production and hierarchical systems of knowledge it (re)produces (see also Naylor et al., 2018; Radcliffe, 2017a, p. 330). They proposed rethinking the world from plurality,

alterity, and the ‘colonial difference’, wherein it ‘is important to geopolitically locate the forms of thinking and cosmologies produced by subaltern subjects as opposed to hegemonic global designs’ (Grosfoguel, 2002, p. 209). ‘To think from the colonial difference’, Naylor describes, ‘is to not only acknowledge centuries of imperialism and contemporary “othering,” but also to recognize and speak from the underside’ (in Naylor et al., 2018, p. 199).

It is important to note that to recognise and speak from marginalised places is also to recognise the complex entanglements of de/coloniality that cannot be reduced to the binary of modern/Western versus traditional/indigenous. In her case study of fair trade as experienced by *campesinos/as* in Chiapas, Mexico, Naylor argues that ‘fair trade production both fits into and complicates’ the local farmers’ struggle for autonomy (Naylor, 2019, p. 17). On the one hand, fair trade enables them to earn fairer money, build transnational solidarity networks, and visualise their social movements and demands for rights and recognition. On the other hand, fair trade is embedded within the broader structure of the neoliberal market and therefore feeds capitalocentric, colonial-imperial relations, which would contradict their resistance movement (Naylor, 2019, p. 18). The study is insightful in that it is indicative of a decolonial reality that cannot be simply reduced to an ‘either/or’ question (either decoloniality or coloniality, as if they were mutually exclusive). Fair trade is an institutionalised concept and practice that manages a mode of knowing and produces particular knowledges – the neoliberal ideas of ethical consumption, development, and so forth – and may fall into the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Yet, it is also mobilised and deployed by the *campesinos/as* for their decolonial attempt. The complex and messy entanglements of de/coloniality and the mobilisation and deployment of an arguably modern colonial concept by local actors that Naylor effectively explores can help to shed light on the situation of the Okinawan indigenous movement. As will be explored in the next section, the Okinawan indigenous movement is tied to recognition by the human rights bodies of the UN, an intergovernmental institution headquartered in the United States, and therefore arguably rooted in the modern, universal, and Western-centric system. Yet, the same institutionalised recognition can be, and has been, mobilised by indigenous islanders for their struggle with the existing colonial structures.

Equally important to note is that a decolonial move is not necessarily secessionist. As Radcliffe and Radhuber, citing Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), note: ‘Indigenous and subaltern decolonial projects are not secessionist as “the condition of possibility for an indigenous autonomy is located in the modern nation’s territory”’ (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, p. 6). The theorisation of the decolonial and indigeneity exclusively in relation to independence is also problematic since the conventionally understood idea of independence is founded on a modern and Eurocentric understating of state, territory, and sovereignty, which allows little, if any, space for plural configurations of territory and sovereignty (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, p. 6).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, decolonial geographies bring a plurality that is fully accountable to indigenous rights (Ramírez in Naylor et al., 2018, p. 206) and ‘envisions a world in which many worlds fit’ (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, p. 3). Radcliffe and Radhuber adopt Heriberto Cairo Carou’s discussion on ‘Decolonisation’ (with upper case ‘D’) and ‘decolonisation’ (with lower case ‘d’) to clarify this point: while Decolonisation refers to political independence from direct colonial territorial governance, decolonisation ‘is the process ... of the liquidation of the diverse effects of colonization, such as the denial of rights to Indigenous peoples and ongoing domination by the colonizers’ descendants’ (Cairo Carou, cited in Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, p. 4). Radcliffe and Radhuber continue: ‘lower case decolonization (or decoloniality) speaks to ongoing struggles to challenge colonial modern relations of social, spatial, territorial and epistemic power’ (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020, p. 4). The lower case decolonisation of existing colonial territorial orders can offer alternative spatial imaginaries to the independence model (Decolonisation) such as the plural configuration of territory and multiscalar political-legal orders, be it relational autonomy or a specific form of self-determination.

The distinction between Decolonisation and decolonisation bears resemblance with the conceptual and theoretical discussion on the idea of indigeneity in decolonial, indigenous, and island geographies (Coombes et al., 2012; Grydehøj et al., 2020; Radcliffe, 2017b). Radcliffe notes that the concept of indigeneity is increasingly becoming an analytical starting point that ‘attends to the social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, and epistemic processes through which the meaning of being Indigenous in a particular time and place is constructed’ (Radcliffe, 2017b, p. 221). Grydehøj et al. (2020, p. 16) further elaborate such a relational conception of indigeneity in the field of island geography, where decolonial approaches are on the rise (Grydehøj et al., 2021; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016) as islanders continue to struggle against various forms of colonial oppression (for example, Davis, 2015; Shigematsu & Camacho, 2010). The relational approach can be distinguished from a globalised and generic notion of indigeneity that arises from international platforms such as the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. The latter can be problematic as it can delegitimise political and land struggles that do not explicitly appeal to indigeneity. Some marginalised, arguably indigenous, communities do not identify themselves as indigenous due to the cultural, political, and historical contexts within which they are positioned. It can also risk reviving forms of primitivism and essentialist views of identity (Grydehøj et al., 2020, p. 16). Solely relying on the transnational discourse of indigeneity is a form of ‘abstract universalism’ that endorses the idea of Universal Truth (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 214) and neglects local manifestations of indigeneity. This is not to say that a relational account on indigeneity is independent from the transnational discourse of

indigeneity. As in the Okinawan indigenous movement, local manifestations of indigeneity may also be relational to the transnational discourse of indigeneity.

I follow the relational approach to indigeneity in the following analysis, with a particular emphasis on contextualisation. The aforementioned focus on the mobilisation of the international idea of indigenous rights requires appropriately contextualising the rise of the Okinawan indigenous movement. It requires understanding the specific context of Okinawa's colonial present, why Okinawan activists appealed to the UN recognition of indigenous peoples, and what they are trying to achieve by it. In the later discussion of their encounter with neo-nationalism, a contextualist approach will also help to understand the ambiguity and complexity inherent in the Okinawan activist appeal to indigenous recognition. In their relational account on indigeneity, Grydehøj et al. note that indigeneity 'sometimes plays a problematic role within the decolonial process' (Grydehøj et al., 2020, p. 16). By contextualising indigeneity as played out in Okinawa, I aim to show how it becomes problematic.

While the following is a study of a decolonial movement with an aim to contribute to the existing debates in decolonial (island) geographies, some relevance of postcolonial scholarship should be in order. The decolonial approach is sometimes distinguished from postcolonial scholarship. Ramón Grosfoguel (2002, p. 215), for example, underscores that postcoloniality places importance on colonial culture while neglecting the political-economic process of coloniality. Prominent postcolonial studies like Edward Said's (2003) *Orientalism* focus on literature criticism, challenging, or 'provincializing' to borrow Chakrabarty (2008) terminology, Western thought. As discussed above, decolonial scholarship focuses on rethinking the world from marginalised places. According to Daigle & Sundberg (2017, p. 338), foregrounding accountability to knowledges and practices from these places is arguably what makes decolonial geographies distinct from postcolonial approaches. Yet, attention to marginalised knowledges was already widely valued in postcolonial geographies (for example, Sharp, 2009). Also, as Brad Coombes et al. (2012) point out, postcolonial theories such as those on contradiction, messiness, and ambiguity within colonised subjectivity are relevant to indigenous geographies, as well as to research on contemporary Okinawa (Nishiyama, 2019). Such messiness – which as the aforementioned studies show is not exclusive to postcolonial scholarship (for example, Naylor, 2019; Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020) – is, indeed, present in the politics of indigeneity in Okinawa and nevertheless has implications with respect to ongoing decolonial debates.

#### 4 | THE OKINAWAN INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT

Okinawa is one of the smallest prefectures of Japan, constituting only 0.6% of the national land. Despite its size, it is home to a large proportion of the United States Forces Japan (USFJ), which is the biggest American military command abroad (see Defense Manpower Data Center, 2021). More than 70% of USFJ are allocated in the prefecture (Okinawa Prefectural Government, 2021, p. 3; Ministry of Defense, 2021) and, more precisely, on Okinawa Island (*Okinawa hontō*), where 15% of the land area is occupied by the military. The militarisation of Okinawa Island is a direct result of the dual colonial domination of Japan and the United States (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009; McCormack & Norimatsu, 2018; Nishiyama, 2022a). The islands that constitute the prefecture were formerly unified as the independent Ryukyu Kingdom until Japan annexed them in the late 19th century. During the Second World War, the United States seized Okinawa Island and it, together with the other Ryukyu Islands, came under the control of the US military government after the war. The military confiscated lands and built military facilities across the island. While the formal military occupation ended in 1972 when the islands were 'returned' to Japan, the reversion did not make any meaningful change to the military presence. The two former colonisers agreed that the US military would remain in order to maintain national and regional security, a security policy that continues to hinder the human security of Okinawans (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009; Hoshino, 2016).

Ranging from noise and accidents during military training to murder and sexual violence by the service members, the military presence continues to cause violence against Okinawans (Nishiyama, 2022). Facing such militarised and colonial conditions in their everyday lives, Okinawans have long been engaging in various demilitarising and decolonial movements. Resistance movements against the military presence proliferated notably in the 1990s after the gang rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by US servicemembers in September 1995. The incident led to mass anti-base demonstrations, an unprecedented prefectural referendum concerning the military presence, and the formation of social movements and civil society organisations. The Okinawan indigenous movement emerged in this context, with support from the Tokyo-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Shimin Gaikou Centre, which had previously been working for the rights of the Ainu, an indigenous people from the northern part of the Japanese archipelago. It should be noted that the Okinawan indigenous movement is heterogeneous and closely related to other anti-military movements and organisations, including a feminist peace movement in Okinawa (Ginoza, 2015; Yokota, 2015). Also, different activists and groups have been involved in the movement and different organisations with different aims have been created since, including the Association of Indigenous Peoples in the Ryukyu (AIPR,

established in 1999), which focuses on the protection of human and indigenous rights, and the Association of Comprehensive Studies for Independence of the Lew Chewans (ACSILs, established in 2013), which exclusively seeks political independence. The present analysis focuses on the Okinawan indigenous movement as developed in Okinawans' appeal to the rights of indigenous peoples as prescribed by relevant UN bodies.

Following the growing international discussion on the protection of indigenous peoples within UN bodies in the 1980s and 1990s (United Nations Department of Economic Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples, [undated](#)), activists and scholars in Okinawa, together with sympathisers in mainland Japan, began to mobilise the idea of indigeneity (Ginoza, [2015](#); Siddle, [2003](#), pp. 140–142; Yokota, [2015](#)). As their early statements clarify, Okinawan activists began to pursue UN recognition of indigenous status not so much in order to pursue political independence, but to foreground their colonial past and present. Among their focal points were: (1) the forcible annexation of Okinawa, and the Ryukyu Islands more broadly, which the Japanese government continued to neglect; (2) coloniality as manifested in military violence and other insecurities faced by the islanders; and (3) a lack of Okinawan representation in political decision-making within Japan. For example, in August 1996, Yasukatsu Matsushima, a native of Ishigaki Island, participated in the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations with the support of the Shimin Gaikou Centre (Siddle, [2003](#), p. 140). In the working group, Matsushima addressed the colonial history of Okinawa and linked the US military issue on Okinawa Island to the rights of indigenous peoples. He described the recent gang rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by US service members as a 'dreadful crime against a person in the weakest position – an indigenous female child' and continued:

It is natural and proper that the Okinawans should exercise their right of self-determination to eliminate discrimination and protect and promote their human rights as an equal member of international society. ... The Okinawans should be represented in the negotiation over the removal of the military bases as one of the parties concerned on an equal footing with the Japanese and US governments.

(Matsushima cited in Siddle, [2003](#), pp. 140–141)

Matsushima, and many other Okinawan indigenous activists in the subsequent years for that matter, used existing institutionalised ideas, including human rights, the rights of indigenous peoples, and indigenous status as prescribed by UN conventions, charters, and declarations (see Siddle, [2003](#), pp. 140–141), to articulate the neglected indigenous status of Okinawan and Ryukyuan peoples and violations of their rights by Japanese and US policies. In particular, he underscored the Okinawan right of self-determination that continued to be ignored by post-colonial policies on Okinawa Island. As characterised in the quote, the right of self-determination in this context is about a right to participate, or 'an equal footing', in political decision-making, which has been virtually absent since the reversion of Okinawa. Okinawan political opinions have rarely been reflected in the US–Japan security policies that continue to maintain the US military presence.

Following Matsushima's statement in 1996, the framing of the US base issue in Okinawa in relation to the rights of indigenous peoples steadily became popular among activists, which led to the establishment of AIPR in 1999, arguably the first NGO in Okinawa dedicated to the protection of Okinawan indigenous rights. AIPR members and other activists continued to attend the UN working groups in the years that followed (Ginoza, [2015](#), para. 23; Siddle, [2003](#), pp. 141–142). As a result their continuous efforts, Okinawans were eventually recognised as an indigenous people by UN human rights bodies. A year after the General Assembly's adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, the Human Rights Committee reported that the Japanese government should recognise Okinawan indigenous status: 'The State party should expressly recognize the Ainu and Ryukyu/Okinawa [sic.] as indigenous peoples in domestic legislation, adopt special measures to protect, preserve and promote their cultural heritage and traditional way of life, and recognize their land rights' (United Nations Human Rights Committee, [2008](#), para. 32). Similarly, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has criticised the Japanese government for persistent discriminatory policies towards the people of Okinawa and encouraged Japan to promote their rights and implement adequate protection measures (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, [2010](#), para. 21). Okinawan rights, and land rights in particular, in this context are related to the (de facto) US military occupation. As the 2010 CERD report underscores, 'the disproportionate concentration of military bases on Okinawa has a negative impact on residents' enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights' (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, [2010](#), para. 21), which was previously reported by the special rapporteur on contemporary racism in 2006 (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, [2006](#); see also Ginoza, [2015](#), para. 14).

As a (non-)response, the Japanese government ignored, and continues to ignore to this day, the UN recommendations, which have been issued multiple times. The government has neither recognised Okinawan/Ryukyuan indigenous status nor implemented protective measures for the islanders, and the disproportionate concentration of military bases on Okinawa Island remains unchanged. Amid the increasingly recognised Okinawan indigenous status and the lack of response from the Japanese

government, Okinawa Prefectural Governor Takeshi Onaga delivered an oral statement at the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in September 2015. The Shimin Gaikou Centre had worked to secure the time for the governor's speech, which would provide momentum for the Okinawan indigenous movement. It was also timely, as another incident that highlights the violation of Okinawan rights and the Japanese government's negligence of Okinawan voices was taking place at that time. Onaga's speech took place in the middle of a political debate over the construction of a new American base at Henoko in the northern part of Okinawa Island. The construction plan was part of the Japanese government's attempt to alleviate the decades-old issue of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which has long been posing threats to local residents (Hoshino, 2016; Nishiyama, 2022b). In 2013, then governor Hirokazu Nakaima approved the plan, which was welcomed by the government and the United States but ignited anger among many Okinawans. During his run for the 2014 gubernatorial election, Onaga led a political campaign against the plan and defeated the second-place candidate Nakaima by a wide margin. The overall sentiment against the construction plan at Henoko among Okinawans was also evidenced in a survey by the local newspaper *Ryukyu Shimpo*. The survey, which was conducted in August 2014, showed that a vast majority of Okinawans, over 80%, opposed the construction plan (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2014). At the UN session, Onaga underscored that the Japanese government was nevertheless determined to undertake the construction plan despite anti-construction sentiment shared by the majority of Okinawans:

I would like the world to pay attention to Henoko, where Okinawans' right to self-determination is being neglected. After World War Two, the U.S. Military took our land by force, and constructed military bases in Okinawa. We have never provided our land willingly. ... Over the past seventy years, U.S. bases have caused many incidents, accidents, and environmental problems in Okinawa. Our right to self-determination and human rights have been neglected. ... Now, the Japanese government is about to go ahead with a new base construction at Henoko by reclaiming our beautiful ocean, ignoring the people's will expressed in all Okinawan elections last year. I am determined to stop the new base construction using every possible and legitimate means.

(Okinawa Prefectural Government Washington D.C. Office, 2015)

While he did not use the term 'indigenous people' in the speech, Onaga called for Okinawans' rights to self-determination and land, which was in accordance with the earlier indigenous claims. Like Matsushima's statement in the early years of the Okinawan indigenous movement, self-determination (or lack thereof) here is associated with Okinawan political representation in decision-making concerning the US military presence on the island.

The analysis of these texts clarifies that the Okinawa indigenous movement and its appeal for indigenous land rights are about a demand for political representation concerning the military presence on Okinawa Island and, ultimately, the demilitarisation of the island rather than political independence. Or to draw from Cairo Carou's discussion above, it focuses on the *decolonisation* of Okinawa – that is, decolonisation in terms of struggles against the ongoing colonial political and spatial relations of Okinawa – rather than the *Decolonisation* (independence) of Okinawa. Somewhat resembling this distinction, Okinawan scholar Ayano Ginoza (2012), who draws on the work of Maaka and Fleras (2005), suggests that Okinawan indigeneity should be understood not necessarily as a form of claiming independence or secession but as 'a political ideology and social movement by which a politicized awareness of original occupancy provides a principled basis for making claims against the state ... that helps to transform U.S. militarism and neocolonialism' (2012, p. 9). The idea of indigeneity as mobilised by the Okinawan indigenous movement is then not so much about 'being indigenous', whatever it might mean; rather, it is more about an attempt to demilitarise, and decolonise, their island through using the transnational discourse of indigenous rights.

As the following sections explore, the analytical distinction between decolonisation and Decolonisation and the different conceptualisations of indigeneity discussed in the previous section becomes important also in light of the recent emergence of a neo-nationalist, and neocolonial in effect, countermovement against the Okinawan indigenous claim. They help us to understand how the idea of indigeneity comes to be (ab)used as both an impelling force for a decolonial end and an obstruction for the very same end.

## 5 | THE CONTESTED IDEA OF 'SENJŪMIN'

While the international institutionalisation of indigeneity might help indigenous communities across the world to challenge their ongoing colonial struggles, including Okinawans' struggle with the ongoing military presence, as discussed earlier the generic and transnational discourse of indigeneity can be problematic. In the context of Okinawa in particular, its problem lies in people's perception of the Japanese translated term for 'indigenous people', which has received mixed feelings among the islanders. The English term 'indigenous people' is translated as '*senjūmin*' or '*senjūminzoku*' in Japanese. Some Okinawans, including those

involved in the Okinawan indigenous movement, stereotypically associate the term ‘*senjūmin*’, or ‘*senjūminzoku*’, with images of ‘backward people’ and, as a result, prefer not to identify themselves as indigenous people. For instance, Shōko Ōshiro, who attended the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations in the early years of the movement, expressed her ambivalence to the *senjūmin* identity and noted the unpopularity of the term among her friends: ‘Actually, I still feel a little resistance to this term [*senjūmin*]. When I tell my friends too, they respond with puzzled expression’ (cited in Siddle, 2003, 143). Ōshiro and other activists also held the stereotypical images of ‘indigenous people’ as ‘barbarians’ (Siddle, 2003, 143). The image of ‘indigenous people’ is associated with a ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ way of life, which marks a stark contrast with the lives of many Okinawans who live a modern and urban life, especially those who live in major cities on Okinawa Island.

The unpopularity of, or resistance to, the *senjūmin* identity among Okinawans illustrates not only the problem with the generic use of the idea of indigeneity but also the pervasiveness of the coloniality of epistemic power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) within indigenous islands. The idea that indigenous peoples are ‘barbaric’ or ‘primitive’ derives from the modern and racialised discourse of civilisation that emerged during earlier colonial periods when alleged biological inferiority played a role in European imperial expansions. The same idea was embraced in Japan in the late 19th century when the newly established empire used a similar discourse of civilisation as the justification for its imperial expansion in East Asia (Nishiyama, 2015). Japan’s racialisation of colonial others was clearly seen during the 1903 Osaka Exposition, which exhibited *Jinruikan*, or the Hall of Mankind, wherein Okinawans, along with the Ainu, the Chinese, and Koreans, were displayed as backward natives (Siddle, 2003, 138). The observed refusal to take on the identity of indigenous people in the indigenous movement may be understood as an act directly challenging and decolonising such coloniality of epistemic power. Yet, Japan’s colonial othering of Okinawans became more complicated when Okinawans themselves internalised the (il)logic of colonial othering in a somewhat similar way to Japan’s internalisation of the European discourse of modern racism (cf. Nishiyama, 2015). The local newspaper *Ryūkyū Shimpō*, along with several Okinawan individuals, protested the aforementioned exhibition not precisely because of its racialisation of Okinawans themselves but because of its categorisation of Okinawans in the same way as the Ainu and Taiwanese aboriginals, who were, in their eyes, ‘savages’ (Meyer, 2020). Such multi-directional epistemic violence of modernity/coloniality underpins the unpopularity and stereotypical image of *senjūmin* among Okinawans who, despite the recognition of their distinct identity and colonial history and their commitment to the decolonisation of Okinawa, are still hesitant and resistant to the category of indigenous people.

The unpopularity of the term *senjūmin* did not prevent the Okinawan indigenous movement from growing, however. As explored in the previous section, the activists successfully mobilised the transnational discourse of indigeneity for their land rights struggle and eventually obtained UN-endorsed indigenous recognition, which provides an international pressure to the Japanese government. Yet, the contested nature of the identity of *senjūmin*, and the lack of unanimous support for the term, has today become one of the focal points in neo-nationalist discourses around the politics of Okinawan indigeneity.

## 6 | THE RISE OF THE NEO-NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AGAINST OKINAWAN INDIGENOUS RECOGNITION

The Japanese government continues to ignore the UN recommendations that have been issued recurrently in 2010, 2014, and 2018. The passive act of ignoring the Okinawan indigenous status has recently combined with an active countermovement that mobilises the unpopularity of the term *senjūmin* for a neocolonial end. Soon after Onaga’s speech at the UN Human Rights Council, a group of neo-nationalists and conservative politicians initiated a countermovement against the UN recommendations. In December 2015, Tomigusuku City, one of 41 Okinawan municipalities, became the first council to write an official statement against the recommendations. It states: ‘Most of us, Okinawa Prefectural people, do not have the self-awareness that we are indigenous people, and it is extremely regrettable that such recommendations are being issued without the knowledge of the citizens of the prefecture’ (Tomigusuku City, 2015). The motion was initiated by conservative council members including the mayor Haruki Gibo, a politician endorsed by the Japanese conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Gibo and other conservative members of the council co-founded the Okinawa Citizens’ Association to Realise the Retraction of the UN Indigenous Peoples Recommendations (*Kokuren senjū-minzoku kankoku no tekkai o jitsugensuru Okinawa kenmin no kai*), which is now part of the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan (Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, 2016a), whose members have been actively demanding the retraction of the UN recommendations since its establishment.

In the Tomigusuku statement, while the unpopularity of the term *senjūmin* is mobilised to refute the UN recommendations, there is no mention of the ongoing issue concerning the US military presence, which decontextualises the Okinawan indigenous movement and reduces the issue solely to the question of whether the term is accepted by Okinawans. The statement treats the



military occupation as a past event and continues to make historically inaccurate and ignorant claims. It goes so far as to say the recognition of Okinawans as indigenous people is a form of discrimination:

Even during the US military administration, we, Okinawans, had always maintained our self-awareness as Japanese and continued to strongly hope for the return to our homeland. On 15 May 1972, we achieved the return to our homeland. Since then, we have continued to enjoy peace and happiness as Japanese, exactly in the same way as citizens of other prefectures. If the rights of indigenous people are claimed despite this, people from all over the country will see Okinawans as a minority and it will, on the contrary [to the protection of Okinawans], promote discrimination.

(Tomigusuku City, 2015)

During the military occupation, Okinawans, indeed, hoped for the return of Okinawa to Japan, which they believed would result in the end of the military presence on Okinawa Island. For them, the return of Okinawa meant the return of fertile lands that had been occupied by the military. When it was revealed that the Okinawa Reversion Agreement was just a handover of administrative power over the islands without making any meaningful change to the military presence, many Okinawans were disappointed and enraged, and went to protest. 'On the actual day of the reversion ceremony', Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu recall, 'none of Okinawa's seven recently elected members of the national Diet attended the Tokyo ceremony, and in Naha far more gathered in Yogi Park to protest the terms of reversion than attended the official ceremony' (McCormack & Norimatsu, 2018, p. 7). The Tomigusuku statement also makes nationalist and historical-revisionist claims that whitewash Japan's wartime atrocities and colonial policies: 'We shall never forget the thoughts of our ancestors who risked their lives as Japanese to defend their homeland Japan, their homeland Okinawa, in the Battle of Okinawa' (Tomigusuku City, 2015), a claim that ignored the fact that many Okinawans were killed, or forced to commit suicide, by the Japanese military.

Following the Tomigusuku statement, neo-nationalists and conservative politicians affiliated with the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan initiated the collection of counter-petitions from local municipalities, including those in Okinawa Prefecture. In June 2016, the Ishigaki City council became the second municipality in the prefecture to produce a counter-statement. Ishigaki City, too, was led by an LDP-endorsed mayor, Yoshitaka Nakayama, with the majority of the council members affiliated with the conservative ruling party group of Yotō, which is led by the LDP. The council is also known for its pro-military and nationalist stance, which is partly due to its geographical location. Ishigaki City is located on Ishigaki Island, which is part of the Sakishima Islands that are situated at the southernmost end of the prefecture and therefore closer to Taiwan and the highly disputed Senkaku Islands than to Okinawa Island. In 2010, there was a boat collision incident between a Chinese trawler and Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) boats near the disputed islands, which Japan, China, and Taiwan all lay claim to. The Ishigaki council, led by Nakayama, used the incident to stimulate the idea of a 'China threat' in the public and promote the militarisation of the region by stationing the Japan Self-Defence Forces (SDFs) (Yamazaki, 2018, p. 196). The city also introduced the use of a revisionist textbook in schools within the municipality that places importance on national security against foreign 'threats' (Yamazaki, 2018, p. 194). The 2016 Ishigaki statement reflects this geopolitical concern in its demand for the retraction of the UN recommendations, claiming that the Okinawan indigenous claim is 'dangerous' because it sheds doubts on the territorial status of the Ryukyu Islands, including the Senkaku Islands (Ishigaki City, 2016). With its geopolitical concerns, and also due to the absence of US bases on the Sakishima Islands, the statement reduces the issue of Okinawan indigeneity to the international geopolitics of security.

These written statements were subsequently used by members of the Diet, neo-nationalist organisations such as the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, and the Japanese Ambassador to the UN, who referred to them as 'testimony' that Okinawans themselves disagree with the UN recommendations. At the Cabinet Committee in the Japanese House of Representatives in April 2016, Masahisa Miyazaki, an LDP politician elected in Okinawa Prefecture through the proportional representation system, referred to the Tomigusuku statement and claimed that 'We, Okinawan citizens, are undeniably Japanese, not indigenous people' (Shūgiin, 2016, p. 13). Miyazaki's statement was soon uploaded on YouTube by the chairman of the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, Satoru Nakamura (2016), who describes the recorded discussion as 'evidence' that Okinawans are Japanese. More recently, the Tomigusuku and Ishigaki statements, along with the transcript of Miyazaki's statement, were translated into English and included a report by the Japan NGO Coalition Against Racial Discrimination (JNCRD) (2018), which was submitted to the 96th session of CERD. JNCRD is a far-right coalition consisting of groups including the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan and the Academics' Alliance for Correcting Groundless Criticisms of Japan whose members include Hidemichi Tanaka and Kanji Nishio, the former chairmen of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, which promotes an extremely nationalistic view of the history of Japan. The JNCRD report states that the UN recommendations are against the spirit of CERD for they would discriminate against Okinawans and includes the Tomigusuku and Ishigaki

statements and Miyazaki's speech in its appendix as a basis for demanding the retraction (Japan NGO Coalition Against Racial Discrimination, 2018, pp. 47–52). Members of JNCRD, and also members of the Okinawan Citizens' Association to Realise the Retraction of the UN Indigenous Peoples Recommendations in earlier years, went to Geneva and made oral statements calling for the retraction (Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, 2016b, 2018). Not only the neo-nationalist NGOs but Japan's official statement also used the municipal counter-petitions to demand the retraction. In the 10th and 11th CERD governmental reports, the Japanese Ambassador to the UN, Masato Ōtaka, referred to the two council statements and proclaimed that 'it cannot be said that there is widespread recognition in Japan that people from Okinawa Prefecture are "indigenous people"'. 'From the stand point of Japan', he continued, not recognising Okinawans as indigenous people 'does not fall under the subject of "racism" under this convention' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), 2018, p. 3).

The Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan has sent a similar counter-petition to all municipalities across Japan (roughly 1700 in total) and asked them to publish a written opinion against the UN recommendations. According to their website dated July 2019, 13 municipalities have adopted the written opinion so far (Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, 2019). This is numerically rather insignificant, but the emerging neo-nationalist movement is nevertheless relevant for studies of indigenous islands and decolonial geographies that strive for the understanding of the politics of indigeneity and, more importantly, the decolonisation of ongoing colonial violence to lands, bodies, and knowledges. The Okinawan quest for demilitarisation through the indigenous claim has come to face a form of neocolonialism that is brought about by a strategic and geographical use of political representation, the mobilisation of the unpopularity of indigenous identity, and the decontextualisation of the indigenous movement. While counterstatements against the UN recommendations from mainland Japan may represent 'Japanese' voices, and thus may be ineffective for the retraction call, the collected counterstatements from local municipalities on the indigenous islands have enabled neo-nationalists, conservative politicians, and the Japanese Ambassador to the UN to 'represent', as it were, Okinawan voices. They have enabled them to proclaim that these 'indigenous' people themselves do not identify as indigenous people. The collection of such 'Okinawan voices' was made possible by the mobilisation of the unpopularity of the term *senjūmin* among Okinawans and by separating the indigenous claim from the issue concerning the (post-)colonial (de facto) military occupation. The attempt to separate the indigenous claim from the issues of the US military presence and colonialism is prevalent across written and spoken calls for the retraction of the UN recommendations. In fact, the issues concerning the colonial history of Okinawa and US bases on Okinawa Island are strategically absent in most, if not all, of the opinions that have been published to this day. Even when these relevant topics were raised during a council meeting, a proposer of the counter-petition, who is typically associated with the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, insists these are separate issues (for example, Ginowan City, 2019). The Okinawan indigenous movement has also been mischaracterised as an independence movement by the neo-nationalists. At the 96th session of CERD, in addition to the submission of the JNCRD report, Nakamura, representing the Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, made an oral statement claiming that an 'independence movement from Japan has never occurred' in Okinawa, and thus 'the UN recommendations would mislead the international community' (Okinawa Policy Research Forum of Japan, 2018). Framing the indigenous movement solely in terms of independence neglects the colonial history and present of Okinawa (in fact, as with other calls, Nakamura's speech does not address the issues of colonialism or US military).

In light of the emerging neo-nationalist countermovement against Okinawan indigenous status, the contextualised understanding of indigeneity and the understanding of decolonisation as the 're-appropriation of land' or the process of 'the liquidation of the diverse effects of colonisation' rather than a claim to independence discussed earlier in this paper are not only helpful but also crucial to combatting these new forms of neocolonialism. The contextualised understanding of indigeneity in such circumstances requires attention to two seemingly oppositional, yet in fact closely linked, factors. The first factor is about the mobilisation of indigeneity in the Okinawan indigenous movement; it is about how and why the activists appeal to the indigenous status and what they aim to achieve by it. The second factor is a local understanding of the idea of indigenous people; it is about the historical, social, and cultural appropriation of the idea. The neo-nationalist movement in Japan and Okinawa by and large relies on the abstract idea of indigeneity, namely focusing solely on the term 'indigenous people' while ignoring the indigenous movement's central focus on gaining a degree of self-determination for demilitarisation. It also, perhaps rather knowingly, ignores the complexity inherent in people's localised perception of the idea (*senjūmin* in this case) and (ab)uses it for a neocolonial end.

## 7 | CHALLENGES FOR DECOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of the Okinawan indigenous movement can be understood as a particular geopolitics of knowledge, not in terms of Western epistemology as earlier decolonial scholars have explored but in relation to the ideas of indigeneity, indigenous

peoples, and indigenous rights. This nevertheless has important implications for decolonial scholarship, including decolonial geographies and studies of indigenous islands. It is a geopolitics of knowledge that shows the messiness and complexities inherent in the mobilisation of an internationally institutionalised, arguably Western, idea for a decolonial end. On the one hand, the transnational discourse of indigenous peoples can instigate momentum for a local indigenous and decolonial project by providing international pressure to the state in which indigenous people are located and that continues to dismiss their voices. On the other hand, the same discourse, which is centred on the abstractly globalised idea of indigeneity, can be (ab) used by neo-nationalists and rightists for neocolonial ends and thus hinder the very same indigenous and decolonial project. The present case study has shown that the analytical distinction between decolonisation and Decolonisation (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020) and the relational and contextualised understanding of indigeneity (Grydehøj et al., 2020) serve an empirical importance. Understanding decolonisation as the undoing of coloniality – be it military (de facto) occupation or a lack of political representation – and indigeneity as being mobilised in a particular context has proven to be crucial to understanding such messiness and, more importantly, to overcoming the emerging form of neocolonialism. The narrow and abstract understandings of Decolonisation and indigeneity can even be counterproductive to the very movement that strives for decolonisation and the elimination of colonial violence to indigenous people and lands. Decolonial geographies require careful attention to the gap between the two conceptualisations of decolonisation and indigeneity for it creates a space in which the concepts can be (ab) used to both promote and hinder the pursuit of rights in colonised (is)lands.

This poses a challenge for the decolonisation of knowledge (and the idea of indigeneity in particular) which necessitates a number of considerations. It requires decolonising the idea and identity of indigenous peoples. As in other indigenous (is)lands across the world (Grydehøj et al., 2020, p. 16), the term's negative stereotypical images remain pervasive in the minds of some Okinawans, including indigenous activists themselves. Even worse is that such stereotypes can enable a new form of neocolonialism such as the counter-movement for the retraction of UN recognition of Okinawan indigenous status. The decolonisation of knowledge here does not have to constitute the rejection of the idea of indigenous peoples as a whole. While the idea is embedded in Western/modern/colonial knowledge production, it can still be progressively mobilised for decolonial ends, as the Okinawan indigenous movement showed. The transnational discourse of indigenous peoples and their rights can still be useful for a decolonisation process, but it should closely engage with the localised and contextualised understanding of indigeneity, including why a particular indigenous claim is made. Primacy should be given to what a particular local group of people aims to achieve through an indigenous claim rather than the idea of indigenous peoples as such. This can, I would like to suggest, allow for more constructive dialogues within indigenous people and between them, the state in which they are positioned, and international organisations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the journal editor and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive and critical comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by the Academy of Finland (grant number 321755).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the public domain. Please refer to the reference list of the paper.

## ORCID

Hidefumi Nishiyama  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5845-0459>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term 'neo-nationalist' is used in this paper to describe people and a political movement that arose in the broader context of historical revisionism in Japan, which grew in the 1990s, and more notably in the 2000s, and which is sometimes characterised as neo-nationalism (Takagi, 1998, pp. 134–135). The term is also chosen with reference to contemporary right-wing populism. The counter-movement against the Okinawan indigenous movement explored in the paper has a revisionist character in that it negates the colonial history of Okinawa. Its motion to retract UN recognition of the Okinawan indigenous status, along with its distribution of misinformation, can be seen as a form of right-wing populism. I characterise this as a neocolonial movement with respect to its attempt to, in effect, (re)colonise Okinawa, which is manifested in its claim that Okinawans are historically Japanese and against the indigenous recognition.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of political independence is also found to be unpopular on other colonised islands across the world (see Prinsen & Blaise, 2017).

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**How to cite this article:** Nishiyama, H. (2022) Decolonial encounter with neo-nationalism: The politics of indigeneity and land rights struggles in Okinawa. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 00, 1–14. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12582>