The Welfare Complex, Sosu Asahi-no-oka: The Idea of a Facility Where People Can ‘Snuggle Up’ to Each Other

Journal: Senri Ethnological Studies
Volume: 80
Page Range: 33-52
Year: 2013
URL: http://doi.org/10.15021/00002490
The Welfare Complex, Sosu Asahi-no-oka: The Idea of a Facility Where People Can “Snuggle Up” to Each Other

Hironobu Shirozu
Kobe University

This paper examines an initiative to set up a social welfare complex in a closed elementary/junior high school building in Okinawa. The facility, called Sosu Asahi-no-oka, not only serves local children and seniors but also hosts visitors to the region. This chapter discusses leisure time, school buildings, cuddling, and well-being by analyzing the ways in which time is shared in the facility.

1. Introduction
2. From school closing to multi-function facility
   2.1. Overview of Kunigami Village in Okinawa Prefecture
   2.2. School closing and the establishment of Sosu Asahi-no-oka
3. A place where senior citizens and children can “snuggle up”
   3.1. The daytime service center
   3.2. The assisted living house
   3.3. The day-care center for isolated areas
   3.4. The accommodation facility
4. The Cooperative Store: Another Kind of Well-being
5. In Closing—Transcending School Memories

1. Introduction

Driving out of Naha, one travels along roads lined with Chinese banyan (Ficus microcarpa) trees and royal poinciana (Delonix regia) flowers that create a truly subtropical feel. The Okinawa Expressway leads to National Highway No. 58, which continues north for about three hours. Before long, the broad expanse of the cobalt-blue ocean with its coral reefs can be seen through the car’s windows. This national highway is an actually an ocean road joining the Nansei Islands and Ryukyu Islands with Kyushu: it begins in Kagoshima, crosses the water to Tanegashima Island and then to Amami Oshima Island, and finally arrives at the main island of Okinawa3. My destination—Yanbaru, the district occupying the northern part
of Okinawa Prefecture—is on Okinawa Island at the northernmost end of this highway. The site of my field study—the Sosu Asahi-no-oka facility—is situated within the small settlement of Kunigami Village in Okinawa Prefecture, atop a low hill (“oka”) that affords a view of faraway Yoron Island across the sea, with the rising sun (“asahi”) to one’s back.

The development of Kunigami and other communities in Yanbaru, as well as the history of their welfare, is aptly symbolized by such road-building projects as National Highway No. 58. Indeed, the manager of the Sosu Asahi-no-oka facility, who was of great help to me in my field work, spoke about Kunigami Village’s history over three generations as being synonymous with the progress of the road construction there.

One must not forget that the modern history of regional development in Japan is inseparably linked to the construction of roads. The opening of a road does not merely mean increased convenience in transportation. It gives employment to people in areas where there are scant opportunities for paid work. For example, road construction provides farmers with precious cash income after the harvest season. As people’s livelihoods in general have gradually become more centered on money, the dependence of such regions on road construction has grown all the more. Ironically, however, the opening of new roads has also divided local communities, hastening outmigration, reorganizing municipalities, and forcing some to face an existential crisis (i.e., recognize the possibility of being forced out of existence). Older settlements, connected by road to more modern central cities, have seen prosperity followed by decline—and Kunigami is no exception. As the village loses inhabitants to the more alluring city, its population declines and predictable difficulties arise. This pattern, in turn, has changed the way the community provides for its residents’ well-being. The management of
life itself—tasks such as caring for children and elders, which used to be accomplished through cooperation and mutual assistance (yuimarū in the Okinawan dialect)—are now products and services that end up, inevitably, being outsourced.

Before roads were built in the district, the people of Yanbaru walked along hill ridges or animal paths to get from place to place, sometimes even wading across swamps and other places without bridges and getting their feet wet in the process. They would walk along the coast, except when the tide was too high. When the tides ebbed, too, coral would make some beaches impassable. Obviously, transporting heavy loads was hard work in the old days.

When land transportation was too onerous, the people turned to a form of sea transportation called Yanbaru boats. The region’s exports—mainly sugar and indigo-dyed cloth—were loaded on these boats for the journey to Naha, the capital of Okinawa in the south of the island. On the way back, the boats would be loaded with such staples as liquor and pottery for household use. While it may be difficult to imagine so today, Yanbaru used to be described as “Japan’s Hawaii” thanks to its thriving maritime trade.

2. From school closing to multi-function facility

2.1. Overview of Kunigami Village in Okinawa Prefecture

Kunigami Village, at the northern tip of Okinawa Island, has an area of 194.82 square km (the 5th largest in Okinawa Prefecture) and a population of 5,451 living in some 2,400 households (the 26th biggest in the prefecture as of March 31, 2009) (Yano Tsuneta Kinenkai ed. 2009). Most of the village’s territory is a subtropical forested wilderness that is home to such rare
birds as the Yanbaru water rail and Okinawan woodpecker—both designated as nationally protected species. Kunigami has some of the richest nature in all of Okinawa, and for that reason it is trying hard to attract environmental tourism and sports camps.

Meanwhile, though, Kunigami is a shrinking community, with fewer and fewer children being born and the average age climbing inexorably. Though the village had more than 12,000 residents in the 1950s, its population has since decreased by half. In fact, the percentage of young people in the total population of Kunigami is only 13.2%, compared with 17.9% for the whole prefecture. Furthermore, the percentage of old people is 27.9%, much higher than the prefectural average of 17.2% (Yano Tsuneta Kinenkai, ed. 2009).

These trends are even more apparent in the eastern part of the village, far from National Highway No. 58. The Sosu District of Kunigami Village—the location of Sosu Asahi-no-oka, the object of my field study—is in the eastern part of the village, home to 77 people in 35 households. During its peak year of 1950, the same district had 507 people in 96 households. The percentage of senior citizens in Sosu District today is well over 30. Population shrinkage and the graying of society are reaching a breaking point.

2.2. School closing and the establishment of Sosu Asahi-no-oka

In March 2004, Kunigami’s Sosu Elementary School held a graduation ceremony with just one student. That ceremony ended up being the school’s last. It was closed soon thereafter, just a few years after celebrating its 100th anniversary in November of 2000. Sosu Elementary School had many times been on the verge of closure, in each case avoiding that fate at the last moment by welcoming a new student after several years of having none—but finally the end
Photo 4  Another side of Sosu Asahi-no-oka

Photo 5  Old classroom of music
came. As a matter of fact, one child had been scheduled to enter the school, but after some reflection on the child’s future and the school’s options, the bitter decision to close down was still made. In this manner the settlement faced its new realities: fewer children, more senior citizens, and fewer residents in general. The villagers lamented the school’s closing, and at the same time they grew anxious about the future of Sosu itself. Naturally, having accepted the fact of the school’s closing, they requested that their leaders at least use the school site productively in a way that would help revitalize the community.

So the question became how to reuse the building of what had been Sosu Elementary and Junior High School (it had previously served as a junior high school as well, though not at the time of its closing). Various ideas were floated, mainly by residents of the village, and it was finally decided to remodel the building into a social welfare complex. However, there were still several hurdles to overcome. The building had been constructed in 1981, and it was difficult to get the original blueprints. Moreover, it turned out that the land on which the school was built had been lent out for free. It thus became necessary to confer with various stakeholders about the planned changes in the property’s use. Above all, there were predictable difficulties stemming from the plan itself: namely, to set up a multi-use welfare facility. Creating a multi-use welfare complex aimed at both senior citizens and young children, and at the same time asking for public support to cover its expenses, necessitates negotiations with all administrative agencies that have jurisdiction in matters of welfare (e.g., the Public Aid for the Aged Act and the Child Welfare Act).

In June 2005, the Village launched a committee to promote the use of the closed school, members of which began doggedly to tackle the issues outlined above. They even went as far as Tokushima Prefecture to inspect a facility that had been set up in a closed school there. In December of the same year, construction work began on “Sosu Asahi-no-oka” which aimed to facilitate interaction among members of the community while keeping memories of the school intact.

On May 24, 2006, then, Sosu Elementary School was reborn as a base for the revitalization of the eastern part of Kunigami Village, which includes the settlements of Oku, Sosu, Ada, and Aha, and for the enhancement of overall community well-being. The total cost came to some JPY 410 million (a little more than USD 5 million at current rates). The national treasury provided various subsidies, including those for community nursing care, for the creation and maintenance of welfare-related spaces, and for the facility and maintenance of inter-community exchange. The rest of the cost was covered by special bonds issued by Kunigami Village as a reduced-population municipality.

An article in the May 29, 2006 issue of the Ryukyu Times reported as follows about the facility’s inaugural ceremony:

The Kunigami Village Eastern District Sosu Asahi-no-oka complex, built using the building of the old Sosu Elementary/Junior High School, which closed in March of 2004, was inaugurated on May 24, with some 250 Sosu District residents taking part in the inaugural ceremony. The opening of the facility had been long awaited, with expectations of revitalizing the district. Those district residents who took a look at the facility voiced joyful comments, such as “it brings back memories” and “I can hardly recognize it.” According to the Village government,
there are very few instances in Japan of a closed school building being reused as a social welfare complex, and it is the first such case in Okinawa Prefecture.

... With tears in his eyes, MAEKAWA Naoyuki, head of the Eastern District, spoke this way about his impression of the new facility: “I am deeply moved. It was heartbreaking for me to decide to close the school, given that it had more than a century of tradition. I hope that the facility will lead to the revitalization of the district. SAKURAI Ayako (60), teacher at the time of the school’s closing, spoke the following words with deep emotion: “The school song is still displayed in the gymnasium, so it brings back memories.”

The article demonstrates locals’ love for Sosu Elementary/Junior High School, as well as the size of their expectations for the building in its new life as the welfare complex Sosu Asahi-no-oka. This community revitalization effort was very different from the road building and maintenance of old; for a shrinking community with ever fewer children and ever more numerous senior citizens, it represented the start of a search for a new kind of well-being.

3. A place where senior citizens and children can “snuggle up”

Let me now give a general description of Sosu Asahi-no-oka.

Its land area is 7,125 square meters, and its total floor space is 2,821 square meters. Starting with the head of the facility, there are 18 employees, including caregivers, nursery staff, cooking staff, and clerical workers, making the system a relatively compact one. As the original school was small, Sosu Asahi-no-oka can hardly be very large. But its size only makes
it easier to manage: clientele can take interest in various events happening around the facility, and employees can pay close attention to what is going on and give complete care to those who need it. The primary facility is the two-floor main building of the former school, adapted for use by senior citizens and small children with barrier-free technology such as ramps. Kunigami commissioned Yozankai, a social welfare corporation, to oversee the management of the facility. Yozankai first set up Hokutoen, a nursing home for the aged, in the central Kunigami district of Hentona in 1980. With its guiding principles of respect for clients, support for self-reliance, secured life and coordination with the community, the organization has contributed to the social welfare of Kunigami Village.

What exactly, happens at Sosu Asahi-no-oka, then? The multi-use facility is composed of four sections: (1) a daytime service center, (2) an assisted living house, (3) a day-care center for isolated areas, and (4) an accommodation facility. Very few places nationwide have reused closed school buildings in such a way, offering all these services at a single site and managing it as a complex. A more detailed description of each of the four sections appears below.

### 3.1. The daytime service center

The daytime service center can hold 20 people at a time, and nearly 40 senior citizens are registered as users, mostly from the eastern district of Kunigami Village. It is open from Monday to Friday each week, with different clients coming on different days. At any given time there are nearly 20 people using the center, some of whom are also residents of the assisted living house. Before the facility was opened, the only place offering such daytime services in Kunigami Village was in the western coastal district, some 30 minutes away by
car, so most senior citizens from the east were reluctant to use it. Sosu Asahi-no-oka, on the other hand, sends a bus around twice a day to pick people up and take them back home, lessening the burden of transportation.

Starting around nine o’clock every morning and stretching through the evening, the elders get together to talk (yuntaku in the Okinawan dialect), play games, sing karaoke, or enjoy other varieties of recreation. During lunch, they eat the set meal provided by the large cafeteria, sitting together with the older children at the day-care center for isolated areas. Surprisingly, however, the senior citizens finish their meals silently, unlike the noisy children around them. Some read newspapers and others watch TV, but in general all seem to enjoy their break without making any special effort to take care of the children. This is probably because they are acting in a routine manner, just as they would with their own families, so they don’t feel the need to be overly attentive to the children.

My visit to the facility coincided with the end of a champuru (stir-fried dish) competition. The event involved everyone in the facility, from seniors to young children. Such events — athletic meets, birthday parties, etc. — are common for Okinawan people, who love to have feasts and getting to know each other better by singing and dancing together. When I visited the facility, the recently-completed champuru competition seemed to be lingering on, with the daytime service users busy competing as they sang each district’s song.

3.2. The assisted living house
Residents of the assisted living house are senior citizens whose nursing needs are at Level 2 or lower. They live here in order to receive proper care. The house’s capacity is 14 persons,
and it is currently full. The assisted living area is located on the first floor, halfway between the daytime service center and the day-care center for isolated areas, and it houses two people per suite of rooms. Each suite is rather comfortable, with a cozy dining room and kitchen adjoining a bedroom, offering the full set of necessary accommodations for living. The residents are happy to welcome the children arriving at the day-care center each morning, and during the day they talk and have fun with patrons of the daytime service center. These activities help stave off the loneliness that senior citizens are prone to experience in retirement.

### 3.3. The day-care center for isolated areas

The day-care center for isolated areas serves children from the community living in areas, such as the eastern district of Kunigami Village, that are not well served by transportation infrastructure. It was set up by local municipalities. The capacity of the day-care center is 30 children, and almost all of the 17 children aged 1 to 6 in the eastern district of Kunigami Village use the facility. In fact, the decline in the community’s very young population has ceased, and there are even new children scheduled to start using the facility. After all, the future of the community depends on the children.

Incidentally, Okinawa’s unique childcare practices do not usually include leaving such children, about to enter school, in day-care centers such as Sosu Asahi-no-oka. People across Japan have noted and debated the differences in management styles between kindergartens and day-care centers. Recently there have arisen special “designated kindergartens” where both kinds of services are offered as a step toward integrating the two. The case in Okinawa is quite different, however.
Postwar Okinawa remained under American occupation until 1972, and during this time a custom was established of keeping children in day-care centers until age 4 and in kindergartens starting from age 5. It is still quite common in Okinawa for children to attend a preschool-like kindergarten for just one year before they enter elementary school, in the American fashion. Some have observed that day-care centers are thus devoid of 5-year-olds. The hours of operation are quite different at day-care centers and at kindergartens, for one thing, with official guidelines for kindergartens stipulating four hours of care a day. Children who return from kindergarten, then, often have no adult waiting at home to take care of them. Parents and guardians who have jobs must send their children to special children’s clubs or unregistered day-care centers in the afternoons, increasing the number of caregivers in children’s lives and doubling the cost of childcare.

The day-care center for isolated areas at Sosu Asahi-no-oka, however, also takes in 5-year-olds—partly due to the special circumstances under which the day-care center exists, but also because it is more convenient for parents to have children of various ages play and spend time together. The fact that such opportunities are guaranteed make the place all the better. It is also noteworthy that the village charges a very reasonable fee for the services—less than half the average charged by officially designated day-care centers in Okinawa Prefecture. Costs are kept down in part by consolidating the menu at the day-care center with that of the daytime service center, taking advantage of the facility’s multiple uses. Still, the fees paid do not begin to cover yearly management costs of JPY20 million (approximately USD250,000). The day-care center for isolated areas would be difficult to sustain without the understanding and sense of mission of local residents and municipal governments who know
that they are raising the next generation—*i.e.*, the successors of the community.

### 3.4. The accommodation facility

The accommodation facility is located on the building’s second floor, occupies 10 rooms that hold a maximum of 62 persons, and is used every year by over 2,500 people in total. Old classrooms have been converted into very spacious Japanese-style tatami-mat rooms and Western-style rooms with beds. The first floor has a large communal bath, perfect for relaxing after taking a trip or working up a sweat playing sports. The training room is the school’s former music room, still almost in original condition with its piano and projector, and can be used by larger groups for training-camp or study purposes. Sosu Asahi-no-oka is thus open not only to the immediate community but also to travelers stopping by.

Kunigami is also working hard to attract sports training camps to the area by advertising its rich natural environment. In fact, Sosu Asahi-no-oka sees many visitors who come for bicycle racing and weightlifting training camps. Around 80 children from Fukuoka Prefecture (two hours west of Tokyo) also come to the facility every summer to take part in the “Koga City Young People’s Boat” program, exploring the tropical environment and experiencing the Okinawan summer traditional dance festival known as “Eisa” (equivalent to the Bon dances in the rest of Japan). One advantage of a former school building is that it has a gymnasium, which boosts its attractiveness to training camp users. Training rooms have also been added to the annex in recent years to broaden the clientele even further.

In addition, Sosu Asahi-no-oka serves the community as a venue for banquets or feasts. The gymnasium is perfect as a place to perform various types of entertainment for gatherings

**Photo 11** Sports field
Photo 12 Banquets place in gymnasium

Rights were not granted to include this image in electronic media. Please refer to the printed journal.

Photo 13 Martial performance (Ryukyu karate) on the Banquets place by the manager
of relatives or of the association of people hailing from Sosu. In Okinawa, for example, people’s 97th birthdays are celebrated not just by relatives but by the whole community in a grand party known as Kajimaya (meaning “pinwheel”). Pinwheels made from the leaves of the adan plant (Pandanus odoratissimus) are distributed to everybody, and even parades are held sometimes. Sosu Asahi-no-oka often welcomes groups of 50 or more people for events such as Kajimaya parties.

Okinawan banquets place strong emphasis on entertainment, and the stage installation in the gymnasium at Sosu Asahi-no-oka is useful for that reason. The manager actually gave us a personal demonstration of how the facility is used. He told us that he would perform an elaborate magic trick for us, and we were quite amazed at how serious he was. He stressed that “surprise is an important element of banquets,” and accordingly, when he removed the cloak covering his whole body, in what had seemed to be an ordinary magic trick, an extraordinary space suddenly spread out before us. He had tricked us into thinking that he was going to do magic, when in fact he began to demonstrate Ryukyu karate, dancing wildly on the stage using nunchaku and sickles. At that moment, as we were pulled unwittingly into that extraordinary time-space, we realized how important the banquets held on the gymnasium stage were to the facility.

4. The Cooperative Store: Another Kind of Well-being

Incidentally, as we also wanted to learn about the settlement of Sosu, we often left the Sosu Asahi-no-oka facility to observe daily life in the community. Upon leaving the former site of
Sosu Elementary School, which rests upon a low hill, one soon sees the main settlement of Sosu lying next to the ocean. In sharp contrast to the giant breakwater constructed in 2008, the buildings of the tiny settlement—not even 20 in number, some empty—are bunched close to each other and built in the traditional Okinawan folk-dwelling style. Around 60 people live there now, according to the manager of Sosu Asahi-no-oka.

Entering the settlement, one sees a sign for the Sosu Cooperative Store, which is located at the center of the community. As the only store there, it serves as a place for residents to shop and chat with each other. It has a long history, going back to 1914. The war forced it to close down temporarily, but it reopened in 1951, when Sosu had more than 500 inhabitants. Sosu must have seen more dramatic growth and decline than any other place on Earth.

We first asked a worker at the Sosu Cooperative, Ms. M, about the conditions in Sosu. She is a resident of the settlement and a graduate of Sosu Elementary School. She told me wistfully how, as a girl, she used to weave her way through terraced fields on the way to the old red-brick elementary school that formerly stood on top of the hill. Surprisingly, she told me that the elementary school used to be where the Cooperative Store is now. In other words, the Sosu Cooperative Store was built on the site of a closed elementary school, just as Sosu Asahi-no-oka was, making it a place charged with meaning for the community.

I asked Ms. M about several photographs decorating one wall of the store. She said that they depicted the “Abushi Bare” ceremony that takes place every year from April to May. The pictures themselves were not so old, having been cut out of a calendar from 1999. The name “Abushi Bare” refers to the special day set aside for clearing out (“oiharai” in standard Japanese) harmful insects from the furrows of fields (“aze” in standard Japanese) and cutting

---

Photo 15 Abushi Bare
the grass. On that day everyone stops doing agricultural chores to enjoy the ceremony with *bento* box lunches they bring along. In the feast that follows, any new babies born in Sosu during the previous year are introduced to the inhabitants and welcomed by them; the pictures from the calendar depicted this event. On the day of the “*Abushi Bare*” ceremony, everyone with any connection to Sosu returns from such places as south-central Okinawa Prefecture or the Japanese mainland to celebrate the birth of new life. The culture of fostering in the whole community that was apparent at Sosu Asahi-no-oka has actually been handed down from generation to generation through the community’s long history, as is evident from the association of people hailing from Sosu and the Cooperative Store.

The existence of the Cooperative Store is both unique and important in a consideration of the well-being of Okinawan communities. This kind of store was first established in 1906 in Oku, the settlement nearest to Sosu in Kunigami. One of the founders, ITO MAN Morikuni, who previously ran a grocery in Oku, felt that the profits he made in his business should belong to everyone in the settlement, so he decided to deed the store to the community. Taking advantage of that opportunity, residents of Oku collectively founded and began to run the Oku Cooperative Store. The store grew over time thanks to its trade with Naha, which it accomplished using the three Yanbaru boats it owned. That store still exists today, more than a century after its founding, and serves as an indispensable gathering place in the community. The concept of cooperative stores spread from Oku to nearby communities, then to south-central Okinawa Prefecture, and even to Miyako and Amami Oshima Islands (Miyagi 2009: 16–32); the Sosu Cooperative Store is one result of this trend. Thus the “cooperative store”—born in the outlying parts of Okinawa and representing the wisdom of people “solidarity” in order to survive—is a mechanism that has functioned over the years to provide everyday goods as well as a venue for social interaction.

By far the most interesting aspect of the cooperative store is how it has transcended its existence as just another retail business. The store operates on the basic principle of sales on credit, a system initially designed to facilitate the purchase of staples—which can be bought only with money, not through bartering—by locals at the time of the store’s founding, who had little cash income. Meanwhile, the store also aided residents in shipping and marketing goods produced locally—such as indigo-dyed cloth, sugar, vegetables, and seaweed—helping them manage their books and canceling out bills they had run up at the store by paying out dividends from the store’s profits. Also noteworthy were the store’s no-interest loans for expenses relating to injury and illness, as well as its eagerness to support education by providing scholarships and loans for academic purposes (Miyagi 2009: 12–15). Here is manifested Marx’s ideal: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” The cooperative store operates through the corporatism among the poor and realizes solidarity of community.

Nowadays, for such settlements as Sosu—where the shrinkage of population and the graying of society are becoming ever more apparent—it is no easy task to continue running a cooperative store. As a matter of fact, the settlement compensated the store for losses in 2005, and new management rules were drawn up in 2008 in an attempt to revitalize the store. Sosu Asahi-no-oka has an ongoing agreement to buy a certain amount of food from the store, and that has helped sales to some extent. The relationship acts as a litmus test for whether a
mechanism that has helped support the community in the past (i.e., the store) can cooperate with a new stakeholder with the same aim (i.e., the welfare facility). When we left the settlement, we saw by chance a banner hanging from the Sosu Civic Hall reading, “Present and Future Possibilities of the Cooperative Store: Building Up the Village by Utilizing the Treasure That Is the Cooperative Store.” We realized anew how urgently the inhabitants of Sosu view the revitalization of the Cooperative Store—something that involves the fate of the settlement itself.

5. In Closing—Transcending School Memories

Lastly, in view of Sosu Asahi-no-oka’s location at the site of a former school, let us think about what a school means to a community—what a school is and what it should be. Also, what kinds of memories do senior citizens at Sosu Asahi-no-oka have of their old school, and how do they feel spending time at a repurposed school building? I would like to explore such questions while citing several interviews that were conducted on site.

At first, we had assumed that interviews would progress in a certain way during our fieldwork. As our study of Sosu Asahi-no-oka was meant to illustrate how to use closed school sites effectively, we thought that the repurposed building would not only be functional, but also hold some special emotional and symbolic significance. In fact, some 2,000 schools have been closed across Japan in the past decade due to the decline in the number of children nationwide, and many regions have been groping for ways to use former school buildings productively. In 2004, for example, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a special list of 50 closed schools across Japan that were selected as models of repurposed facilities. One criterion for selection was the relationship of each school with its community, especially its symbolic function. Knowing all this, we embarked upon our research at Sosu Asahi-no-oka expecting to confirm the symbolic significance of its facility. Upon hearing what the senior citizens at the daytime service center had to say, however, we realized that they were hardly nostalgic at all for their old school days.

In the first place, none were actual graduates of the Sosu Elementary School, but that did not seem to be the only reason for their lack of nostalgia. Whenever we asked about their school memories, they always wound up mentioning, without fail, the Okinawan practice of making students who spoke the local dialect instead of standard Japanese wear humiliating “dialect placards” as penalty. They would speak of these “dialect placards” with bitterness, and—contrary to our expectations—we sensed that Sosu Asahi-no-oka’s older clientele in no way chose to use the facility out of nostalgia for their school days. Those senior citizens who stayed in Yanbaru remembered their old schools as places that severed the bonds of the local community—bonds that were strengthened by the use of dialect in the places where they were born and grew up.

From the middle of the Meiji Era (i.e., the 1880s and 1890s) until shortly after the Second World War, children in Okinawa who used local dialect in school were punished by being forced to wear a “dialect placard” around their neck. In addition, they had to wear it until another child used the dialect. In this way the humiliating placard was passed from one child to the next. The memory of the “dialect placard” in Okinawa can be described as a deep claw
mark left by the history of reforming and correcting people’s language into standard Japanese — a policy that began with Imperialist education (i.e., turning the people into faithful subjects of the emperor). However, the use of such placards failed to eradicate Okinawa’s dialects, which differ even from town to town. Senior citizens continue to treasure their memories of the towns that raised them and the languages spoken in those towns. Nurses at the daytime service center now strive to perform their duties while respecting the local language. Elders use the local dialect to pray to their ancestors, recite poems extemporaneously, tell stories that have been passed down, and recount memories as they dance all night long by the shore in the light of the moon to the accompaniment of a sanshin (an Okinawan musical instrument, literally “three strings”).

Though our expectations were utterly flouted from the start, the real thrill of doing field research lies precisely in such surprises. If nostalgia for a closed school is not what draws people closer together at Sosu Asahi-no-oka, then what is it? When we asked senior citizens at the facility about their interactions with the children at the day-care center, they unanimously answered, “the children lift my spirits.” They also treasure a place they can visit anytime in order to meet friends who speak in the local dialect. In the end, the facility attracts people because they can meet other people there. In other words, they are enjoying life there together.

To better understand that point, consider the insight of Ivan Illich (1926–2002, Austrian philosopher and Roman Catholic priest), who was known for his perspicacious criticism of contemporary civilization: “In these essentially sun-powered cultures, there was no need for language production. Language was drawn by each one from the cultural environment, learned from the encounter with people whom the learner could smell and touch, love or hate. The vernacular spread just as most things and services were shared, namely, by multiple forms of mutual reciprocity, rather than by the tutelage of a teacher or other professional” (Illich 1981: 66).

Indeed, people have been nourished for a long time by the sun and earth of Okinawa, smelling and touching one another, loving and being loved by one another, and hurting and being hurt by one another. They have at the same time shared culture with each other, beginning with the vernacular.

The term “vernacular” as described by Illich above requires some explanation. The word was originally derived from the Latin vernaculus, meaning “domestic” or “native,” which in turn came from the Etruscan verna, meaning “home-born slave” or “native;” it has now come to mean “native” or “rooted in a certain place.” According to Illich, vernacular things are to be distinguished from the specialized knowledge taught by teachers at schools. As shown in the quotation, vernacular things are learned by a person from the cultural environment into which he or she is born, then woven into a world that is shared with others. In his explanation of the concept, Illich emphasizes in particular the contrast between native-language education and the mastery of vernacular words. Illich notes the unprecedented attempt in 15th-century Spain by Elio Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522) to codify the grammar of his native language, Spanish, and to reform or correct the usage of vernacular words. That attempt is not entirely unrelated to Okinawa’s history of correcting children’s usage of local words with the “dialect placard.” It is the vernacular language that is protected and handed
down by people. That is literally the symbol of their solidarity. As we consider the well-being of the senior citizens who gather at Sosu Asahi-no-oka, it is no wonder that memories of their education, as symbolized by the “dialect placard,” did not sit well with them.

However, if one traces the etymology of gakko—the Japanese word for “school”—back to ancient China, one realizes that gakko were literally intended for nurturing and sustaining life, as Terasaki Hiroaki and Chou Zen-Kou have described in detail. The word gakko first appeared in a passage by Mencius (372 B.C.–289 B.C.) recommending the building of shojo gakko (using a Japanese reading of the Chinese characters). Local schools were called sho in the Yin Dynasty (17th century B.C. to 1046 B.C.) and jo in the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C. to 256 B.C.). Shojo gakko was another term for “schools,” depending on the dynasty, and these were to be places of reikan yoro (again using a Japanese reading). That is, they were to teach the morals of courtesy and decency and to care for both children and the elderly. As indicated by the shape of the Chinese characters used (with a sheep under a roof, etc.), shojo gakko were intimately related to keeping livestock and storing grain. In other words, the origin of schools (in the Chinese sense), as pointed out by Terasaki and Chou (Terasaki and Chou 2006: 33), was as follows: “In the hunting and gathering stage, humankind reached the epoch-making step of storing excess production as a way to secure preserved foods. Schools were where that excess was stored.” They went on to describe schools as “storage places to preserve the excess production of the community for a common purpose.” That meant, precisely, places for storing the food needed to nourish people, passing down the skills of managing and distributing this food, and sustaining those who were exempt from having to engage in productive labor: children and the elderly.

In some ways, then, Sosu Asahi-no-oka recalls the original purpose of schools: the facility is supported by subsidies from the national treasury—modern-day “excess resources,” so to speak—and helps support both the young and the aged. We need not assume that modern-day schools are the only type of “schools” that can exist. Instead, we must remember that schools used to be a “base of well-being” sustaining the life of the whole community, beginning with children and senior citizens.

Throughout human history, the initial and final periods of life have been difficult times for individuals to survive by themselves. This remains true today. During those extremely unstable and precarious periods of our lives, we are forced to depend on others for most of our needs. Looking at the history of welfare in the West, we see that many children used to be abandoned and that the sick and the elderly with nowhere to go were once treated as paupers. In fact, hospitals were originally set up to take in large numbers of such paupers; they were not even seen as places at which illnesses were treated. The beginning and end of life were viewed as times of charity, and poverty was controlled by having the government, called police in the 18th century, supervise and protect people in those stages of life. It is therefore difficult for people to shake the idea that the government, in the realms of childrearing and caring for the aged, somehow “hands down” help to us from above, protecting us in a patronizing way.

Since modern times, welfare has been designed in a unilateral and charitable way as an element in the administration of society. With today’s welfare state reaching its limits, however, people are talking about the new face of well-being. I would like such people to con-
sider the fact that we have been kept alive only through “planting roots” in the earth, solidarity of various generations, and helping one another. The people who gather at Sosu Asahi-no-oka have nourished their own lives by being present at each stage of their own upbringing and aging. I think it will become increasingly important, when considering the welfare of the very young and old, to make arrangements whereby people of different generations can meet and live together in comfort.

Note

1) There are no bridges connecting these islands; each island’s section of the highway is separate.

References

Illich, Ivan
1981 Shadow Work, Marion Boyars.

Kamiyama, Miyoko, Satako Kamata, Miki Hirata, Mariko Naka and Hirotake Kamisato

Miyagi, Yoshihiko

Shirozu, Hironobu

Terasaki, Hiroaki and Chou Zenkou

Yano Tsuneta Kinenkai (ed.)