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“Pictograms and Knot-Ropes: Administrative Records in the Borderlands of Early Modern Ryūkyū”

Yonaguni Island in the Yaeyama Archipelago was the westernmost point in Tokugawa Japan’s sphere of influence. Conquered by the Ryūkyū Kingdom as late as 1520, the island remained a borderland hard to control, defined by the dangerous Kuroshio current. Historical discussions of Yonaguni’s early modern experience usually rely on scarce textual sources of the Japanese-language administration imposed by outside rulers with limited access to local society.

Local elites became mediators between tax-collecting authorities and a local society hard to fix in the grids of early modern administration. One of the most surprising features of this borderland’s administration is its reliance on non-textual documents for demography, tax submission and trade. While knot-ropes for numerical records were once used widely in the Ryūkyū Kingdom, the creation of pictographic writing or *kaidā-di* was a unique product of state formation in the Yaeyama Islands.

This paper discusses the value of such alternative sources in narrating borderland society in the bent of the Kuroshio. Responding to the problem of the subaltern, historians have recently come to explore new archives that account for local agency in pre-literate societies. The task of *deep history* is to configure processes of cultural formation and environmental change with the specific data produced by complex outside administration. In virtual absence of written accounts, the study of material environments, cultural affinities and non-textual sources can shed light on how the mechanisms of power were adapted to a maritime borderland.