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## National Identity and Literature from Okinawa

by [About Japan Editors](#)

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Grade Level

[Secondary](#)

Historical Period

[Meiji \(1868-1912\)](#)

[Taisho \(1912-1926\)](#)

Subject Area

[English and Language Arts](#)

Theme

[Imperial Japan](#)

Topic

[History-Modern](#)

[Literature](#)

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### Background Information.

Soon after taking power in 1868, the Meiji government moved to exert sovereignty over territory on the outskirts of the main islands of Japan, including Hokkaido to the north and Okinawa (the Ryukyu Islands) to the south. Hokkaido and Okinawa were annexed as Japanese prefectures, but the government's assertion of sovereignty over them was the beginning of a decades-long expansion that eventually included the colonies of Taiwan and Korea.

As a result of government programs to educate its new subjects in Japanese, by the 1920s literature was being written in Japanese in various areas outside the old boundaries of Japan. In Okinawa, formally annexed in 1879, a distinctly modern literature began to appear in the 1920s. In the period up to 1945, issues of cultural identity preoccupied many Okinawan writers. The concerns of their fiction range from the affect of the government's programs of assimilation on the islands' people and culture to the experience of migration to "mainland" Japan, where many Okinawans went to seek work. (For many decades writers also struggled with the question of whether to write partly or wholly in one of the dialects of the islands, a problem that has tragically faded as Japanese has become the primary language of more people.)

Okinawa was occupied by the United States from 1945 to 1972 and then "returned" to Japan. Because the islands remain part of Japan their literature often is treated as a subset of Japanese literature, but this raises distinct questions. Writers from Okinawa have shared many concerns with writers from the mainland: in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, some took part in modernist experiments while others, such as Yamanokuchi Baku, whose story "Mr. Saito of Heaven Building" is the material for this lesson, created fiction from their own experiences. Their writing also struggles, however, with conflicts between ethnic and national identity (as Okinawans and as Japanese) that have no counterpart in the literature of the mainland. From the early twentieth century onward, indeed, many writers from Okinawa considered their true compatriots to be not mainland Japanese, but other oppressed peoples such as Koreans under the Empire, or African-Americans in the United States. Like the writing of Koreans who remained in Japan after 1945, literature from Okinawa reminds us of the diversity of people who, from a distant view are all defined as "Japanese," and of the role that governments can play in defining literary heritages.

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### Learning Goals.

1. Students will learn that literature from Okinawa shares some characteristics with literature from the "mainland" but has distinct concerns such as the conflict between ethnic and national identity. Broadly, students will consider whether "Japanese literature" can include writers who do not consider themselves ethnically or culturally Japanese, but who write in the language.
2. Students will understand that under the Japanese Empire diverse peoples immigrated to the mainland in search of opportunity, and suffered discrimination because of their origins.

3. Students will see that some writers in Okinawa considered literature to have a special role in maintaining a distinct Okinawan culture.

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**Standards.****Language Arts**

1. **McRel Standard 5.** Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
2. **McRel Standard 6.** Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
3. **McRel Standard 8.** Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

**World History**

1. **McRel Standard 36.** Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914.
2. **McRel Standard 37.** Understand major global trends from 1750 to 1914.
3. **McRel Standard 38.** Understands reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early 20th century.
4. **McRel Standard 42.** Understands major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II.

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**Key Concept.**

Okinawa and Hokkaido both developed literary traditions that closely related to larger trends in Japanese literature, while maintaining many characteristics distinct to their status as recent additions to Japan or even, depending on the interpretation, colonies.

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**Essential Question.**

What does it mean for literature to be "Japanese" literature?

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**Thought Questions.**

1. What is the source of the sympathy between the narrator and Mr. Saitō?
2. Why is Mr. Saitō intent on getting the narrator to abandon poetry? Why does the narrator resist?
3. What does "Mr. Saitō of Heaven Building" tell us about the situation of minorities in Japan? How does Baku suggest minorities should respond to their situation?

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**Activities**

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**Focus Activity Ideas.**

Ask students to define "American Literature" in writing. Raise the question as to whether or not "American" literature must be written in English, and whether any literature written in the United States is "American." Use this brief activity as an introduction to the concept of the difficult relationship between nationality, "national culture," and literature.

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**Main Lesson Activity Ideas.**

1. Lecture on literature from Okinawa
  - A. Japanese government's annexation of Okinawa and other territory in East Asia
  - B. programs to educate children in Japanese created a "Japanese literature" in Okinawa
  - C. literature from Okinawa shares some characteristics with literature from the mainland but also has concerns (for example, with the conflict between ethnic and national identity) that mainland literature does not.

## 2. Discussion of the story based on thought questions

- A. What is the source of the sympathy between the narrator and Mr. Saitô?
- B. Why is Mr. Saitô intent on getting the narrator to abandon poetry? Why does the narrator resist?
- C. What does "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building" tell us about the situation of minorities in Japan? How does Baku suggest minorities should respond to their situation?

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### Summative Activity Ideas.

Have students respond, either in writing or orally, to the following question: Which approach do they think is best, that of Mr. Saitô or Mr. Baku, and why?

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### Resources.

Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, "Introduction," *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, ed. Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 1-36. See also Michael Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory* (London: Routledge, 1999). Molasky and Rabson's introduction to their volume of translations provides an overview of Okinawan literature from the early twentieth century to the present.

Yamanokuchi Baku, "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building," trans. Rie Takagi, in *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, ed. Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 85-96.

"Tengoku biru no Saitô-san" or "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building" was published in 1938 by Yamanokuchi Baku (1903-1963), the most prominent poet of twentieth-century Okinawa. "Yamanokuchi Baku" in its entirety is a penname; conventionally one refers to the author as Baku. Baku moved to Tokyo in 1922 and spent most of his life in the city. Many of his poems and stories draw on his experiences trying to support himself in Tokyo while he pursued his literary vocation. "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building" is written in standard Japanese.

As in "At Kinosaki" and *Diary of a Vagabond* (see the lesson [The I Novels](#)) the narrator in "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building" is unmistakably the author, but like Shiga Naoya and Hayashi Fumiko, Baku drew on his experiences to illuminate problems that reach well beyond his own life history. When they migrated to the mainland in search of work, Okinawans faced the temptation to "pass" as Japanese in order to avoid discrimination. Although the narrator of "Mr. Saitô of Heaven Building" does not hide his origins, in Mr. Saitô he encounters another subject of the Japanese Empire who is trying to do so. The narrator recognizes that Mr. Saitô is from Korea (88-89), but sympathizes with his desire to escape the discrimination that the narrator himself has experienced for sixteen years (page 89). Silent empathy for the other's suffering in a prejudicial society is one source of the bond between the two (pages 93-94).

Despite the compassionate humor with which he describes his employer, however, the narrator does not hesitate to observe that Mr. Saitô makes his way in the world by exploiting the hopes of others—selling them kits and classes in "Eastern Medicine" with no guarantee that the customers will obtain a license to practice (pages 86, 90-91). As an alternative to such an individualistic response to discrimination, Baku seems to urge solidarity among oppressed peoples, rooted in the shared experience that allows Mr. Saitô and the narrator to understand each other almost without exchanging words. Indeed, Baku suggests that such solidarity could succeed where efforts to simply avoid discrimination fail: the narrator does not condemn Mr. Saitô for passing, acknowledging the real prejudice he faces, but leaves little doubt that Mr. Saitô's downfall is due in part to his efforts to obscure his identity, the one secret he manages to keep (page 96).

The skirmishes between Mr. Saitô and the narrator over poetry reflect their differing responses to inequality. Mr. Saitô urges the narrator to give up poetry in order to make a living (pages 86, 94-95). In parallel to the opposition between "poetry" and "practicality," however, is an opposition between the narrator's open acknowledgement of his Okinawan roots versus Mr. Saitô's efforts to hide his origins in Korea. Baku's affirmation of a connection between literature and ethnic identity is a recurring theme in literature from the islands and suggests that writers should have a special role in maintaining a distinct Okinawan culture.

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### Discuss (O)

**Contribute to this Lesson (0)**

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**Email This**

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