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Local Governance in Okinawa A Case Study from Oku

A virtual *u:japan* lecture by Gabriele Vogt

Thursday
2021-04-15
18:30~20:00
online

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Oku, a hamlet of less than 200 inhabitants in Okinawa's Yanbaru region, is known as a place of alternative economy, rich social capital and vivid local self-governance. The basis to this is the hamlet's local shop, the so-called *kyōdōten* (共同店). Founded in the early 20th century as a private initiative, to ensure the distribution of Oku's rich forest

has expanded beyond the shop administration and shaped the model of governance within the hamlet itself. The Oku *kyōdōten* model has spread in Okinawa and occasionally beyond, and today, while several shops already had to close their shutters amidst population aging, outmigration and the wider distribution of chain supermarkets, several dozen cooperatively run shops still persist.



Gabriele Vogt holds the Chair of Japanese Studies / Social Sciences at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, Germany. She has been studying local politics and civic engagement in Okinawa for more than twenty years, and has also extensively researched population aging, eldercare and international migration to Japan. Among her recent publications is a co-authored piece with Ken V. L. Hijino, "Identity politics in Okinawan elections: The emergence of regional populism" (*Japan Forum*, 33:1, 2021), and a monograph entitled *Population aging and international health-caregiver migration to Japan* (Springer, 2018).

resources, and later of agricultural products such as tea and citrus fruits, the *kyōdōten* as a cooperatively run shop has taken over a central economic position in the hamlet. It has served as a meeting point for the hamlet's inhabitants and various local organizations, thereby providing a space for community-building. Its organizational structure, which is based on principles of direct democracy

administrative autonomy from outside governance on a municipal level. Today, however, against the backdrop of demographic change and developmental initiatives in Yanbaru, the store's future is anything but certain. By analyzing the *kyōdōten* model, I assess the potential and the limitations of economic vitality, social support and political autonomy in the marginalized regions of Japan.

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