

The Emperor’s Army and Japan’s Discrimination against Okinawa

Satoko Oka Norimatsu

On April 25, Okinawa’s governor Onaga Takeshi held a press conference in response to the start of the construction of retaining walls by the Japanese government in Oura Bay, off the coast of Henoko, on the Northeastern shore of Okinawa Island. Many recognized this as the official launch of construction of the new Marine base. Onaga’s angry remark that the state was “throwing ‘sute-ishi’ (riprap) into the ocean without sufficient explanation to Okinawa” invoked a painful association with the Battle of Okinawa, the last land battle in the Pacific theatre of WWII. Between late March and early July 1945, the Japan-U.S. battle took 120,000 lives of the more than 460,000 residents of the island prefecture. Okinawan people subsequently used the term “sute-ishi,” or sacrificial stone, to describe the nature of the battle, meaning that Japan sought to prolong the war at the sacrifice of Okinawans to buy time for the Imperial Headquarters to prepare for the U.S. land invasion of the Japanese mainland. Now, seventy-two years later, “sute-ishi” is used again to describe the assault against the sea, whose bounty provided food for the local residents to survive the deadly battle.



**A protester on a kayak approaches Henoko construction site, May 15, 2017.
Photo: Tsuyoshi Kitaueda**

Okinawa as an “Overseas Theatre”

On April 12, I visited Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery for the War-Dead in Tokyo. It is a state-funded and operated facility that keeps the remains of “those who died overseas in the past big war.” To my surprise, Okinawa was referred to there as one of the main “overseas theatres.” The map of East Asia on the information panel at the facility circled Okinawa Island, Miyako Island, and Ishigaki Island with a dotted line, the caption listing “186,500” as the number of the war-dead from the region, just as it did other areas under Japanese control during the war, such as Korea, Taiwan, China, and the Philippines.



Information slate at Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery. Photo by Satoko Oka Norimatsu

During the war, Japan, which had forcefully annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879, blatantly sacrificed Okinawa in an abortive attempt to protect the mainland. Astonishingly, the national cemetery that mourns the Japanese war-dead openly declares that those who perished in the Battle of Okinawa had died in "kaigai", that is overseas, beyond Japan's shores.



"Sazare-ishi" at the Chidorigafuchi Cemetery. Photo: Satoko Oka Norimatsu

As I strolled around the premises of Chidorigafuchi Cemetery, which, unlike Yasukuni Shrine, is supposed to be a religion-free facility to mourn the war-dead, I noticed its association with the Emperor everywhere. Rokkakudo, a hexagonal structure, keeps the remains "representative of each overseas theatre," in an urn deigned by the Showa Emperor (Hirohito)." At Maeya, a covered area where visitors place flowers to commemorate those who died, photographs showed Imperial Family members visiting the facility. On the sides of the courtyard two monuments were engraved with waka poems, one by former Emperor Hirohito, the commander-in-chief of the Empire's armed forces up until the end of the war, and the other by current emperor Akihito. In front of the visitor's rest house stands a "sazare-ishi," a term which appears in the Japanese national anthem Kimigayo: small stones that became a boulder over many years,

symbolizing the wish for longevity of the emperor's reign. There was even a Hirohito calendar hung on the wall inside the rest house. The number of war-dead described at the facility is in accord with the Japanese government's official numbers - 3.1 million war-dead, of which 2.4 million (2.1 million military and .3 million civilians) are said to have died overseas, and these numbers only refer to Japanese deaths. Overall, the Cemetery offers no critical reflection on the war that killed tens of millions of people across the Asia-Pacific in the name of the Emperor.

The Japanese government is again attempting to turn the Ryukyuan chain of islands, which the Emperor-oriented national war memorial presents as an "overseas theatre," into new battlefields by building more U.S. military installations and Japan's Self-Defense Forces bases. The Japanese government continues to deny the wartime barbaric acts of the Emperor's Army such as the killing of Okinawan civilians and enslavement of tens of thousands of girls and women across Asia as sex slaves, airbrushing those histories from school textbooks. Recently, government leaders, including Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Defense Minister Inada Tomomi, endorsed the Imperial Rescript on Education, emblematic of Japan's imperial advance. Can there be any assurance that the troops dispatched by such a government will not act again as the Emperor's Army did during the war? I doubt it, especially in light of the recent case of Miyakojima City assembly member Ishimine Kaori, a leader of the opposition against the government's plan to deploy seven to eight hundred Ground SDF troops on the small island between Okinawa and Taiwan, who became a target of fierce right-wing harassment merely for expressing her fear of military sex crimes. Such fears are not unfounded, given the high incidence of SDF sexual crimes and sexual harassments. But Ishimine has been under intense attack for "defamation" of the SDF by those who regard the SDF as sacred and any criticism of it

unacceptable.

May 3, 2017 marks the 70th anniversary of the enactment of Japan's post-war constitution. Emperor Hirohito, who remained on the throne but was prohibited from exerting any political power under the new constitution, engaged in an unconstitutional act in September of the same year by offering Okinawa to the United States. Hirohito told General Douglas MacArthur through his aide that he hoped that the United States "will continue the military occupation of Okinawa and other islands of the Ryukyus." He suggested that continued U.S. military rule should be "based on the fiction of a long-term lease--25 to 50 years or more--with residual sovereignty retained in Japan."

4.28, the Day of Humiliation

On April 28, 1952, when the San Francisco Peace Treaty took effect, it left Okinawa under U.S. military rule just as Hirohito had proposed. Sixty-five years later, while the U.S. military base concentration continued in Okinawa, a former Marine, then an employee of U.S. Air Force Kadena Base, sexually assaulted and killed a 20-year old Okinawan woman and abandoned her body in Onna Village. Coincidentally, the act occurred on April 28, the day Okinawans commemorate as "the Day of Humiliation," as the Peace Treaty detached Okinawa while the rest of Japan enjoyed post-Occupation independence.



Site where the body of the rape and

murder victim was found, Onna Village, Okinawa. Photo: Satoko Oka Norimatsu

I was asked to address the question of how to overcome the “division” between Okinawa and the Japanese mainland. My answer is that it is the Japanese mainland’s exclusive responsibility to “overcome” whatever “division” exists, as it was the Japanese mainland that created the “division” by its various discriminatory colonial policies described above, including the Battle of Okinawa, the post-war occupation, the acceptance of U.S. military occupation from 1952 to 1972, the concentration of U.S. bases, and current war preparations on the Ryukyuan islands. The Japanese mainland can overcome the “division” only by recognizing and ending such discrimination. However, few mainland Japanese seem to think this way.

Japanese Colonial Mentality

On June 19, 2016, sixty-five thousand people gathered at Ounoyama Athletic Field in Naha, Okinawa to mourn the victim of the rape-murder mentioned above. One of the speakers Tamaki Ai, a university student and a young leader of the anti-base movement, called Japanese mainlanders “secondary perpetrators (of the crime),” meaning that the U.S. military presence in Okinawa was a primary cause of the crime but Japan, which allows the overwhelming concentration of bases in Okinawa, shared responsibility. It seemed to me that calling Japanese outside of Okinawa (meaning roughly 99% of the country’s population) secondary perpetrators was even too lenient toward the country whose democracy had failed to eliminate discrimination towards Okinawa for over forty years since its reversion to Japan in 1972. To my surprise, however, I later heard that many anti-base activists on the mainland of Japan were critical of Tamaki’s remark. Tamaki only pointed out the fact that the Japanese bear

responsibility for U.S. base-related crimes by concentrating the overwhelming number of U.S. military bases on Okinawa. Any mainland claim that her criticism might create division between Okinawa and the mainland shows a lack of any sense of responsibility for Okinawa on the part of mainlanders. We Japanese will not even be able to start eliminating our discrimination against Okinawans unless we clearly accept responsibility as victimizers of Okinawa. It is we who created division.

When I hear of such an episode, I think I can understand why so many Japanese cannot accept the justice of the argument for *kengai isetsu*, or the call for mainland Japan to take responsibility for its own U.S. bases by moving them from Okinawa to where they belong: the mainland. Polls suggest that more than eighty percent of Japanese support the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (Ampo), under which U.S. military bases in Japan are hosted. Meanwhile, Okinawa bears the burden of seventy percent of U.S. bases in Japan. In Ryukyu Shimpo’s survey of Okinawan residents at the end of April 2017 during the days leading up to May 15th, the 45th anniversary of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan, seventy percent of respondents stated that the base-hosting burden on Okinawa was unfair. A survey by Okinawa Times found that fifty-four percent of respondents described the excessive base-hosting burden on Okinawa as discriminatory. As undesirable as U.S. bases may be anywhere in Japan, if it is not possible to dismantle the Ampo system and eliminate U.S. bases in the foreseeable future (certainly Japan has not done so in the last forty-five years), it is only fair that the mainland host the U.S. bases instead of continuing to force the majority of them on Okinawa.

I realize that many Japanese who reject the *kengai isetsu* argument do not see themselves as participants in the ongoing Japanese colonialism against Okinawa, just as they refused to face the fact that Japanese

mainlanders are responsible for base-related crimes in Okinawa, as Tamaki Ai rightly pointed out. These perhaps well-meaning Japanese peace activists may argue that they stand in “solidarity” with Okinawan people and do not welcome notions such as *kengai isetsu* and “Japanese as perpetrators,” because they may get in the way of such “solidarity” between Japanese and Okinawans. Is it not the case, however, that solidarity only comes into being gradually as we Japanese succeed in eliminating discrimination, specifically eliminating the overwhelming concentration of bases and their impact from Okinawa? Solidarity is not something that the oppressor imposes on the oppressed. Worse still would be to criticize Okinawan voices that point to such injustice as an attempt to obstruct solidarity; since such action would be an arrogant expression of a colonial mentality

On April 11, I attended a meeting in Tokyo by a group called “[Okinawa no kichi wo hikitoru kai: Tokyo](#) (Tokyo Association to Take Back Military Bases from Okinawa).” This is one of the groups in the Japanese mainland that aim to decolonize Okinawa by taking back the military bases to where they belong: the mainland. There are such groups in [Osaka](#), [Fukuoka](#), [Niigata](#), and [Nagasaki](#) as well. Many of the members of these groups want to wake up the largely uninterested public on the mainland Japan to forge a nationwide public opinion that will eventually impact policy, leading to reduction and elimination of foreign military bases from Japan.

One mainland Japanese activist who participates in this movement told me that feminist activists often challenge her asking how she would take responsibility for the crime that comes with the military bases if mainland Japan took back the bases from Okinawa. I find such challenges appalling. Whether military sex crimes occur in Okinawa or in mainland Japan,

the responsibility lies with all of us Japanese who have been unable to abolish Ampo and eliminate U.S. bases from Japan. Such challenge is tantamount to a claim that responsibility arises only when crimes occur on the mainland but not when they occur in Okinawa. There is great need to spread awareness that mainland Japanese are responsible for the injustice in Okinawa.

April 28 should be the day when we Japanese engrave on our minds our responsibility for letting yet another Okinawan woman be brutally raped and murdered as a result of Japan leaving Okinawa under U.S. military rule on the same day as sixty-five years ago, 1952, when the San Francisco Peace Treaty was enacted and the Ampo Treaty was signed.

This is a revised English version of Satoko Oka Norimatsu’s article that appeared in the Okinawan newspaper *Ryukyu Shimpo* on May 1, 2017, as Part Four of the Five-Part article series called “*Bundan wo koete - Ima, hondo kara mitsumeru 4.28 (Beyond Division - Perspectives on April 28 from Japanese Mainland)*.” The original Japanese version is [here](#).

Related Articles

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Notes

¹ Governor Onaga's press conference on April 25, 2017, at Okinawa Prefectural Hall. The full text of Onaga's statement is on Page 6 of Okinawa Times, April 26, 2017.

² "Estimate of the Total Number of the Dead in the Battle of Okinawa," Sogo Annai, Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum (Naha: Naha Kosoku Insatsu Kabushiki Gaisha, 2001), 90; Masahide Ota, This Was the Battle of Okinawa (Naha: Naha shuppan sha 1981), 2.

³ The Japanese government's estimate of the war dead inside Japan is 700,000, of which 500,000 were civilians and 200,000 military. See [here](#).

⁴ "教育勅語、教材化に道筋 第2次安倍政権で評価相次ぐ," Asahi Shimbun, April 1, 2017.

⁵ Satoko Oka Norimatsu, "『日本の軍隊』による性暴力のタブー化こそ問題," Shukan Kinyobi, March 31, 2017, 31.

⁶ Regarding this "flaming" over Ishimine Kaori's remarks and right-wing attacks on her, see articles by [Satoko Oka Norimatsu](#), [Saito Miki](#), [Takara Sachika](#), [Ishihara Masaie](#), and others in Ryukyu Shimpo, Okinawa Times, and Shukan Kinyobi reprinted on the blog of [Peace Philosophy Centre](#), from March 21 to April 5, 2017.

⁷ "Emperor of Japan's Opinion Concerning the Future of the Ryukyu Islands," W. J. Sebald's memo to General MacArthur dated 20 September 1947, declassified on 29 March 1979.

⁸ Tamaki Ai, "第二の加害者は本土," Okinawa Times, June 20, 2017, 3.

⁹ For example, 83.2 percent of respondents across Japan answered that they believe the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is important to the peace and security of Japan, in the NHK poll to mark the 45th anniversary of Okinawa's reversion to Japan. See [here](#).

¹⁰ "復帰45年 県民世論調査," Ryukyu Shimpo, May 9, 2017, 2.

¹¹ "基地負担 強い不満 「沖縄差別」54% 増加," Okinawa Times, May 12, 2017, 2.