In a Dark Time: Community, Memory, and the Construction of Women's Lives in Postwar Okinawa, Japan

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Linda Angst

Signatures:  

[Signatures]

Professor William Kelly, Advisor

[Signature]

Professor Harold Scheffler

[Signature]

Professor Marc Edelman
Summary

This project is a study of Okinawan women who have survived the Battle of Okinawa cave experiences. From April to June 1945, one-third of the island population (or 150,000 persons) perished. I am interested in retrieving a history which has for political, social, and private reasons remained largely silent. While the women, children, and men ineligible for conscription shared the experience of taking shelter from the battle in the caves along the Okinawa coastline—often with their military defenders/captors—the roles, experiences, and memories of women are this inquiry's focus. It is my contention that the trauma of the cave experiences, in which women witnessed forced mass family "suicides" and took the lives of their own children, has rendered them unable to articulate this past until recently. What is remembered, how it is remembered, and how that memory has shaped women's lives, identities and the postwar life of their communities are the questions addressed.

This project entails one year of archival research and ethnographic fieldwork in a mid-Okinawa town near a U.S. military base. Long shaped by the patronage of American servicemen and more recently by Japanese business developments, the economies of these towns have defined the work and lives of women—the survivors of the caves, their daughters and granddaughters—and contributed to how women perceive themselves and are perceived within these communities. This points to the historical legacy of the war in the construction of gendered generational identities and relations.

The silence maintained by civilian survivors of the battle is situated in the context of the silences of other minority groups who suffered collective traumas during WWII—Jews in Nazi concentration camps and Japanese Americans in Western U.S. relocation camps. While camp survivors have spoken little of their pasts, they cannot forget. The work of Lawrence Langer (1991), Shoshana Felman (1992), and others point to Holocaust testimonies—the act of speaking—as a sign of unrelenting struggle in the conflation of conventional and durational (or memory's) time in such testimony. Norma Field (1991) has shown the potency of war memories for the mid-island village of Yomitan whose celebrated local activist, Chibana Shoichi, protested the 1986 visit of then Prince Akihito by burning the Japanese flag. Given pervasive kin losses in the battle, other island communities also struggle with residents' memories.

Goals and significance

This project integrates several theoretical perspectives (life histories, community ethnographies, and testimonies) and situates them in the particular and traumatic circumstances of Okinawan villages and the lives of their women. Certain qualities of Wiswell's work on rural Japanese women (1983) and Bernstein's ethnography of a Japanese family
centering on Haruko, the mother and wife (1974), inform and frame my own analysis.

Furthermore, social scientists have studied the nature of silence in Japanese communication, emphasizing its role in defining a relational sense of self. Yet silence about the war separates Okinawan women from mainland women. The war experience raises questions of ethnicity and the historical relationship of Okinawa to Japan. The Battle of Okinawa lies figuratively between Hiroshima, where Japanese were victims of outsiders, and Nanking, where the Japanese victimized outsiders. While Mikio Kanda, Robert Lifton, and others speak of Hiroshima victims' tragedies, the Okinawa case is qualitatively different, I argue. Ostensibly Japanese, Okinawans were victimized by "insiders." As such, their silence is attributable not only to the trauma of individual and collective knowledge about acts of moral transgression in the caves, but is bolstered by postwar political circumstances: Okinawans continue to be dominated by both Japanese and American military and business interests. When and how have Okinawans broken their silence in the postwar era? How has silence been used strategically to shape social relations and politics at the village level and island-wide? And to what degree and in what capacity have women been involved?

An attempt to study postwar constructions of personhood and community in terms used by Western scholars of Japan is challenged by this element of silence. How were the Okinawans perceived, by themselves and mainland Japanese? The construction of modern state ideology (Gluck, 1985) through manipulation of collective memory and tradition, coercion by armed force, and promulgation of an elite sense of race, class, and gender made possible the Pacific War. Ivy (1988) and Ohnuki-Tierney (1987) discuss the cooption of the marginal and the embrace of nostalgia by the modern Japanese state in the construction of a discourse on modernity and the self. Okinawan women's silence raises questions of ethnic and gender difference that continue to define relations in a purportedly homogenous and egalitarian society.

Unlike the most recent journalistic accounts of the Battle of Okinawa and oral histories of the war's survivors (Feifer, 1992;Cook and Cook, 1992), this project seeks to interpret and understand the complex nexus of social and political forces--including the on-going impact of the war experience and postwar history--shaping Okinawan women's lives. With the death of the Showa emperor, it is particularly timely for the Okinawans to speak up and bring to rest the unresolved "remains" of the Pacific War experience. The aging of the decreasing population of women survivors and changes in U.S./Okinawan/Japan relations make this project particularly urgent.
Sample Bibliography of Related Literature


