

Phoenix or Perennial Underdog:

Has Okinawa in the aftermath of the Pacific War and post U.S. occupation, been given a voice; or does the once independent kingdom now capitulate to the political volition of mainland Japan?

Alexandra Jane Corrin

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The Battle of Okinawa

Shame yourselves not!
You must die!

Give us handgrenades

Use your sickles, your hoes, your razors-
Kill! Die!

Parent to child, husband to wife, young to old
The emerald green sea to crimson

Called mass suicide
In truth, a hands-off mass murder

Iri Maruki and Toshi Maruki, *Okinawa: A Portrait of War*
(1982-1992)

"*Okinawa no mondaï*", the Okinawa problem, is a phrase with which, having resided in Japan for a decade, I am familiar. But to what does this refer? For most Japanese it is synonymous with "*kichi no mondaï*", the base problem: the opposition towards the 74.8 percent of U.S military bases on just 0.6 percent of Japan's territory (Hook and Siddle, 2003). These occupy close to 20 percent of the main island (Taira 1997), are a perpetual physical legacy of the Battle of Okinawa, and a bitter reminder of Okinawa's tripartite relationship, with Japan and the U.S. The phrase "*Okinawa no mondaï*" also

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connotes the specifically Okinawan nature of the problem: it is a problem with which mainland Japanese, 330 miles away, need not, and want not, to be concerned. The Okinawan problem is multifarious, involving Okinawa's historical legacies, the appropriation of history for political purposes (see Hein and Selden 1997,2000, for a detailed exploration of this theme), the education system, issues of constitutional rights, of cultural and political identity, as well as economic, and environmental factors. What is more, it is debatable as to whether we may even speak of Okinawa in terms of a monolithic, homogenous entity, for while the inhabitants of Okinawa prefecture include the numerous Filipinos, Indians and even ex- U. S servicemen who have settled in Okinawa, should we also count those "Okinawan" communities born in Kansai and elsewhere? (Hook and Siddle, 2003).

Furthermore, Okinawa, including the outlying islands of the archipelago, with their own distinct local rituals and practices, boasts a rich cultural diversity. Moreover, main- island Okinawans may even exclude the outlying islanders of Miyako, as historically and culturally different, or even regard them as inferior (Hook and Siddle, 2003). In fact, even the Okinawan mainland residents' attitudes towards Japan, the U.S, and the base issue, are divided (Siddle 1998).

In a dynamic changing global environment Okinawa's identity is, in Siddle and Hook's words, under constant "renegotiation". This paper seeks to decide whether Okinawa, during the post occupation years, is phoenix or underdog.

In order to come closer to our objective, let us first put Okinawa into its historical context. The Okinawan archipelago, previously the independent Ryukyu kingdom, was annexed to Japan, in 1879(see Taira 1997 for the origins of Okinawa prefecture). These beginnings, and Okinawa's subsequent relations with Japan, have meant that Okinawan history is often framed as a "narrative of victimization". Hook and Siddle elaborate:

This dominant narrative of Okinawan victimization begins with the Satsuma invasion of 1609 and is punctuated with keywords like

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Ryukyu shobun, *sotetsu jigoku* (palm-tree hell-the starvation period of the 1920s), *tetsu no arashi* (the Typhoon of Steel-Battle of Okinawa) and *fukki* (reversion). It culminates in the *kichi mondai* (base issue) and Okinawa's unfair treatment at the hands of the central government.

(Hook and Siddle, *Japan and Okinawa*: Introduction 2003:11)



Himeyuri no tou: a symbol of Okinawan sacrifice (Photo by author)

This narrative of victimization continues to be reiterated in conjunction with certain incidents. Thus, the *Himeyuri*, high school student nurses Corps, killed on the battlefield in 1945, have become symbols of Okinawa's sacrifice. And the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl, by the U.S military has, as Angst convincingly shows, been appropriated as a metaphor for the violation of Okinawan territorial and political autonomy (Angst, 2001). Okinawa, in this way, has come to be epitomized by the gendered metaphor of the sacrificed daughter. In fact Takazato Suzuyo, leader of the Okinawan delegation to the 1995 Women's conference in Beijing even declared:

Okinawa is the prostituted daughter of Japan. Japan used her as a breakwater to keep the battlefields from spreading over the mainland until the end of World War 11. After the war, she enjoyed economic prosperity by selling the daughter to the United States.

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(Quoted in Angst 2001: 251)

However, though persuasive, the narrative of victimization allows no place for Okinawan agency, implying that the Okinawans themselves had no influence in shaping their own destinies. Reality is much more complex, particularly when it comes to the area of commemorating and memorializing emotive historical events, the politicization of history, and the problems of putting history into the public domain (Figal 2001, Yonetani 2000, 2003, Yoneyama 1999). This tension begins with the Battle of Okinawa: the only ground war fought on Japanese soil in 1945 and involving civilians. During this encounter close to one third of the local population were annihilated and a total of about 147,000 died (Hein, 2001). Twice as many civilians were killed as troops (Allen 2002:33, see also Ota 1981 and Ota 1999 for full exposition of civilian casualties).

Different versions of the truth, in relation to the Battle of Okinawa, have been a source of acrimony regarding the displays of the Yaeyama Peace Memorial Museum, which opened in 1999, on the southern island of Ishigaki, and the New Peace Memorial Museum, which opened in 2000, in Mabuni, mainland Okinawa. Surreptitious changes to museum exhibits, by the prefectural administration (Yonetani 2000 and Yonetani 2003), were, put bluntly, deliberate attempts at historical falsification.

Within the climate of a growing nationalistic historical revisionist movement within Japan, the tampering with both displays reflected efforts to downplay the Japanese Imperial Army's atrocities against Okinawan civilians. In June 1999 exhibits of the Yaeyama Peace Memorial museum, underwent a number of clandestine changes. The museum, originally intended to commemorate victims of 'war malaria': local inhabitants who had contracted the virus after being expelled to malaria-infested areas by the Japanese army, had its captions euphemistically doctored. Thus, "forced expulsion" was changed to: "ordered to take refuge", and a panel thought to depict suicide, became simply "victims of the Battle of Okinawa" (Yonetani 2003:196).

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Similarly, in August 2000, local newspapers revealed that the prefectural administration had interfered with displays of the Okinawa Prefectural peace museum. The conservative governor, Inamine, proclaimed that exhibits: 'should not be too anti-Japanese' as Okinawa 'only amounts to one prefecture within Japan'. The controversy centred upon a life-sized diorama depicting enforced or so called 'collective' suicide within a recreated scene of a cave. The diorama was to portray a Japanese soldier pointing his rifle at an Okinawan mother and ordering her to kill her baby, because the baby's cries might be heard by the invading US military. However, while visiting the workshop, on the eve of the outbreak of the revelations over the attempted changes, a supervisory committee found that the soldier no longer had a rifle, but was merely staring at the family hiding in the cave. Nevertheless, in the face of public outrage and extensive press coverage the gun was reinstated, albeit no longer pointing directly at the mother. Furthermore, the people of Okinawa showed irrepressible interest in their history, through numerous contributions to newspapers and, in the first two weeks of opening, the new Prefectural Peace memorial Museum achieved twice the average annual visitors of its predecessor (Yonetani, 2003).



The new prefectural peace museum: a site for learning about the Battle of Okinawa (Photo by author).

Not only have many community members, in these ways, fought for an honest portrayal of their history, but there have also been several outstanding individual voices and local initiatives, seeking to re - appropriate their history. Among these is Mr. Sakima, the curator of

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Sakima *bejitsukan*, or art museum, whom I met during August 2002. Displaying Iri and Toshi Maruki's huge murals depicting the horror and human carnage of the Battle of Okinawa, these paintings reveal to students visiting the small but busy private museum, the full extent of the army's atrocities. They learn that, in Iri's words:

Group suicide is a masquerade because even though people were not physically killed they were forced to kill themselves.

(Maruki Iri quoted from Marukis' documentary, 1984).



*The author with Mr. Sakima, August 2002(*Photo by author)

Just as the portrayals of group suicides in museum displays and captions were highly contested, the semantics of history are also being fought over in another public domain: Japanese history textbooks. The issue of the wording used to describe suicides has been a vitriolic one. It erupted in the early 1980s, when the Japanese Education ministry's insistence that the phrase "*Shudan Jiketsu*", "group suicide", should be used in Ienaga Saburo's textbook was strongly, but unsuccessfully, protested by Okinawans. "*Jiketsu*" connotes honour, glory, and voluntary self-sacrifice for the greater good (for a comprehensive analysis of the phrase see Taira 1999 and Field 1991). A ruling by the Supreme Court, insisting on its inclusion has only exacerbated the perception gap between Japanese and Okinawans, about the war. Norma Field,

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in her book *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*, gives a useful account of the semantics of *shudan jiketsu*:

The neutral translation .. might be 'collective suicide'. In this instance, the neutral choice is inadequate. For if the end of life was 'self determined',...the determination was made under duress, both in the form of the presence of the two armies and in the long discipline required for the production of Japanese Imperial subjects. For this reason I think of shudan jiketsu as 'compulsory group suicide

Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* (1991:61)

A further concern of activists has been that of what message is passed on to future generations. Kinjo Shigeaki, a professor of Ryukyu University, in Okinawa, states:

In Germany the children are taught about what the Nazis did and to resist if the government should become like Nazis. But in Japan people grow up thinking that the army didn't do anything wrong and are not told the truth about Okinawa.

(Kinjo Shigeaki, quoted from Marukis' documentary, 1984).

One way in which children can learn however, is through illustrated children's books by the Marukis, which tell frankly the story of the battle. For example, their book *Okinawa: The Cry of an Island* tells vividly how locals were brutally forced out of their places of shelter, by the Japanese army. And the paranoia and discriminatory attitudes of the army is also made abundantly clear:

In Megushima, Gu san was killed by the Japanese army. His wife and five children were also killed. They said that because they were from Korea they were likely to be spies. Many residents of the island who were not supportive to the Imperial Army were also killed.

(Maruki, I and Maruki, T., *Okinawa: Sen no Zu*, 2000 translated from the Japanese by the author.)

The Marukis' contribution has been immense, as is emphasized in John Dower's tribute:

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Historical memory is fickle and the influence of powerful visual images is incalculable. Much of what the Marukis painted might well be nearly forgotten already if they had not given us such strong images to hold onto... and a reminder of Okinawa, where Japanese soldiers killed their own countrymen before killing themselves. When the images are offered with a sense of tragedy and complexity as well as anger, as Iri and Toshi Maruki have done, the historic memory has been well served (Dower, 1985,26).

At a regional level local initiatives have also been taken to “resurrect” the past and to educate children. Kumejima Island’s Board of Education, in 1999, introduced a new “living history” program, to present to students the stories of survivors of the Pacific war. This served, in Matthew Allen’s words, to “provide counternarratives to those sponsored by the ministry of education” (Allen 2002:27) since, for the most part, the Kumejima massacres have been omitted from the historical record available to school children. In terms of education, a more fundamental problem facing Okinawans is that their curriculum is imposed by mainland Japan. The centralized education policy discriminates against Okinawan children because the compulsory Japanese history and culture books largely ignore the existence of Okinawa. Sakuda Isamu, from the Kumejima Board of Education, laments:

The biggest problem we face is that of the ministry of education. It looks to standardize its curriculum without any recognition of regional or cultural difference. So the kids down here learn about Kansai, Kanto and Kinki Japanese history, but nothing at all about local culture and history. . It’s a travesty.

Quoted in Allen (2002:124)

That said, nevertheless, a number of well-known Kume people have successfully become part of a wider Okinawan community, such as Ota Masahide, the former governor of Okinawa prefecture and professor emeritus at the University of the Ryukyus (see Ota 1981, 1991, 1999, 2003).

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In addition to the subordination of Okinawan education to the centralized mainland *monkasho*, another fundamental structural problem preventing Okinawans from achieving a greater degree of autonomy lies in a strong economic dependence upon mainland Japan. This is a key issue which goes hand in hand with politics, the government's policy towards Okinawa is essentially a "stick and carrot" one: harsh suppression of opposition in exchange for financial dividends (Ota 2003). The most glaring example was when, in 1999, the central government pledged to renew negotiations over large-scale economic stimulus packages for Japan's poorest prefecture -with per capita income at 70% of the national average (Taira 1999:171). In return, Inamine was put under intense pressure to secure a site for the building of a new controversial US military base in Nago to take over the functions of the US Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma. Significantly, although Okinawans did, in spite of the "carrot", in a plebiscite on the issue register their opposition to the relocation, ultimately their constitutional rights were ignored, and more money dispensed to ostracize opponents (Yonetani 2001).

Okinawa is often referred to as a "3K" economy-bases (*kichi*), public works (*kokyo koji*) and tourism (*kanko*) (McCormack, 2003). The base issue is a dichotomous one: in conjunction with those Okinawans protesting the bases there are also those who have a vested interest in maintaining them. Thus, in March 1995, while 3000 opposed the occupation of their land and refused to accept the payments, 29,564 Okinawans received the payments without protest. Moreover, many of those refusing were not Okinawans, but outsiders, who own tiny plots under the *hitotsubo* anti-war landowners' movement (Hook and Siddle 2003). In addition, the pernicious effects of the 39 military bases on Okinawa island alone may be offset against the employment opportunities created, although the revenue from U.S bases as a percentage of local GDP has fallen from 25.6%, in 1970, to just 5.7%, in 1996 (Hook and Siddle 2003:5). Ultimately, the positive aspects of the bases are eclipsed by the negative ones.

Construction, or public works, also constitutes a double-edged sword: while infrastructure has been dramatically improved since reversion, compounded by tourism, the two make a toxic cocktail of

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environmental damage (for a thorough analysis of economic and environmental issues see McCormack, 2003).

As well as its ecological ramifications mainland images of Okinawans, as promulgated in advertising Okinawa as a resort, may be seen as an encroachment on Okinawan cultural identity. Okinawans are frequently constructed as the exotic other (Hook and Siddle 2003:6), perpetuating gross stereotypes and undermining Okinawa's cultural diversity. Moreover, many resorts, catering to homeland tastes, do not even serve Okinawan food, import souvenirs from the mainland, and, employing more mainlanders than Okinawans, often enhance not Okinawan, but mainland coffers.

Yet, despite the structural limitations on Okinawa, it nevertheless remains true that Okinawa's status has improved immensely since reversion. Okinawans now have more rights than they did pre-reversion, and, in the area of memorialisation of the past in particular, a large degree of autonomy from the official state sponsored version of history, has been achieved. Even with its limitations, the prefectural peace museum is unprecedented in what it set out to achieve, and perhaps the only museum to scrutinize the behaviour of Imperial troops and avoid the "victim consciousness" or "*higaisha ishiki*" that Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been accused of (see Orr, 2001). Still more, the museum, with its traditional Okinawan-style architecture, while a symbol of pride in Okinawan culture simultaneously is unique in its transnationalization of peace through the *Cornerstone of peace* monument. This lists the names of the victims of the Battle of Okinawa, regardless of their nationality, rank or status as civilian or combatant (see Figal 2001 for an analysis of this memorial). Despite accusations of "Yasukunification", it is in fact diametrically opposed to the nationalistic narrative of war glorification, offered at that site.

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The Cornerstone of Peace Monument, Mabuni in 2002 (Photo by author)

Moreover, in terms of establishing a cultural identity and gaining increased respect from the mainland, significant inroads have been made (Amemiya 1999). Siddle and Hook even suggest that: “a counter-colonization of Japanese cultural space by Okinawan cultural forms is occurring” (Hook and Siddle, 2003:14) citing the popularity of music and Okinawan cookery programmes as examples. Indeed, in 2007, young Okinawan singer, Natsukawa Rimi, idolized by many Japanese, is a staple at *karaoke* evenings.

To conclude, Okinawa has resurged, repeatedly, from hardships of the past, and, in spite of the inherent structural hurdles of the political, economical and education systems, the voice of Okinawa grows. Remarkable gains have been accomplished and strong stances taken. If the base issue, in the present post September 11th world situation, looks bleak, Okinawans continue to display a determined vitality. Okinawa can therefore be seen, depending on the historical time and place, as both phoenix and underdog, perhaps perpetually swinging between the two. The spirit of Okinawa however is resoundingly that of a phoenix, constantly resurging. Okinawans are securing the best deal they can for themselves, within permanent, but often redefined, perimeters. Active participants in their future, constantly renegotiating their position within Japan, Okinawans are, in Hook and Siddle’s phrase: “taking advantage of the contradictory opportunities inherent in the structural constraints upon their lives” Hook and Siddle (2003: 241).

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