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メタデータ	言語: 出版者: 琉球大学アメリカ研究センター 公開日: 2008-07-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Okinawa-U.S. relations, environmental problems, concept of environmental problems, environmental history 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12000/6784

What is Okinawan about Okinawan Environmental Problems? An Outline of the Okinawan Cross-Cultural Environmental Experiences

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Abstract

As we all may agree, environmental issues do not stand by themselves; they are not merely about preservation and conservation of the physical environment and animals living somewhere. They are also social and cultural problems. My main goal is to analyze the process through which "Okinawan environmental problems" have become recognized as "Okinawan" problems. By explaining the social, cultural, and economic situation in postwar Okinawa, I will attempt to delineate some of the essential elements that constitute people's idea of "environmental problems" and show some of the early environmental problems that arose during the 1970s as an example of the cross-cultural experience of Okinawa. I will conclude that Okinawan environmental problems were created through cross-cultural interaction between Okinawas and the U.S. military.

Keywords: Okinawa-U.S. relations, environmental problems, concept of environmental problems, environmental history

I would like to pose a challenging question to start: "What is Okinawan about Okinawan environmental problems?"

This is, in fact, one of the most frequently asked questions when I talk about some examples of environmental problems in Okinawa. There are basically two ways to think about this question.

One is to employ the adjective "Okinawan" as a specific place. In this sense, Okinawan environmental problems are problems derived exclusively from a place called Okinawa. Thus it automatically emphasizes the "particularity" of Okinawan environmental problems.

On the other hand, "Okinawan" in Okinawan environmental problems can be used to emphasize the "universality" of Okinawan environmental problems. Like Ulrich Beck explains about risks in postmodern society in his *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity* (Sage Publications, 1992), environmental problems are universal. They originate from local, specific places, but at the same time, environmental problems affect more than local places. Likewise, the phrase "Okinawan" in "Okinawan environmental problems" can encompass its locality and began to mean a problem that might have something to do with the Okinawan environment but now become so symbolic that it can explain other environmental problems.

Indeed, these two aspects of "particularity" and "universality" of environmental problems are sometimes interchangeable, especially because of the structure of environmental problems. Every local place has its own environmental burden, but its structure, through which environmental burdens are produced, can be identical to any places. For instance, there is an

endangered species called "Yanbaru Kuina" (Okinawan Rail), which is like the Kiwi, a flightless bird in New Zealand. Both birds look similar, and they are increasingly endangered because their natural habitats are threatened not only by predators but also by humans and their expansive range of activities.

To put it simply, this is a universal formula for endangered species, and it is a universal way to look at the problem. On the other hand, this kind of universal perspective does not allow us to consider more specific aspects of the problem. For example, what do both birds eat? What kind of predators attack them? What does the Yanbaru Kuina mean to people living there? These are more specific questions that cannot be reduced into a universal formula.

Thus, asking the question "What is Okinawan about Okinawan environmental problems?" is essentially a way to illustrate two aspects of the problem. My answer is always to emphasize that Okinawan environmental problems are very unique because of Okinawa's own cultural, social, and historical milieu that created the problems, but I also believe that Okinawan environmental problems can provide a perspective to think about similar environmental problems. I believe we need both a particular and a universal perspective to look at environmental problems. By sharing similarities between various environmental problems, we can sympathize with others and work together; by finding differences, we can understand other ways of looking at the problems. Thereby, we can respect all standpoints.

Likewise, I would like to point out both the particularity and universality of Okinawan

environmental problems. My main goal in this paper is to outline cultural, social, and historical processes through which Okinawan environmental problems have become unique, focusing particularly on the cross-cultural relationship between the U.S. military and the Okinawan people. By introducing two specific examples (Ishikawa Beach Pollution and the CTS Problem in Henza), I will explain some historical aspects of Okinawan society pertaining to the U.S. occupation in the postwar era. Then I will introduce two examples of Okinawan environmental problems that will highlight how these incidents can be considered "Okinawan" environmental problems.

Historical Framework

Okinawa experienced devastating environmental destruction as the result of WWII, both extensive demolition of the natural environment and immeasurable damage to Okinawan people's mind, culture, and society. Therefore, anyone who attempts to study environmental problems must account for how both the physical and the human environment were influenced by the war. Although I believe Okinawan environmental problems existed prior to the presence of the U.S. military, my emphasis is on more recent phenomena. This paper focuses on the structure of these problems and also on illustrating the outline of Okinawan environmental consciousness. Today's Okinawan environmental problems have become visible in the process of the vast social changes took place in the postwar period. This is the period—roughly speaking the 1970s—in which the Okinawan environmental movement appeared during the Okinawa reversion period, and this period is also the time through which we can witness how environmental affairs became infused with attempts to protect the endangered natural environment and to preserve Okinawan identity.

To summarize these critical phases in Okinawa environmental history, the following are the historical divisions that I use in this paper:

1. Preparation for War (1940s to October 1944)
2. Direct Impact of the War (1944 to 1945)
3. Aftermath of the War (1945 to 1972)
4. Preservation and Conservation of Natural Resources (1972 to the 1990s and onwards)

Focus of the Project

For this project, I have looked into the US archives to see how the idea of the environment appeared. In order to do that, I focused first on how institutions have reacted to particular environmental problems.

Since 1945, there have been several

organizational transitions of both military and civilian administrations. From 1945 to 1946, the "United States Naval Military Government" had administrative control. From 1946 to 1950, the "United States Army Military Government" took over. Then, the administration changed to the "United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands" (USCAR) followed by the "Government of the Ryukyu Islands" during from 1950 to 1972. During those years, the "Department of Health and Welfare" played a central role in work related to the environment in terms of sanitation, social welfare, and disease control.

However, by using the term "the environment," we have to be careful about what it meant during those times. Just as Okinawa had to recover from the damage of the war, the Department of Health and Welfare focused on sanitation, disease control, and public welfare. The primary concern was better "health." The environment meant the social environment where humans live. A better environment meant a better place and condition for humans to live. So if you look for the term "environment" in the U.S. administrative archives during 1950s, you will encounter such files as "family planning," "leprosy (Hansen's Disease)" "salt and water samples," or "pest control."

It was during the late 1960s that the term "pollution" began to appear in both U.S. and Okinawan administrative files. For instance, one of the first official documents on pollution was "Ishikawa Beach Pollution" which is included in "Preventive Medicine, Veterinary and Sanitation Files 1960-1971." Perhaps in response to the actual environmental pollution (mostly toxic), this was the period in which the Department of Health and Welfare created a subdivision called the "Center for Pollution and Sanitation" (October 1, 1971). In 1972, when Okinawa reverted to Japan, the Department of Environment and Sanitation was created, and in 1974, the Department of Health and Welfare changed its name to the Department of Environment and Health, within which both the Offices of Natural Conservation and the Office of Pollution Regulation were also established.

If we look at these institutional changes, we can understand that they were reflections of the transition of people's concern for health and infrastructure in the '50s and '60s to the natural environment in the 70s. Or, to put it differently, the point of emphasis in environmental administration moved from the concern for the human-centered, social environment during the 50s and 60s to a more comprehensive outlook in the 70s in which both humans and non-human nature were taken into consideration. Now we can assume that it was in the

1970s that environmental problems were institutionally recognized, and the term “environment” was used in the 1970s in the way that we generally mean today.

Of course, we also have to be aware of actual problems that were experienced by people. Institutions or politics are reactive rather than proactive, so that the transition of the institutional label, “the environment,” might have described different situations. In fact, the noise from military aircraft, the leaking of toxic substances (PCBs) from the American bases, as well as non-military related environmental problems had drawn attention prior to 1970s. If we look at different sources such as Okinawan local newspapers and brochures, there were concerns such as smoke from the pottery industry, noise and smoke from steel companies, or water pollution during late 1950s and 1960s. These kinds of discrepancies in terms of recognizing environmental problems are indeed the issue in my project. Although there have been environmental problems, such as those just shown above, there were some critical incidents that drew people’s attention and became environmental problems; whereas there were other environmental problems that didn’t draw any attention and thus weren’t recognized by many as a problem. In Okinawa, the presence of American Military troops played a key role in making environmental problems visible. This statement is by no means intended to justify the presence of the military bases; nor do I imply that the Military has been the only and worst polluter on the islands. My point is that, when different values—concerning the environment—meet, environmental problems become visible. Let me elaborate on this point by introducing two of the early environmental problems in Okinawa.

Ishikawa Beach Pollution

There were two environmental problems that drew people’s attention mostly from the 1950s to the 1970s. These cases show how environmental problems became recognized as “environmental problems.” The first incident took place in Ishikawa Village, and this incident can be seen in such files as: “Pollution Lower Bishagawa [Hijyagawa]1960 – 1971” and “Ishikawa Beach Pollution 1967-68.” As far as I know, in these files, we can find the first use of “pollution” in military documents. For this reason, Ishikawa beach pollution can be considered one of the earliest water pollution incidents recognized in Okinawa.

In “Disposition Form” dated on 25 Aug. 1967, it says:

Recent serious pollution of Ishikawa Beach has been traced in part to night soil from Ishikawa City. Tests

performed indicate that local contamination of the waters adjacent to the beach exceed normal limits allowed by most U.S. Government agencies. Since Ishikawa City has no satisfactory means of disposing of its night soil, and this has resulted in a public health problem of considerable magnitude, and since information from GRI [Government of the Ryukyu Islands] Construction Department indicates programming for this project in 1976, it is requested that steps be taken to fund that part of the treatment facility needed to treat night soil in FY 69, subject to GRI concurrence.... The government of Japan has shown no financial interest in the Master Plan—Ishikawa City Integrated Sewerage and Sewage Disposal.

Not only can we see how the postwar Okinawan society was not yet equipped with a sewage disposal system, but also how its problem was dealt with in a complicated manner. Ishikawa City was then one of the biggest and most rapidly growing cities in Okinawa, and the U.S. military government found that the ocean was being polluted by the city. For the Japanese government, Okinawa was not part of Japan at that time; thus, it is interesting to note that the Japanese government felt no responsibility to give financial aid to Okinawa for the establishment of a sewage system; it was rather expected that the U.S. military should take on the project.

This environmental problem is important to my discussion because of the process in which the military found the pollution. Looking over the Navy and Marine administrative files, there is an indication that in the early 1960s, the military government was looking for beaches for recreational use. The criteria included whether a beach had good parking or whether it was located far from local residents, among other things. Ishikawa Beach was one of the beaches the military chosen; however, they checked the water quality and found that it was severely contaminated. The military government made an extensive research and found that the contaminants came from neighboring Ishikawa City. If it were not for military interest in the recreational use of Ishikawa Beach, the Ishikawa Beach pollution would not have been recognized in the late 1960s.

Based on the research I have done so far, it may be that the Ishikawa Beach pollution was created by the presence of the U.S. military. Different ways of using the environment made the Ishikawa Beach pollution visible. It was recognized as “pollution” not only because the beach was chemically contaminated by sewage from Ishikawa City, but also because the quality of the water prevented the military from receiving the benefits of the environment. This is the

reason why the Ishikawa Beach pollution was not likely to be recognized as a problem for Okinawan people. Of course, I do not mean that the pollution didn't exist. Indeed, Ishikawa Beach was polluted, but it became a problem in the late 1960s because the Americans had a different way of using the environment other than Okinawans. Later, with U.S. military government leadership, the Okinawan government started building a sewage disposal system, and the Ishikawa City area established a water disposal system for the first time in Okinawa.

I have already described how the term "environment" was changed up to the 1970s, and now we know that the 1970s was the period in which environmental problems started to be recognized institutionally. It was a time when Okinawan infrastructure was increasingly developed, and as a result, we can see new ways of interacting with the environment. Because there was an inevitable connection with the U.S. military government, we can see how Okinawan environmental problems gradually have taken form.

CTS Problems in Henza

In the 1970s, an energy crisis became a central and urgent issue. The energy crisis of the winter of 1973-4 shaped a new issue. Both Japanese and American governments were affected by oil shortages, rising prices, and an emphasis on energy conservation.

In order to illustrate another environmental problem in the 1970s that illustrates some other aspects of "Okinawan" environmental problems, I would like to introduce one incident in Henza, Yonagusuku village, and a book called *The Mother Ocean* (1981) by Seishin Asato. It is a book about CTS (Central Terminal Station), meaning the oil transit station in a district called Henza in Yonagusuku Village, which is located in the east side of the mainland Okinawa. This project was initiated by both the U.S. and Japanese governments in the preparation for the oil crisis in the 1970s. Huge oil tankers were in great demand but few ports were available at that time for the oil tankers. Thus both governments decided to build a transit station from which smaller boats go back and forth between tankers and the station to transport oils. The project started in 1966 by American military and Oil Company called GALF initiated to build the station. When it was built, however, the coast of Henza district had to be reclaimed from the sea. Despite Henza people's opposition to the project, the station was completed in 1970 and as soon as the station began operation, it brought about many environmental problems such as oil spill, destruction of marine ecology near the coast.

Although the CTS station was built and there were environmental problems created from it, Henza People's opposition was so organized and effective that it influenced following environmental movements in Okinawa. It is known as the "CTS movement. Asato is one of the leaders of the CTS movement who helped organize the movement." In the book, he writes, "As the war ended, our youth was over. After the war, I realized what it means to be an Okinawan. I worked really hard to rebuilt schools and houses after the war; that's how my youth was all about. But suddenly as the appearance of the CTS project, I became aware of my identity as an Okinawan" (22). I believe Asato's words are important to our understanding of Okinawan environmental movements because here we can see how he is associated with his identity with his place, Yakena. He lived in the period that I have surveyed. He survived the war, got involved with re-building of Okinawan after the war, and now he is confronting some of the negative aspects that resulted from social changes after the war.

Samuel P. Hays suggests that "Ecological perspective involved an affirmation of the capacity of individuals to take personal responsibility for their lives by designing with nature rather than with larger, remoter, and more centralized human institutions" (31). I believe that Asato's words exactly embody environmental thoughts because he feels responsible for the environment by recognizing his presence in the environment. Therefore in terms of the principle, the CTS movement is an environmental movement that concerns about the relationship between humans and the environment—which emphasizes not only humans' benefits but also the ecology of the place. Also, perhaps more important is that Asato combines the crisis of place with his identity as an Okinawan. Using Samuel Hays phrases, he could achieve this sort of environmental consciousness because he witnessed "larger, remoter, more centralized human institutions" such as big oil company, Japanese government, as well as the US government that suddenly appeared in the face of the reversion. For this standpoint, Asato was not happy about reversion and he even insisted that Okinawa, or Yakena, should be independent from mainland Japan.

Asato was 32 when the war was over, and confronting the U.S. Military as external forces made him aware of his identity, which was based on his life rooted in his place. Asato also talks about people's grass-root movement, some important aspects of the CTS movement.

Movement will come to an existence when people made aware of what they are. You have to expose something lying inside of you, something that constitutes essential

part of yourself. You don't fight for lofty ideas and thoughts, you fight for yourself. So, we don't need leaders for the movement. Each one of us is the representative of the place. Look at the War, whether you have a good leader or not, everybody is the victim. (20)

Here, we can see important principles of Okinawan environmental movement. Emphasizing the connection between people and the place, what Asato is describing here is the principle of environmental justice movement, characterized as local, grass-root movement. Environmental justice movement is not simply about race, class, and the environment; but rather it is essentially about struggle for one's connection with the place, acknowledging fair and equal distribution of benefits and burdens. Asato clearly mentions that you have to expose inside of yourself, in other words, the most essential part of the self that make what you are. For him, that essential part is his connection to the place, which is now endangered by the big oil company. Evoked by endangered natural environment, and by his identity based on the place recognized by the presence of "otherness" in the time of the reversion period, the CTS movement can be considered the first Okinawan environmental movement (and supposedly) one of the first environmental justice movements in Japan.

Conclusion

Samuel P. Hays writes in his 1987 book that "Environmental concerns were rooted in the vast social changes that took place in the United States after World War II" (2). He goes on to explain:

This [the expansion of interest in environmental affairs] began with a rapid growth in outdoor recreation in the 1950s, extended into the wider field of the protection of natural environment, then became infused with attempts to coop with air and water pollution and still later with toxic chemical pollutants. Such activity was hardly extensive prior to World War II; afterward it was a major concern. (3)

Hays observations of American environmental consciousness in the postwar period goes well with the situation in which the Ishikawa Beach incident drew attention; it is precisely the conflict in value between the U.S. military and Okinawan people. The conflict in the use of the natural environment makes a problem visible, and this structure of conflicts is the essence of "Okinawan" environmental problems.

In the CTS movement in Henza, what we have seen is an extension of Ishikawa Beach pollution. Okinawan environmental consciousness was evoked in the reaction against the military presence. Again, we have to remember that Okinawa had been vigorously involved with rebuilding the society and its economy,

which is also the case in mainland Japan: however, what makes Okinawan environmental unique is that environmental problems have been intertwined with the military base. It was so because both Okinawans and the American military looked at, and used the physical environment, and their views toward the environment have been changing, so that it is important not to employ the term "environment" single-handedly. If I can add one more comment, it is because of this transient, complicated meanings of its term, Okinawan environmental problems have come to become unique.

Notes:

This paper is based on the presentation at "University of the Ryukyus and University of California at Davis Symposium, Cross-cultural Contact between the U.S. and Okinawa" on Nov. 7 – 8, 2003 (at University of California Davis)

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