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## Remembering the Battle of Okinawa and Reshaping Community War Narratives: The Commemoration of *Irei no Hi* in the Okinawan Diaspora in Hawai‘i

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The purpose of *Irei no Hi* (Memorial Day for the Battle of Okinawa) is not only to remember how destructive and painful war is but also to remember that as a world citizen, we must do everything in our power to avoid it. The day is also to remember the resilience, the courage, and the spirits of the Okinawan people . . . as they continue to hope for the peace and sustainability of their homeland. The day is very much to learn from their stories, especially *chimu-gukuru*, an Okinawan word that stands for heart, spirit, and soul. During this time of crisis in the world, with the coronavirus pandemic and racial unrest in America and in other parts of the world, more than ever, I believe we need to learn the lessons of the past from our ancestors to drum up our own *chimugukuru*. Gwen Fujie, organizer of *Reflections: Irei no Hi in Hawaii*, a virtual event commemorating Okinawan Memorial Day in 2020 (Fujie 2020, at 1:44:45)

### Keywords

war memory, diaspora, life story, community, resilience

### Introduction

Okinawan Memorial Day is observed on June 23 to remember the lives lost during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. In Okinawa, the day is referred to as *Irei no Hi*, literally “the day for consoling the souls of those who died.” The Battle of Okinawa, lasting three months (April–June), was the last battleground of the Asia–Pacific War and resulted in many deaths among both Japanese and American soldiers. For America, capturing Okinawa would open the door to invading Japan. For Japan, the battle was intended to delay the US invasion. The battle is distinguished by the number of civilian deaths: one-fourth of Okinawa’s civilian population died in the battle. June 23 is regarded as the end of the battle because it is the day when organized Japanese military resistance ceased with the suicide of General Mitsuru Ushijima. Many remaining families treat *Irei no Hi* as an anniversary of their family members’ deaths, and it is the day to remember all of those who

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died in the Battle of Okinawa. The official prefectural ceremony is held at the Peace Memorial Park in Itoman-city, a site of intensive fighting and the final battle ground.

This paper describes and analyzes commemorative practices around the Battle of Okinawa organized by the Okinawan diasporic community in Hawai'i, which began in 2005. The service usually includes religious prayers, testimony from survivors, and live music performances. The significant components are a traditional Okinawan music performance and explanation of the meaning of songs about the lives of Okinawans and the landscape during and after the battle, and also life stories given by war survivors. In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the memorial service was held virtually for the first time, under the leadership of the younger generations, allowing the participation of Okinawan communities in other parts of the world. This paper examines the sociohistorical and political process through which *Irei no Hi* has transcended the geographical location of Okinawa to become practiced by the diasporic community in Hawai'i. Based on my analysis of ethnographic research, the newsletters published by the Hawaii Okinawa United Association (HUOA) and other related documents, and life-story interviews I conducted in Hawai'i and Okinawa between 2018 and 2021, I demonstrate that this practice of commemoration in Hawai'i is not just a practice to console the souls of those lost during the battle but also a site for the articulation of a sense of belonging in the diaspora through negotiating the meanings of *Irei no Hi* and how it should be observed in the diaspora.

In his book, *A Postwar Ethnography of the War Dead in Okinawa*, Tsuyoshi Kitamura (2009) claims that studying the aftermath of the Battle of Okinawa allows us to understand the memories and emotional scars that remain and illuminates the war's continued relevance to the present. He argues that for survivors and surviving relatives, the paths their war dead took during the battle are memorial sites (Kitamura 2009, 35). Kitamura's work shows that memory is a living thing and also re-imagines the Islands of Okinawa as full of intersecting paths of living memories. Although more than 75 years have passed since the end of the Battle of Okinawa, efforts to preserve the memories of the battle are visible in contemporary Okinawa. Throughout the month of June, primary and secondary school teachers emphasize peace education and teach about the battle, often inviting survivors to share their testimonies so that children can learn about the tragedy of the battle and the importance of peace. Because the survivors are growing old, however, new efforts to preserve their experiences are being made at both the local and prefectural level, such as the training of postwar-generation docents at local peace museums in Okinawa.

In this paper, by understanding memory as plural and living, I examine the negotiations of the meanings of *Irei no Hi* in the diasporic community in Hawai'i. First, this paper briefly reviews literature on the Okinawan diaspora as background to understanding *Irei no Hi* as a practice of diaspora. Second, I discuss the militarized public discourse of the Battle of Okinawa in Hawai'i and situate *Irei no Hi* as cultural activism to produce a counter-narrative. Third, I analyze the life stories of people who were influential in bringing *Irei no Hi* to Hawai'i. As Diane C. Fujino points out, "social history, with its

focus on studying ordinary people from the bottom up, is a particularly relevant method for studying grassroots movements” (2008, 150). The life stories illuminate the sociopolitical processes through which the *Irei no Hi* memorial service came to be observed in Hawai‘i and different discourses of the *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i. In addition, they articulate the narrators’ sense of belonging and cast light on the reshaping of the community’s war narrative.

Passing on the war memories on the Battle of Okinawa is significant in at least two ways. First, the memory of the Battle of Okinawa has shaped Okinawan collective identity and has played an important part in ongoing cultural and social activism in Okinawa. *Irei no Hi* was established in 1961 by the Government of the Ryukyu Islands during the US Occupation. After Okinawa’s “reversion” to Japan in 1972, the day was no longer a holiday, but since 1991, it has been publicly recognized as an Okinawan prefectural holiday. The fight for its own memorial day has been framed by the socio-political situation of Okinawa by challenging Japan’s War Memorial Day—August 15, the date of Japan’s surrender in 1945. Although Okinawa’s reversion to Japanese administration ended the US military occupation, approximately 70.6% of US military bases in Japan are still located in Okinawa despite Okinawa making up less than 1% of Japan’s land area. Recognizing the interdependence of US-Japan colonialism in Okinawa, Annmaria Shimabuku argued that Okinawans’ ongoing resistance to US military bases should be understood as resistance to this “mutual colonialism” (2012, 3). An ideology of peace based on the memory of the battle has played a significant role in challenging the continuous colonization and militarization of Okinawa. Shinji Kojima examines the process through which the social memory of the Battle of Okinawa has been constructed in his discourse analysis of the leaders of the reversion movement in Okinawa (2007, 138). Understanding memory as manifested as a discourse, he shows how the battle has been differently remembered over the post-war historical period.

Second, the war memories on the Battle of Okinawa transcends the dominant narratives of war memories that are often shaped by national frameworks. For example, while most national war memorials are dedicated to the nation’s soldiers, the names inscribed on the Cornerstone of Peace at Peace Memorial Park in Itoman, Okinawa, include victims known to have died due to the battle, regardless of nationality or of military/civilian status, including Okinawans, Japanese, Americans, Koreans, and Taiwanese. By transcending nationalism, this war memorial constructs a war memory for humanity. The humanitarian perspective was also emphasized in a recent protest by Takamatsu Gushiken, who has spent forty years voluntarily searching for the remains of victims of the battle and returning the remains to families, regardless of their nationality. On the week of the *Irei no Hi* in 2021, Gushiken began a hunger strike to draw attention to the Japanese government’s plan to potentially use soil from Itoman and Yaese, in the south of Okinawa Island, for the construction of a new US military base at Henoko in Nago, which is in the north. In his protest, he emphasized that the remains of the still unknown victims mixed into that soil are not just of Okinawans but also of Japanese, Americans, and Koreans, urging

people to understand that it is not just an Okinawan issue. On August 15, Japan's Memorial Day, Gushiken continued his strike in Tokyo to make an appeal to the people of Japan (*Ryukyu Shimpo* 2021).

My academic interest in diaspora studies and life stories comes from my family's history, particularly my memories of my late grandmother (1915–2017). Born and raised in Tottori Prefecture, my grandmother survived the war in Japan and migrated to Okinawa, then under US Occupation. Because of her traumatic experiences, which she could hardly put into words until late in life, she decided on Okinawa because it was as far away as she could get from where she had suffered. In Okinawa, she encountered my father (1935–2017), who was born in Okinawa and had lost his parents early. She became his adopted mother. She never left Okinawa again. I grew up listening to her stories about her childhood in Tottori, her war experiences in Tokyo, and her new life in postwar Okinawa, which made me wonder what it is like to start a new life in an unfamiliar place, to have a home that one cannot return to, and to live in a community where one cannot speak openly about one's traumatic past. Life stories told by my grandmother have shaped my understanding that Okinawa, where I was born and raised, is a place where multiple trajectories of diasporic lives intersect.

This paper includes the life story of an Okinawan woman who survived the Battle of Okinawa and migrated to Hawai'i in the postwar years. Her narrative of the battle, standing in stark contrast to the American nationalistic war narrative, reveals her continuous suffering from war memories and her sense of belonging. Her narrative echoes those of other women in Okinawa who survived the battle. The narratives of these Okinawan women who survived the Battle of Okinawa are what the narrative psychologist Yoko Yamada (2021) calls *narrative[s] of loss*, which are different from masculine narratives of the battle prevalent in Hawai'i that focus on the soldiers and individuals as heroes. These women's stories are also different from *narrative[s] of gain* (Yamada 2021) that include the success stories of Nisei soldiers in the Okinawan community. Yamada argued that the act of telling one's life story is an act of organizing and making sense of one's life experiences, and making sense of and telling one's life story fosters resilience. When survivors recount their own experiences of the battle, they also share life stories of those who did not survive. They talk about their deaths, and in connection with the dead, they make meaning of their own lives. The listeners, on the other hand, confront life and death as told by these narrators—the survivors of the battle—and reconsider their own lives by understanding the stories of others who did not survive. The *Irei no Hi* narratives that are co-constructed between the narrators and the listeners make the Okinawan community aware of the importance of listening to these narratives of loss, which foster empathy for the continuous struggles and sufferings of the survivors and understanding of the sacredness of individual lives, and then considering one's own responsibilities.

### ***Irei no Hi* as a Practice of Diaspora**

The term *diaspora* means dispersion and has come to be used for both voluntary and involuntary displacement from a homeland, as well as the people thus displaced. Diaspora is a way of understanding the lives, cultures, and identity formation of people in transnational contexts. Rogers Brubaker argued that diaspora should be analyzed “as a category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group” (2005, 13). The concept of diaspora gives us a perspective from which to question the nature of the nation state and in particular to confront what it includes and excludes, as well as to recognize individual diversity. Considering the Okinawan diaspora as a category of practice, rather than a category of analysis, allows us to understand the meanings of *Irei no Hi* as negotiated in the diasporic context and shaped by the narratives of the actors.

Takeyuku (Gaku) Tsuda writes: “[D]iasporas are not an objective social state (that exists or does not exist) but a relative condition of diasporicity,” (2019, 191) where some are more diasporic than others. He argues that one of the determinants of diasporicity is shared powerful historical memories of collective trauma, which can be sustained over generations and lead to collective solidarity. Studies of Okinawans’ migrations increasingly acknowledge the distinctive aspects of their experiences, which are shaped by the double colonialism of Japan and the US (Ueunten 1989, 2015; Arakaki 2002; Kaneshiro 2002; Arakaki 2007). Dispersion from Okinawa began after Okinawans were incorporated into Japan’s nation state. The abolition of the land division system and the promulgation of a new land consolidation law became push factors, and many people left the islands of Okinawa for Hawai‘i, other Pacific islands, the US, South America, and other destinations, both to find work and to avoid conscription. Furthermore, during the US occupation of Okinawa, many Okinawans were forced out when their lands were taken for the construction of US bases.

Robert K. Arakaki characterized Okinawans outside of Okinawa as a “double minority within a double diaspora” (2007, 26). By “double minority,” Arakaki is referring to their status as both immigrants and as “second-class Japanese citizens” following the history of Japan’s forcible annexation of Okinawa in 1892. By “double diaspora,” he means that the Okinawan diaspora includes Okinawans’ movement to pre-war Japanese colonies in the Pacific such as the Philippines, Micronesia, Taiwan, and Manchuria. Existing studies have revealed how migrant Okinawans have experienced this status as a double minority. They and their descendants have managed to create spaces to maintain and express their distinctive diasporic identity as Okinawans or *Uchinanchu*, for example through Okinawan music and dance traditions, and have kept strong social, economic, and cultural ties with their homeland.

Okinawan migration began in 1900. Hawai‘i was the first destination for overseas migration from Okinawa. Previous studies on the Okinawan community in Hawai‘i have revealed the sociohistorical processes of its emergence and change over time, focusing on

the revival of Okinawan identity that began in the 1980s. Many such studies employ a constructive approach, examining community survival by analyzing the roles of organizational and cultural systems in sustaining collective identity. Oral histories of Issei who came to the islands of Hawai'i as plantation workers document the "double discrimination" they experienced as immigrants and as Okinawans. In the 1920s and 1930s, when large numbers of Okinawan plantation workers relocated to urban Honolulu on Oahu to find better jobs, they formed many Okinawan locality clubs (based on their home villages) for mutual support. However, with the outbreak of war, when the activities of Japanese and Japanese Americans were restricted, the activities of the Okinawan locality clubs were also curtailed. In 1948, a relief movement was launched in Hawai'i to help reconstruct the war-torn islands of Okinawa. Utilizing the existing networks cultivated by the locality clubs and through cultural events such as Ryukyu performing arts and Ryukyu sumo, relief supplies and money were collected. Working toward the common goal of helping their homeland led to the formation of a collective identity as *Uchinaanchu*. Today, on the island of Oahu, there are more than 40 locality clubs that play an important role in supporting the activities of the Hawaii Okinawa United Association (HUOA).

Joyce Chinen, an Okinawan diaspora scholar, argues for the need to reconsider diasporic Okinawans "as settlers and [to] reexamine their conceptualizations and actions vis-à-vis indigenous peoples and their self-determination efforts" (2009, 70). Issues of indigeneity and settler-colonialism should be considered when analyzing the practice of *Irei no Hi* in Hawai'i. Stories of Nisei veterans often glorify their sacrifices and heroic efforts, potentially reinforcing a nationalistic discourse and obscuring their status as settler-colonizers in Hawai'i. In fact, the introduction of *Irei no Hi* created an opportunity for fostering a new form of solidarity between Okinawans and Native Hawaiians, emphasizing links with indigenous communities worldwide, and also recognizing the continuous sacrifices of other Asians and Pacific Islanders and the militarization of their lands.

This paper's focus on the practice of collective remembering of the Battle of Okinawa reveals a multilayered sense of diasporic identity. Wesely Ueunten, an Okinawan diaspora scholar, argues that "diasporic Okinawan culture is a loose and expansive category because it is a product of the creative agency of diasporic Okinawans" (2015). Such a view helps us to challenge the assumption that diasporic identity and culture are fixed and instead enables us to consider diasporic Okinawans' active roles in creating their own culture and identity. He also suggests that it is important to look for the connections within the broader Okinawan diaspora rather than dividing it into separate areas such as Hawai'i, California, or Brazil. He also argues against a distinction between Okinawa itself and the diaspora. While the current study focuses on a practice in one diasporic community, I consider it to merely show a piece of how the Battle of Okinawa has been remembered and *Irei no Hi* has been commemorated in the diaspora. Moreover, the life story analysis in this study demonstrates the importance of the trajectories of diasporic lives within the Okinawan Islands and beyond.

## **Militarized Memories of the Pacific War**

Hawai‘i has been a contested site for the creation of militarized narratives of American wars. Scholars have noted the prevalence of discourses of victimhood and patriotic military sacrifice at war memorial sites in Hawai‘i. For instance, in Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez’s analysis of the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor in Hawai‘i, she argued that this and related sites generate a narrative of “nostalgic discourses of masculine heroic suffering and sacrifice” (2013, 20), and that such a narrative helps to justify the illegal US annexation, the subsequent land dispossession, and the continued military occupation of Hawai‘i. As Geoffrey M. White, in his study on Pacific War memories, explained, despite changes in the displays at Pearl Harbor and challenges to patriotic symbolism, American patriotism has remained strongly present at war memorial sites (2016). The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu (the Punchbowl), which is the burial site for military personnel died in the Pacific in the World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, is another site of production of militarized war memories in Hawai‘i. Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull argued that the memorial and cemetery at the Punchbowl, represent “a masculine space that is planned, controlled, disciplined, orderly,” telling a story of “external danger and national victory,” while “feminine figures are incorporated into supporting roles in the narrative of manly conquest, but there are no autonomous voices or spaces that could be coded female” (1996, 1–2).

Although Hawai‘i is a place where war memories have been highly militarized under continuous American dominance, it has also been a place where alternative and counter-narrative discourses have emerged to challenge the dominant narratives. Efforts to create counter-narratives of Pearl Harbor have been made through transnational collaboration and dialogue. In 2010, for instance, a workshop for US and Japanese secondary school teachers was held in Hawai‘i to discuss how Pearl Harbor should be taught in history classes. The workshop not only brought in Japanese points of view and discussed the experiences of Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i; it also included a talk on perspectives of Hawai‘ians on the historical event. Noting that “Pearl Harbor” is a colonial naming of Pu‘uloa, Jon Kamakawiwo‘ole Osorio described the values and meanings of the place as known through its mention in Hawai‘ian songs (Yaguchi, Morinmo, and Nakayama 2007). Besides this workshop, Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez’s work emphasizes the significance of “Detours,” a counter-narrative tour that “provides alternative narratives of US military geographics on O‘ahu” (2013, 20). She describes how the tour decolonizes the narratives at Pearl Harbor by providing historical context that shows Pearl Harbor to be “a crucial factor in the end of the Hawaiian monarchy” (Gonzalez 2017, 181).

The Battle of Okinawa, the focus of this study, is also represented through nationalistic and militarized narratives at war memorial sites in Hawai‘i. Although such sites emphasize the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces, they also make reference to the Battle of Okinawa in the context of the American campaign in the Pacific after the

Pearl Harbor attack. For example, at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, a map of the Battle of Okinawa is displayed among the American campaigns in the Pacific. At the map galleries at the National Cemetery of the Pacific, each battle in the Pacific is explained in a highly militarized manner, dehumanizing those who served as soldiers while highlighting the strategic use of armed forces (e.g., which forces participated and from what direction American forces invaded). The panel description of the Battle of Okinawa explains the battle as follows:

The marine divisions, which had cleared the northern half of the island, joined in the battle to the south. Naval gunfire, massed artillery and mortar fire, and continuous strikes by tactical aircraft supported the advance of these and the army divisions as they pushed southward against fanatical residents and furious counterattacks. The high ground held by the Japanese in southern Okinawa was ideal for a prolonged defense. The limestone hills, honeycombed with natural caves, afforded every advantage of terrain. Each successive enemy strongpoint was cleared only by persistent and heroic effort. By the middle of June our ground forces had battered their way through the fortified Naha-Suri line. By 22 June 1945 the last organized unit of the Japanese garrison had been destroyed. Okinawa then became the first American strategic base within easy air range of the Japan homeland. (“Okinawa 26 March–June 1945,” 2018)

Ferguson and Turnbull argue that the memorial at the Punchbowl tells a narrative in which “‘their’ killing is irrational, unexplainable, misguided” while “‘our’ killing is laudable and necessary” (1996, 11). This militaristic narrative of the Battle of Okinawa, emphasizing the great sacrifice of American lives and honoring their “persistent and heroic effort” while describing the enemy residents as “fanatical,” tells that the US’s victory is deserved. The narrative also represents the battle as a fight between Japanese and American forces, with no reference to the impacts on Okinawan civilians.

The omission of Okinawans’ voices is notable at war memorial sites in Hawai‘i. The USS Bowfin Submarine Museum & Park in Pearl Harbor provides another example. Part of the museum is the Bowfin itself—the submarine that on August 22, 1944, sank the Tsushima Maru, which was carrying evacuating children away from Okinawa before the US invaded. At the museum, the name of the Tsushima Maru appears as one of the ships sunk by the Bowfin, but the innocent lives lost are not mentioned. At the Hawai‘i Army Military Museum in Waikīkī, there are no displays on the Battle of Okinawa; however, exhibits on American campaigns in the Pacific emphasize how the great sacrifice of American lives justified the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

### ***Irei No Hi* in Hawai‘i as Counter-Narrative**

The first memorial service for the Battle of Okinawa occurred one year after it ended, primarily to console the spirits of those who had died. Memorial services were held at Buddhist temples three, seven, thirteen, seventeen, twenty-three, twenty-seven, and thirty-three years after the battle. As Shingo Iitaka has explained, these spirit-consoling



services are part of Japanese Buddhist tradition and are “not only a means to remember the past, but also an active practice intended to reconstruct relationships with the dead” (2015, 127). Family members usually conduct such services. In 1977, the Jikoen Hongwanji Mission of Honolulu held a thirty-third-year memorial service, which was to be the last such service for almost thirty years. In efforts to reconstruct their lives, the memories of surviving members were repressed after the thirty-third-year memorial service (Yamashiro 2007, 170).

Only in 2005 was the *Irei no Hi* revived to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Battle of Okinawa. The increased transnational movement of people between the homeland and the diasporic community in Hawai‘i was an important factor in this revitalization. The *Irei no Hi* memorial service in 2005 was conducted on the initiative of Okinawan students who were studying in Hawai‘i in the Obuchi Program, a relatively new scholarship program funded by the US federal government. As they interacted with the local Okinawan diasporic community, they questioned why so many Okinawans in Hawai‘i did not know about the Battle of Okinawa although many valued the Okinawan culture and strongly identified as Okinawan. Many of these Okinawan students were aware of current military issues and the historical past of the Battle of Okinawa, and they began to discuss these issues with local Okinawan Americans, inspiring the idea of reestablishing the *Irei no Hi* memorial service. In 2005, the group organized the first *Irei no Hi*. They approached the Hawai‘i Honganji Temple, whose reverend was a civilian survivor of the battle. He understood their idea and offered the use of the temple for the event. For the following year, they decided to organize the Hawaii Okinawa Alliance (HOA; *hoa* also means “friend” in Hawai‘ian) and to work together to commemorate the *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i.

The introduction of *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i in 2005 took ingenuity and effort. Rinda Yamashiro was one of the students involved in it. Reflecting on the experience, she explained her belief that it was important to respect the victims and their remaining family members (Yamashiro 2021). She remembered that when she was growing up in Okinawa, every June her school had peace education, and the students learned about the battle. She recalled being shocked by photos of the war dead that were displayed on the walls at her school, and she also thought these photos might disturb some audiences. For the *Irei no Hi* event in Hawai‘i, the Okinawan students came up with the idea of using white tissue paper to cover each photo of the war dead. One explained: “We thought there might be some people who view the photos as ‘disgusting.’ If that’s the case, then the intention of showing the photos is not being conveyed. To protect the war dead from such comments, we used white tissue paper to cover the photos. We did not want to do anything that would further hurt the victims” (Yamashiro 2021).

Okinawan civilian war survivors residing in Hawai‘i were invited to attend the first *Irei no Hi* memorial service and to tell their stories in Japanese, and the students from Okinawa provided translation of the stories into English. The HOA framed *Irei no Hi* as promoting an anti-war and pro-world peace ideology, avoiding the creation of a narrative

of the war that focused only on Okinawans as its victims. The ideology of world peace and demilitarization was salient in a pamphlet distributed on the day of the service: “Just as the atrocities of the holocaust, the atomic bombings, and indigenous people worldwide must not be forgotten, so must the tragedy of Uchinaa (Okinawa), lest we repeat these human catastrophes called war”(Hawai‘i Okinawa Alliance, 2006).

The importance of civilians’ experiences at the *Irei no Hi* was emphasized by the HOA members to encourage the community to think about world peace, human rights for indigenous peoples, and demilitarization of the islands. More than a hundred people attended the 2005 *Irei no Hi* memorial at Honganji Temple. Three testimonies were given by three individuals who had direct experiences of the war: Higa Takejiro, an Okinawan Kibei Nisei who had experienced the war as a Nisei interpreter; Toguchi Nakasone, who talked about her experience of the war in Saipan; and Miyoko Kaneshiro, a survivor of the war on Okinawa Island. The next year, the HOA and the HUOA co-sponsored an *Irei no Hi* program at the Hawaii Okinawa Center. The event, attended by one hundred people, featured photos, a film, survivor testimony, music, poetry, and discussions. The testimonies were given by war survivors Rev. Shinsuke Uehara, who shared his experiences of surviving the *Chibichiri gama* at the age of twelve, referring to caves in Yomitan on Okinawa Island where people found refuge but which were also sites of compulsory suicide. He talked about how his war experience made him cherish all life. Another testimony was given by Kay Murata, who shared her experience of surviving at the age of five in Yanbaru in the northern part of Okinawa Island, remembering her mother’s struggle to feed her children, as well as rape incidents and the continuous trauma from the war.

After the HOA’s introduction of the *Irei no Hi* memorial service, the importance of this event began to be recognized by the larger Okinawan community in Hawai‘i. HUOA aimed for a larger audience at the *Irei no Hi* memorial service. Although attendance at HUOA’s activities was high, many people did not know about the Battle of Okinawa, so the HUOA began to introduce *Irei no Hi* to a wider audience so that the members of the community could learn about the battle. The community’s interest in *Irei no Hi* was also heightened because of the increased transnational movement that began in the 2000s, when more organized tours to Japan and Okinawa became available to Okinawans in Hawai‘i. They visited major Japanese cities such as Tokyo and Kyoto but also Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Okinawa, they visited the Peace Memorial Park and the Cornerstone of Peace. This was an eye-opening experience about the tragedy of the war from the local civilian perspective, and visitors came to understand the importance of peace.

### **The Narratives of *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i**

The following section presents narratives of some key actors in *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i. The analysis of these individuals’ life stories allows us to see how they became involved in the introduction of the *Irei no Hi* to Hawai‘i and how they narrate their interpretations. The interviewees consented to the use of their real names in this paper.

### ***Irei no Hi as a Ritual to Plant Seeds of Peace in the Ashes of the War Dead***

Pete Shimazaki Doktor was one of the important actors in initiating *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i in 2005. I have known him since I was a graduate student in Hawai‘i. My interview with him about *Irei no Hi* was first conducted on September 5, 2018, in Honolulu. I asked him how he came to introduce *Irei no Hi* to Hawai‘i and what it means for the Okinawan diaspora. For him, the *Irei no Hi* provides a place where Okinawans in Hawai‘i can learn about the tragedy of the war through Okinawan civilians’ perspectives, and an opportunity to create an alliance with Native Hawaiians and fight against the militarized narratives of the war.

Pete is a second-generation Okinawan American brought up in California. Both of his parents experienced the Battle of Okinawa: his father was a 19-year-old American marine, and his mother was a nine-year-old girl hiding in a cave in Yomitan Village with her family. His father served in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Pete grew up listening to his father’s war stories, and Pete felt so proud of his father for serving his country that he also wanted to serve, and he became a marine himself. He was raised as an American, and he said he used to think this way of thinking was normal.

After Pete left the military, he used the federal education benefit for veterans, the so called “GI Bill,” to attend university. Because there was almost nothing written about Okinawa in English, he wanted to go to Okinawa again, which he did at age twenty-five. He emphasized that his experience of going to Okinawa as an adult strongly impacted the rest of his life. He discovered the difference in how the war has been remembered in Okinawa. He was very impressed by his visit to the Peace Memorial Park and the Cornerstone of Peace, where all the lives lost during the battle are commemorated, regardless of nationality or status. He spent hours at the Peace Memorial Park and read all of the war survivors’ testimonies. The stories of the civilians were so different from what he had heard in the US, where romanticized war stories often focus on soldiers or individuals as heroes who sacrificed their lives for their country. Discovering *Irei no Hi* in Okinawa was an eye-opening experience for him, which he called “revolutionary.” He asserted, “It became my dream to have *Irei no Hi* in Hawai‘i” (Doktor 2018).

Pete moved to Hawai‘i to attend a graduate program. While he had been interested in participating in the Okinawan Association in California, it was far from where he and his parents lived, so coming to Hawai‘i and participating in the Okinawan community was exciting. He wanted to share his knowledge about political issues in Okinawa and also introduce *Irei no Hi*. Many of those with whom he talked did not take his attempts to discuss the political issues faced by contemporary Okinawa seriously. The only understanding he received was from Hawaiians, Pete said, and the HOA became the group that organized *Irei no Hi*.

In 2017, *Irei no Hi* was observed at the Jikoen Hongwanji Buddhist Temple on the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The HOA invited a Native Hawai‘ian activist scholar, who spoke on the meaning of Pearl Harbor in the Hawai‘ian historical context. Through emphasizing Okinawan indigeneity, the HOA reframes *Irei no Hi* as an

Okinawan memorial day for the Hawai‘ian practice of aloha ‘aina, a shared responsibility for the land. Pete emphasized that it is important to recognize Okinawans’ indigeneity, and he sees himself and the others who helped introduce *Irei no Hi* as *shimanchu*, islanders. He claimed that *Irei no Hi* should be understood as an “intersection of being able to stand up for what you believe and for the islands of Okinawa and Hawai‘i, to recognize the relationship we have” (Doktor 2018). However, he also emphasized that *Irei no Hi* was not only for indigenous people; rather, he explained that the goal was to recognize our shared humanity, beyond nationality and ethnicity, to help create an intersection between settlers and non-settlers. He added: “One of the best things we can do for the precious lives lost in Okinawa is to plant seeds of peace starting from where their remains lie—not pave over their memories in vain or literally use such soil for Henoko base construction” (Doktor 2021). Pete criticized the Japanese government’s plans for the construction of a US base in Henoko, Nago, which will use the soil from a battlefield in the southern part of Okinawa Island. Pete reminds us of the importance of understanding the Battle of Okinawa not as the past but as its continuous relevance to military related issues in contemporary Okinawa.

### ***Remembering the Battle as Hawai‘i’s Okinawan Community Heritage***

Shari Tamashiro was an important actor in helping the community recognize the Battle of Okinawa as important to the Okinawan community in Hawai‘i. My interview with her was first conducted on September 6, 2018, in Honolulu. Shari was born and raised in Hawai‘i. Her mother was second-generation Japanese with roots in Hiroshima, and her father was third-generation Okinawan with roots in Itoman. Shari organized the first exhibit on the Battle of Okinawa at the annual Okinawan Festival organized by the HUOA.

While growing up, Shari said she did not know anything about Okinawa. However, her parents took her to activities organized by the HUOA and local clubs, such as New Year parties and sports festivals. “I did not understand that there was a difference between Japanese and Okinawan, so I thought [of] myself as Japanese American,” she said (Tamashiro 2018). After she finished college and graduate school, Shari helped her father with a project for the Okinawan community. Her encounter with the story of Hawaii’s Okinawan Nisei soldiers opened her eyes, and she began to study more about their experiences, particularly of second-generation immigrants who had participated in the Battle of Okinawa in the Military Intelligence Service. Shari told the stories of many of these people, collecting their firsthand stories. She also collected photographs depicting historical moments. She wanted to show these photographs to the community and also share the stories of Hawaii’s Okinawan Nisei soldiers during the Battle of Okinawa with a larger audience in Hawai‘i because many people did not know about their community history.

Shari first used the annual Okinawan Festival as an opportunity to present displays for community education on the wartime experiences of Okinawan Americans in Hawai‘i. However, when she initially approached the Festival’s organizing board and those in

charge of the cultural section, her idea was rejected because “the committee wanted to focus on cultural aspects and thought the topic was too depressing for a festival” (Tamashiro 2018). However, her father was in charge of the fundraising section, and she was allowed to present the display in the fundraising section. She believed the exhibit helped the Okinawan diaspora to understand their identity struggles as Okinawan Americans during wartime and to recognize these stories as their community history.

After receiving feedback on her displays, Shari later added testimonies and experiences during the Battle of Okinawa. During the interview, she recalled her experience of the first exhibit at the festival:

It was very moving and powerful. People spent up to 40 minutes to an hour going through the exhibit. Grandparents brought their grandchildren. Survivors of the Battle brought their family to tell them their story. What made me happy was when the daughter of a survivor of the Battle of Okinawa went to the HUOA leaders and told them that the exhibit was the best thing her family ever experienced at the festival. Her mother had called her family and told them to meet her at the festival because there was something she wanted them to see. She took them to the exhibit and started telling them her story. They were shocked because they didn't even know she had experienced the battle. The exhibit enabled her grandmother to be able to tell her own story. (Tamashiro 2018)

Encountering actual war survivors motivated Shari to create a joint exhibit on the Battle of Okinawa in collaboration with the Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum. For the past couple of years, she has been presenting an exhibit on the Battle of Okinawa that includes Okinawan school children's essays and paintings to promote peace at the annual Okinawan Festival. She said that her passion for this work was spurred by an incident when Japanese textbooks removed information about compulsory group suicides during the Battle of Okinawa. That made her determined to tell the story in Hawai'i.

### ***“No Home to Return to”—Memories of Death and Postwar Survival***

Another important actor in establishing the commemoration of *Irei no Hi* was a war survivor. War survivors are important figures living in Hawai'i who are able to share direct experiences of the war. My interview with Yoshiko Sickles was conducted in September 7, 2018, in Honolulu. She spoke to me both in Okinawan and Japanese. She shared her life story with me: her experience of the battle as a child and the hardship of living as an orphan after the war, as well as later reconstructing her life in Hawai'i after her marriage. Yoshiko became a Christian and met her husband at a church in Okinawa. They married and moved to the US when she was nineteen. Her husband, however, died when she was thirty-seven, and she then raised her children alone.

Yoshiko was born in 1939 and raised in Ozato Village in the south of Okinawa Island. When the battle occurred, Yoshiko was only five. She was staying where the battle was the bloodiest. She remembered escaping in the midst of continuous gunfire to reach a cave where women and children hid themselves. Some were injured, but there was no doctor. She also remembered Japanese soldiers coming and taking their food and then telling

people to leave because the soldiers wanted to stay in the cave themselves. In the interview, Yoshiko said she could not forgive what the Japanese soldiers had done to her family. Her father, who was also hiding in the cave with an injured leg, died because Japanese soldiers forced him to leave the cave. He went into the mountains, and later her mother and sister found him dead.

Yoshiko said that she had not felt scared of the war but rather of separation from her mother, especially after she knew that her father had died. While trying to escape from the shooting, they were told to lie down to avoid the bombing. Although she was running fast, it was hard for her to catch up with her sister and mother. For a young child, being separated from her mother was the most frightening thing. Yoshiko was very happy when she found her mother, jumping on her shoulders to hold her mother tight, and she would not let her go. She remembered hearing her mother shouting, "Put your face down." She recalls: "When the bombing stopped, everyone got up. I noticed that me and my sister were covered in blood but uninjured. We soon learned it was my mother who was bleeding. When I looked at my mother, I saw a hole in her back. With each breath my mother took, her body shook, and she could not get up. I could not help thinking that what happened was my fault because I had jumped on her shoulders when everyone was supposed to put their faces down. Because of where I was positioned, my mother could not get down on the ground." Yoshiko cried, remembering her mother's death. We cried together. She said she regretted jumping on her mother's shoulders as she thought that if she had not, her mother would have survived. After a moment of silence, Yoshiko continued her story:

I looked around, I saw people missing hands or legs, and there were many dead bodies. Suddenly, I heard a voice saying, "Leave this area and escape." But I did not want to leave because my mother could not go with me. Then, the men moved my mother to a nearby house. They gave me some water and told me to escape, but I wanted to stay with my mother and did not move. However, when the adults left and I saw them far away, I began to worry. I looked at my mother. She gave me a sign with her eyes to follow them, telling me to leave her and escape. I did not want to go, but I went. I did not see when my mother died.

I remember jumping over dead bodies. I was with my sister but we did not have anywhere to go. We were captured by American soldiers. I saw white soldiers and black soldiers for the first time. They gave the children candy, but the children were afraid that the candy might be poisoned. The soldiers noticed and ate the candy to show the children it was safe. That was my first time to eat American candy. We were sent as cargo to the northern part of Okinawa. With no food to eat, my older sister got sick, and I went outside to find food. We ate vegetables I found, as well as grasshoppers and other insects, which I cooked. All I could think of at the time was surviving. I had no feelings. I did not miss my mother, and I did not even cry. I could not think about anything but just surviving.

My responsibility was to take care of my sister-in-law's child. After the war, my sister-in-law returned to Okinawa from Saipan with her own child. It was common for surviving family members to care for children who lost their parents in the war. My sister-in-law survived the war but lost all her family members in the Battle of Saipan except her child. We helped each other. I always took care of the child. I had to carry him on my back wherever I went,

even to school. I was one of only a few students at school who had lost their parents. I remembered collecting strawberries and wood in the mountains. When we went to collect them, I remember seeing the ocean. I always wondered what was on the other side of the sea. I was always daydreaming of my life across the sea. While strategizing to eat, I was always daydreaming.

There was no one to rely on. Even though Okinawa was my *furusato* (hometown), I had no place to return. I have never returned to Okinawa since I came to the US because I have no one there. (Sickles 2018)

## Conclusion

On June 23, 2020, during *Irei no Hi* on the 75-year anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, the governor of Okinawa, Denny Tamaki, made his speech at the Peace Memorial Park. In his speech, he criticized the Japanese government's forcible move toward the construction of a new US base in Henoko, in the northern part of the main island of Okinawa. He emphasized Okinawans' lessons from the Battle of Okinawa and stressed that he hoped to share "*Okinawa no kokoro, Chimugukuru*," the heart of Okinawans, which is "the spirit of peace longing," with the rest of Japan and the world (Tamaki 2020). This message has also been expressed in previous speeches by Okinawan governors at the Peace Memorial Park. The commemoration of *Irei no Hi* organized by the Okinawan diaspora in Hawai'i is an important example of how the Okinawan spirit is embraced beyond its geographical boundaries. The life stories of key actors of *Irei no Hi* in Hawai'i such as Pete and Shari show how increased mobility, spatial and social, helped shaped individual subjectivity, identity formation, and resulting local and transnational cultural activism.

Hawai'i's *Irei no Hi* is not only a day of consoling the spirits of those lost during the Battle of Okinawa; it has also become a site for recognizing the impacts of war on civilians. The testimonies of survivors shared at *Irei no Hi* show Okinawans to be dual victims of both the Japanese and the American militaries and build a story that not only contrasts sharply with the American militarized narrative of the war but also challenges the Japanese national war narrative, where "the salience of victimhood revolves around the role of the American military, especially in dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Hook 2015, 306). Yoshiko's life story illuminates the persistence of war's emotional scars and reminds us how Okinawans became diasporic even within their homeland. Her story also shows us how her memory intersects with the memory of her sister-in-law, the Okinawa postcolonial repatriate from Saipan, and her diasporic life.

Life stories of war survivors allow us to understand the continuous postwar struggles and sufferings of traumatic memories. In the public space of Hawai'i, the narrative of the Battle of Okinawa is militarized and the battle is remembered as a fight between Japan and the US; the significant sacrifice of American lives is emphasized, and their heroic efforts are honored. References to the battle's impacts on civilians in Okinawa are absent.

Moreover, the outcome of the battle is described as an American triumph and a justification for occupying and militarizing Okinawa. The organization of *Irei no Hi* and the commemoration of the Battle of Okinawa by the Okinawan diasporic community in Hawai'i produces a counter-narrative on the Battle of Okinawa in the militarized islands. In his study of Chamorro war commemorations, Keith L. Camacho has recognized Chamorros as "active participants in the making and remaking of their own histories" and shown how they have "wrestled among themselves over what memories of the war should be portrayed, altered, or suppressed" (2011, 210). *Irei no Hi* in Hawai'i is also a site for reshaping community war narratives. It has become a site for contestations and negotiations over which narratives are being shared, where these narratives are recounted, and what the narratives' impacts are.

*Irei no Hi* is not only observed in Hawai'i. For instance, it has been observed by Okinawan associations in northern and southern California. In October of 2020, the Okinawa Association in Peru made the first documentary to teach the younger generation in the community about the Battle of Okinawa and titled it *Irei no Hi*. Nevertheless, according to a survey conducted by *Okinawa Times* and *Yahoo* in June 2021, 75.5% of those who responded to the survey in Japan said that they did not know about *Irei no Hi* ("Irei no Hi: 75.5%" 2021). Further attention needs to be given to how the Battle of Okinawa has been remembered and *Irei no Hi* has been commemorated in other places. Learning to listen to the life stories of war survivors helps today's generations learn about the values of lives and Okinawa's continuous struggles, and gives them a sense of responsibility as a resource for future community resilience. Furthermore, by transcending nationalistic and militaristic war narratives that romanticize the war dead, the transnational practice of *Irei no Hi* in the Okinawan diaspora helps build a community where the memories and life stories of the Battle of Okinawa are shared and passed on across regions and countries to foster resilience for humanity.

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