

[Paper]

## Okinawan Islands Epistemologies in the Women's Unai Festival of 1985

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### **Keywords**

Gender, network, unai, decolonial movement, diversity

### **Introduction**

Okinawa is the nomenclature imposed by Japan in 1879 at the time of Ryukyu Disposition of the Ryukyu Kingdom southwest of Kyushu. The occasion marked the official abolishment of the kingdom through seizure by the Japanese military. During WWII, Japan designated Okinawa as the final battleground, where the Battle of Okinawa unfolded and where one fourth of the Okinawan inhabitants were killed. For the next twenty-seven years, Okinawa was placed under US military occupation. Even today, Okinawa Prefecture, which constitutes 0.6% of the total land area of Japan, is heavily militarized, despite continued opposition from the majority of the islanders, hosting more than 70% of the total US bases that Japan has agreed to host. In part, a number of decolonial critiques of Japan in relation to Okinawa were made in a framework of Japan and “Okinawa” wherein Okinawa is conceived of in a singular form.

While Okinawa is the commonly used term to refer to one of the of the forty-seven total prefectures of Japan, it falsely gives the impression of a single, monotheistic island. There is more than one island in the prefecture: Okinawa includes 160 islands, 36 of which are inhabited, and which geographically expand approximately 1,000 km from east to west and 400 km from north to south; they stretch over the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. I caution against viewing Okinawa as a singularity, which could be uncritical of the unequal power relations between Okinawa Island and the many other islands of the Okinawan Archipelago. In this essay, I bring to the fore a framework of Okinawa as island places, evidenced in an island-wide feminist movement called the Unai Festival. I look, in particular, at the festival that took place in 1985. Since then, Unai festivals were held annually for ten years to bring together women from all the Okinawa islands and

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from all walks of life, regardless of their occupations or marital status. In doing so, I demonstrate the ways in which the framework constitutes a provocation, rather than a foundation, for contemporary Okinawan feminist praxis and a resilient theorization against militarism. I caution against using this as a foundation because I wish to highlight a still-forming project of Okinawan feminisms that is not static or definitive since the project is engaged by multilayered individuals and grassroots organizations from all walks of life, most of them in the islands but others further abroad.

This essay builds a discussion of an Okinawan women's contemporary feminist movement working on decolonization scholarship through a particular focus on islands and resilience. In doing so, I engage with Keiko Katsukata-Inafuku's seminal essay titled "Creating an Okinawan Women's Studies: Confronting Colonial Modernity with the Agency of 'Unaiism'" (2016) to explicate the significance of her analysis of the festival while identifying where the focus of resilience and islands may add to the discussion. I argue that juxtapositions of islands and resilience offer a generative configuration of islands and islanders' agencies, not as static, small, distant, backwards, and underdeveloped. I first return to the linkage of islands and feminism to show how the Unai Festival presented island feminist relationalities by convening women's issues brought together in reconsideration of women's epistemologies in Okinawa. Then I examine how proceedings of the first Unai Festival demonstrate the diversity of gendered experiences in Okinawa, which in turn constitutes a form of feminist resilience in solidarity with women on the islands of Okinawa and beyond.

### **Islands, Resilience, and the Anthropocene**

In *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*, Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler (2021) discuss the marginalization of islands by focusing on the concept of resilience. The book is important in understanding islands as places that provide an insight into thinking about Okinawa as an overarching epistemology shared by the islanders in that geopolitical region. In particular, their work is concerned with the lack of islands in broader, Anthropocene thinking for "the development of relational ways of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology)" and pay attention to "new or alternative approaches to being and knowing in the Anthropocene" that islands have generated (xi). The Anthropocene was coined and popularized by the 1995 Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, who published research on the effects of ozone-depleting compounds created by human activities. According to Crutzen, the Anthropocene is an era that started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when humans began a central role in environmental destruction, the effects of which will be visible, in retrospect, by future geologists.

Pugh and Chandler (2021) define resilience as "a relational ontology which challenges the universal assumptions of linear causality and technological progress which underpin modernist policy approaches to governance" (42). They argue that the thinking regarding islands stands in direct opposition to the homogenizing and universalizing

approaches of “mainland” modernity. In modernist thinking, islands were frequently marginalized and characterized in need of others’ assistance, something Pugh and Chandler call a “mainland approach.” The United Nations defines resilience as “the capacity of a system, community or society to resist or change in order that it may obtain an acceptable level of functioning and structure” (United Nations 2004, Ch.1, S.1, 17, quoted in Pugh and Chandler, 43). Pugh and Chandler explain that such definitions of resilience connote the seventeenth century meaning of “bouncing back to original shape” (43) after an impact by an external force. They argue such approaches are outdated, whereas “resilience ontologies see life as a dynamic process in which entities are always in relation” (43). Their resilience approach captures the interactions and relationalities produced through processual change; thus, it is concerned with nonlinear and sometimes unpredictable products of interaction. Leaving space to adapt and interpret, Pugh and Chandler’s resilience is applied in the context of this essay as a flexible yet politicized space of assembly. It is the islanders’ resilience praxis that shapes the islands; they are forces that shape the island, and they are forces that shape in the Anthropocene.

### **Islands and Feminist Praxis**

Feminists concerned with forces that shape the Anthropocene pointed out their linkages to between gender early on. They argue that the concept is implicit in feminism and queer theory although it is largely ignored or sometimes erased by the masculine authorities in institutionalized scientific discourse of progress and liberalism. This position highlights the linkage of women and nature, whose voices are silenced or ignored, and what links them both to a sustained patriarchal system that perpetuates male centeredness prevailing through institutions of education, media, politics, and religions, among others. In *Anthropocene Feminism*, Richard Grusin argues that “feminists have long argued that humans are dominating and destroying a feminized earth, turning it into a standing reserve, capital, or natural resource to devastating ends” (9). Such an early ecofeminist critique originated from the crucial feminist theorizing about dichotomies of, for instance, feminine/masculine, nature/culture, emotional/scientific, and private/public, to name a few. They have documented that the left-sides terms of these dichotomies have been dominated by the right to establish hierarchical order in a particular society. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva and Mies (2014), Val Plumwood (1993), and Greta Gaard (1993) demonstrate that aspects of the Anthropocene are enabled by creating a binary between nature and culture, the former as feminine, the latter as masculine. In this light, islands have been problematically defined in comparison to continents, not only in geographical location and size but also ideologically through literature, tourism, politics, and militarism. Such designations in the Asia Pacific islands include smallness, isolation, focus on their insularity, and literary and touristic representations that depicted islands and islanders unfairly with words that connote backwardness, isolation, remoteness, and fragmentation.

James E. Randall mapped numerous examples of the ideological designation of islands through Western literature, evolutionary anthropology, art, entertainment, and other areas in *An Introduction to Island Studies* (2021). For instance, Randall chronicles how images of islands were constructed and circulated through popular media and literature that go back to the eighth century BCE Greek poem “The Odyssey,” attributed to Homer, telling of Odysseus’ voyages and his encounter with mysterious islands populated by mythical, most often female, beasts to be conquered by the male hero. Other literature, music, advertisements, and famous art include *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathon Swift (1762), *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne (1874), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Aldous Huxley’s *Island* (1932), as well as one of the most celebrated paintings of European art, *Te aa no areois* (The Seed of the Areoi 1892) by Paul Gauguin, who largely contributed to establishing an image of Tahiti as a utopian paradise. Randall points out that many of the popularized ideologies of islands were created and disseminated by those who “have only a fleeting association with islands, and whose knowledge and experiences are very different from those who have been born and raised on islands” (55). Critical of the establishment of such island imaginaries, Teresia Teaiwa (2010) analyzed that the context and effect of this literature served to establish prevailing social values, and it is no coincidence that it emerged in the “age of discovery.”

One of the examples concerning Okinawa Island would be Vernon J. Sneider’s novel *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1951), which was adapted as a Broadway play in 1953, and later as a movie in 1956. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The film satirically depicts happy-go-lucky Okinawa islanders during the US occupation of the Ryukyu Okinawa Islands after the Battle of Okinawa through the eyes of a wily local character and interpreter, Sakini, played by Marlon Brando, who was nominated for a Golden Globe for his role in the film. The film was popularized worldwide and contributed to the spreading of militarized values and to the ideologies that the relationship between military occupiers and islanders is benevolent, democratic, and peaceful. For instance, as Yukinori Tokuyama (2018) describes in his analysis of the film, the US military construction of pentagon-shaped schools in Okinawa was intended “to spread American democracy . . . in opposition to both the imperial system of Japan and the expansion of communism in East Asia” (45). As many island scholars have argued, just as islands have long served as “a laboratory” for many fields of study—anthropology, biology, environmental science, tourism, and psychology (Randall 2021; Baldacchino 2006)—Okinawa Island, in the film, arguably served as a laboratory for democracy and US empire, and the film fictitiously served as propaganda for democracy facilitated by military occupation of that island nation.

In her study of Caribbean and Pacific Island literature, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007) argues that popular culture through the Western gaze on islands was “vital to imagining this transoceanic empire” (20). As a hypermasculine governmental institution, the US military manifested the gendered dichotomy of masculine in opposition to its feminine other (Enloe 1990, 2000, 2004; Ginoza 2019). From the aforementioned popular culture

examples through transoceanic empire expansion, islands and sea as organizing concepts have often been represented as static and feminine (Loxley 1990; Connell 2003; DeLoughrey 2007), which facilitated the extensive militarization of the Asia Pacific today. Citing cases of “the Chamorros, Hawaiians, and Marshallese, who have been variously subjected to US combat warfare, cultural genocide, environmental destruction, land dispossession, or nuclear bomb testing,” Keith Camacho (2011) argues that “often stereotypically gendered as feminine and vulnerable, thus requiring the protection of a masculine, military presence, the indigenous people of the Pacific have frequently been exploited for those reasons” (xi). It is in these respects that making an inquiry into women’s feminist movements in Okinawa through the resilience analytic discussed earlier, not as a stable object of inquiry fixated by the nation-state framework of Japan, may help to make visible the gendered genealogy of “Okinawan” experiences.

### **1985 as “The First Year of Unai”**

Women began to quake

In the final year of the Decade of Women in the UN,

In Okinawa, women’s power is about to explode.

Namely, the Unai Festival ’85.

It is said that in ancient times, “Unai” meant sisters who served as the Unai god,

And as goddess in the community, to govern Okinawan society.

Today, we are trying to find new meaning in “Unai,” while we carry on the hopes of Unai.

Those of you who are confined at home, with no time other than taking care of husband and children,

Those made to work a simple and tedious job at work,

Those working multiple jobs day and night for a living,

Those busy with grandchildren’s care,

Those working locally, or in specialized fields,

Those currently into something, or creating something,

Those who want to try something new but not sure what to do,

And those who consider your lives have no insufficiency . . .

Don’t we, women, have richer power within us?

Let’s find the real you, real me. Let’s converse. Let’s network.

Let’s bring together the rich power that women have to coexist with men to create a society of support.

And let’s take part in creating peace in the world society in solidarity with Asian people.

There are various places to meet.

Unai Festival ’85, why don’t you join us!¹

(Unai Festival Planning Committee, “Unai Festival ’85: Let’s Converse and Interact” 1986)

### ***Unai***

In “Unai Festival ’85: Let’s Converse and Interact,” the six women on the organizing

committee began the proceedings for the first all-Okinawan prefectural islands-wide women's gathering. The event called for women from all walks of life to gather in the common ground of "unai" at Yogi Park in Naha City on Okinawa Island in 1985. Making a safe space for women to express, interact, share, witness, hear, and listen to each other, the organizers, Suzuyo Takazato, Hiromi Minamoto, Hiroko Yogi, Noriko Wakao, Harumi Miyagi, and Etsuko Yara, reflected upon the traditional roles that were given to women in Okinawa in order to make visible the diversity of women and their positionalities. They had in common participation in the World Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. In this section, I analyze the festival, which, according to the organizing committee, "cultivated a new historical step" (Unai Festival, 138), as a praxis of the feminist movement applying an analytic of resilience as a relational ontology while building on Keiko Katsukata-Inafuku's analysis of the festival.

In her analysis of unai, Katsukata-Inafuku (2016) argues that the women's movement enacted in the festival can be understood through a concept that she calls unaiism. She argues that unaiism is a "new traditional culture" that constitutes "the core of Okinawan feminism" (24); she hopes this signals that:

The ancient Ryukyu beliefs of unai were inherited in the spirit of the Unai Festival, a women's festival enlightened by the World Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. In other words, the ancient beliefs that had maintained the life of the Okinawan feminism in the world of folklore and religious studies have been rediscovered in the Okinawan women's movement and are supporting the subjectification of women as "spirits of words" that carry out actions. (24)

Citing the prose quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Katsukata-Inafuku (2016) further elaborates that the "new traditional culture" of unai, or unaiism, is characterized by the "exquisite encounter between feminist theory, which was awakened in Nairobi, and the indigenous unai sister beliefs" (27). Despite forthcoming critiques against, and the traps of her essentialist theorization of identity politics, Katsukata-Inafuku prioritized "the need to cultivate a 'topos' for Okinawan women by standing with Gayatri Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' to shift from silence to articulation within the oppressive cultural hierarchy. As in all minority studies, it is necessary to wear a certain identity" (17). In addition, her notion that unaiism is the core of Okinawan feminism is intended to distinguish it from Japanese feminism. Given this, her analysis of unaiism seems to serve the purpose of establishing what she calls Okinawan feminism in her previously published work *Beginning of Okinawan Women's Studies* (Katsukata-Inafuku 2006).

In my reading of the Unai Festival, I cannot help but noticing the ways in which women carefully used unai, Okinawa, and women together. Further, the organizers' questioning of the designations of Okinawan women embodied by the term unai in Okinawa seems quite purposeful and calculated. Locating the event locally in the history of "the place called Okinawa" and the experiences of women who lived in that place in a continuum with future generations who can carry on the hopes and thoughts that the women in the present pass on, Takazato (1985) asks: "It is said that in ancient times, Unai was the

guardian deity that protected male siblings and local communities. It was expected that women had such power, and perhaps at times it was overestimated, but women have also demonstrated this power. But do we, gathered here now, have the confidence, joy, and pride to live as women?" (13).

In the local newspaper, Takazato explained that the event did not intend to exclude men nor to be in opposition to or deny men but rather to consolidate women's power with men's power to build a supportive society ("広がったネットワーク: うないフェスティバル '85 下" [Broadened network: Unai Festival '85], *Okinawa Times*, November 29, 1985). The local newspaper reported that many women were in support when the novelist Hisae Sawachi addressed that aspect in her lecture, stating that "in order for men to be happy, women have to be also happy, and vice versa" and that "a solidarity between men and women leads to the liberation of women" ("広がったネットワーク: うないフェスティバル '85 下" [Broadened network: Unai Festival '85], *Okinawa Times*, November 29, 1985). An emphasis on and acknowledgement of interdependencies between women and men, rather than reinforcing the gender dichotomy, was thus made clear in the spirit of the festival.

As noted in the statement, "unai" is an Okinawan word for sisters whose assigned role was to protect their male siblings and their community from any kinds of disasters that might bring harm to them. Conceptions of unais' power operated within the gendered linear directionality to ensure men's well-being and prosperity but not for women's self-empowerment or empowerment of other women (Ginoza 2022). Thus, the Unai Festival critically grounded itself in the epistemic critique of the gendered role of women in the history of Okinawa to enact feminist criticism within the culture of Okinawa as it relates to oppression against women globally.

The awareness brought from the Nairobi conference reflected the diversity within the organizing committee members of their roots and routes, marital status, and occupations. For instance, the chair, Takazato, was born in Taiwan to Okinawan parents, studied in the Philippines, and worked in Tokyo. Miyagi is from Zamami Island, while Minamoto is from Tokashiki Island. At the UN conference in Nairobi, the festival committee organized a workshop on prostitution around the US military bases in Okinawa. In the workshop, they shared the experiences of sex worker females from the Philippines in base towns as well as sexual violence against local women in Okinawa to unpack how the US military, Okinawan women, the global economy, and sexual exploitation were linked. Thus, the experiences of women in Okinawa are not limited to the essentialist categorization of "Okinawan women."

In fact, the organizers may have intentionally avoided the essentialization of Okinawans as an ethnic group, to make the gathering a space for making connections and relationships. One of the organizers, Noriko Wakase, then an adjunct faculty member at a local college in Okinawa who relocated from Japan in 1972, reportedly gave a new definition to unai as "sisterhood," disassociating Okinawa from the traditionally imposed role of Okinawan women ("沖縄で女たちのフェスティバル" [A women's festival in Oki-

nawa]. *Shakai Shimpo*, November 29, 1985). In doing so, the committee allowed for the openness of interpretation necessary to seek “a path toward a new unai” network (“手を繋ごう、新しい「うない」への道” [Let's hold hands toward a path of new Unai]. *Miyako Mainichi Shinbun*. November 27, 1985).

Hiromi Minamoto, another organizer who initiated the meeting and named the festival Unai, explained that the unai that she hoped to carry on through the festival is the pride and dignity that women established in creating Okinawan society. She made sure that this “does not mean a return to the ancient definition of unai, but rather a way to open the way for a new “unai” to live together, with dignity as individual human beings on equal terms with men” (Unai Festival Organizing Committee 1986, 118).

As such, the twelve-hour event took place from nine in the morning until nine in the evening and was co-sponsored by Naha City, Radio Okinawa, and the organizing committee. The main contents consisted of a symposium, music concert, film screening, and lectures and workshops that featured the status of women and articulations of women's issues in Okinawa. It was mainly broadcast throughout the prefecture by Radio Okinawa but also outside the prefecture. A map titled Unai Festival Network draws out linkages the festival established during the festival through the radio waves of the Radio Okinawa station. The map centers on the core proceedings of the festival in Naha City where the symposium, fifty workshops, an outdoor concert, lectures, and a film screening took place. It further invited direct and indirect participation through radio waves broadcast to listeners in Okinawa, such as those in Itoman City's fish market, individual homes, hospitals, golf locations, and those on the road, as well as across the seas to Ishigaki Island, Miyako Island, the Japanese prefectures of Nagano, Hokkaido, and Tokyo, and to foreign countries including the Philippines, Hawaii, Malaysia, Brazil, and Sweden (Unai Festival Organizing Committee, 88). Physically, approximately 1,300 people attended the opening ceremony.

Throughout the Unai Festival Report, which documented speeches and proceedings that were transcribed into written form, “network” or “networking” most frequently emerged as keywords. The participants of the festival reflected Okinawan women's diverse experiences such as division of labor, patriarchal oppression and violence against women, and access to education and job opportunities, for instance. These diverse experiences resonate with women outside Okinawa, which has allowed for the women to build an international network. The call to redefine unai from different positionalities and from different islands in Okinawa at the festival mobilized Okinawan women's agencies while acknowledging differences among the Okinawa islands, a kind of island relationality that is a valuable resource for island resilience analytics.

One of the organizing committee members and chair, Suzuyo Takazato (1985), began the opening remarks by declaring to the audience and participants that “those who are listening to the festival through the radio as well as those gathered at the festival, we would like to declare this year as the first year of unai, while it is the tenth anniversary of International Women's Year” (16). Paralleling and marking the women's event and the



decade since the United Nations' first World Conference on Women (WCW) held in Mexico City in 1975, Takazato seemed to empower Okinawan women in a network of women worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

My reading of the 1985 Unai Festival resonates with the analysis by Katsukata-Inafuku (2016) but adds layered understanding of her main analysis, which defines "unaiism" as a strategic essentialism in the feminist movement. First, Katsukata-Inafuku's conception of unaiism centers on strategic essentialism of two keywords, "women," which she translates into English as gender, and "Okinawa," as ethnicity (26). The Unai Festival has, from its beginning, emphasized its relationships and network among women across the Okinawan islands, Japan, Asian countries, and beyond. The very notion of Okinawa seemed to be reevaluated in the festival to articulate its own positionalities and perhaps to establish revitalized women's agencies. Thus, the Unai Festival can be better understood as a gesture toward a radical openness in which people addressed in the historically gendered relations of power and violence that permeate their individual everyday lives. Takazato's (1985) opening remarks further resonate with Sawachi: "Certainly, we want to protect men, or meet their expectations of us. However, such expectations could come with heavy baggage that implicates a divorce if wives do not give birth to male offspring. Other times, women's role as a protector of men means to work quietly outside the public spotlight in order to support the society men create" (Unai Festival Organizing Committee, 17).

Critical of such expectations that hinder women's agency to further build and strengthen the patriarchal system, Takazato brought the question of women's agency to the fore at the festival and firmly stated that expected roles such as unai given to women do not truly empower women to live with their partners with joy, hope, and pride. As Takazato continued, one of the steps to articulate women's agency not limited to the role of unai is to express themselves, which leads to another person's joy, and the joy of solidarity mobilizes the empowerment of women. The festival served as a place to create and build such networks. In fact, unai's role extends beyond the private realm of assisting and supporting individual males in families and expands to carrying out ceremonies of *totome* (mortuary tablet system) and *hinukan* (fire gods), *munchu* (a family clan system based on the paternal line), farming, and priesthood.

What I would like to emphasize here is that a single ethnicity, "Okinawan," has previously perceived in terms of Japan's relationship with Okinawa as a single entity. On the contrary, Okinawa Prefecture is not one monotheistic, mono-ethnic island. Nor is it populated by one ethnic group or even one linguistic group of speakers. Linguistically speaking, the North Ryukyuan languages (Amami, Kunigami, and Okinawan) and the South Ryukyuan languages (Yaeyama, Miyako, and Yonaguni) are said to be completely incompatible, and the experiences of colonization and militarization are diverse due to the cultures and inter-island relations.

The Unai Festival of 1985 was, thus, a gathering organized by and centered on women whose epistemology was linked by the culture of unai. The gathering critically redefined

the patriarchal gender order that has silenced and contained women's agencies. Redefinition of the traditional culture of unai, not a simplified ethnic category of Okinawan women facilitated a national and international network of women. The internal critiques of an aspect of Okinawan culture began "to quake" (Unai Festival Organizing Committee, 8), which may resonate with what Teresia Teaiwa (2007) terms "to island," in which the noun island is made a verb.

As a noun, it's so vulnerable to impinging forces. Let us turn the energy of the island inside out. Let us "island" the world! Let us teach the inhabitants of planet Earth how to behave as if we were all living on islands! . . . The islanded must understand that to live long and well, they need to take care. Care for other humans, care for plants, animals, care for soil, care for water. Once islanded, humans are awakened from the stupor of continental fantasies . . . Continents do not exist, metaphysically speaking. It is islands all the way up, islands all the way down. Islands to the right of us, islands to the left . . . Yes, there is a sea of islands . . . But let us also make "island" a verb. It is a way of living that could save our lives. (514)

In this light, the unai enacts an active and open process of islanding, a networking and connective experimentation, and a fluid assemblage with others linked by women's experiences connected to Okinawa.

#### Notes

1. The quote is originally written in Japanese. Author translated it into English.

2. After the first WCW, the conference was held every five years: the second one in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995. The first conference in Mexico City was enabled by years of effort by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to adopt a declaration to eradicate all kinds of discrimination against women and to secure women's human rights. The CSW declared 1975 as the International Women's Year in reference to the first World Conference on Women in Mexico.

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