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Indigenous Women's Storytelling in Resistance and Resilience: The Stories of Liglav A-Wu and Tami Sakiyama

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Introduction

In February 2020, only a few weeks before COVID-19 closed the international borders in many countries in the world, I was visiting Taiwan and standing at the entrance to the Batongguan Historic Trail at Yushan National Park with a group of people, such as Bunun and Ami, who were about to trek into the mountains. They are members of an activist group led by a Bunun poet, Salizan Takisvilainan Islituan, also known as Salizan, a collaborator and informant for an Indigenous Studies research project conducted by National Dong-Hwa University, of which Salizan is an alumnus. As an indigenous Okinawan, I was eager to learn from Taiwan's indigenous people's—our Asian allies'—decolonizing efforts.

Their purpose for entering the trail was to restore their ancestors' lost trail, and Salizan told me through Professor Huei-chu Chu from National Chung Hsing University, who assisted my communication with them as a translator, that they had been scything rampantly growing weeds and uncovering the old trails. Salizan also explained me through Huei-chu, his friend and colleague, that the traditional indigenous-style hut where the group stopped on their way deeper into the mountain had been reconstructed with one of the Taiwanese government's grants-in-aid responding to the increasing demand for indigenous political and cultural revitalization since the 1980s. Before they walked inside the hut, they set up a simple altar outside the hut entrance. Then, after placing traditional foods, such as rice with boar meat in a bamboo tube, as well as the liquor they had brought with them, each member stood one by one in front of the altar, offering a brief speech as a greeting to the ancestors' spirits. I, too, spoke a few words, introducing myself to their

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ancestors, that I was a visitor from Okinawa and there to learn about their culture.

After the routine ritual was completed, they permitted me to follow them into the hut, a full-scale replica of the traditional architecture. Inside it had a small kitchen space, a family room, and two tiny bedrooms, which would usually accommodate about three households, though it did not look like enough space for everyone. Salizan explained that the tiny house was also the burial place for their family. They would bury the bodies of their family members who had died, young or old, deep under the ground of the space they used as a family room. He also said that they would not talk about things that they did not want their ancestors to hear and would not perform sexual intercourse inside the house since it would be embarrassing for both the living and the dead family members. The imagination of the ancestors' spirits as guardians watching over their descendants is also an integral part of Okinawa's indigenous spiritual practice. However, from the way they live every day, sensing their ancestors, it seemed that indigenous people in Taiwan keep in even closer proximity to their ancestors in their metaphysical and physical relationship with them. The project of reclaiming old trails and the traditional house in which Salizan participates with other indigenous people thus manifests their concern and determination to secure the places where they return and maintain the memories of their ancestors. Their action also signals their view of a community that should be in unbroken continuity from the tribal past, which they believe should be ensured with a reified physical place. Salizan expresses an inextricable relationship between the mountains and his tribe, partly in the Bunun language in his poem "I, Who Remain":

Along ludun
I started my walk on a grafted way
tun-lundun-av (let us walk on the mountain)
tun-ludun (walk up the tall mountain)
na-tun-ludun ata (we try to leave for the top of the mountain)
tuna ludun (we reach the top of the mountain)
muhaï ludun (we go over one mountain after another)
muhaï ludun-in (we went over the mountain)
like sierra, they continue winding, tangling,
going around the mountain to the summit
with aspiration breezing through valleys
Down on the ground, the path extending far beyond
Up in the sky, the star drawing you near¹
(Salizan 2019)

The mountain—or *ludun* in Bunun—is the home for the Bunun people: a place just like their house, where life begins and ends, one departs and comes back, and finally, the living and generations of the dead share the same house.

Fundamental to the decolonizing activism that I witnessed in Taiwan was solidarity supported by a shared sense of indigeneity and egalitarianism. There is no doubt that solidarity is assured in their decolonizing process, demonstrating the tribe's resilience. However, the resilience could be gendered because women follow different trajectories of

colonization and decolonization from that of their male counterparts. Indigenous women's social marginality and vulnerability are a socio-cultural construct; in other words, they have been already marginalized in their male-dominated indigenous community even before the external power colonizes their community. Nevertheless, in a colonized community, women are equally marginalized, sexualized, and commodified by the colonizers and their indigenous communities in a tense political and cultural relationship with the off-island imperial force. Therefore, dealing both with the external colonizing force and with the expectations of the internal tribal community, an indigenous woman must secure her place regardless of its location—whether it is in her tribal homeland or in the colonizers' community—where she can ensure her survival even before she seeks solidarity with the members of her tribal community.

Whether their decision to leave the community was volitional or reluctant, “resilience” for indigenous women means to ensure their physical place in the community. Salizan expresses in his poem, “Down on the ground, the path extending far beyond/Up in the sky, the star drawing you near,” some leave their communities and yet are always drawn back to it. However, others do not find their communities suitable for their survival.

This paper delineates indigenous women's different trajectories to gain their places in their communities. Focusing on the literary works of two women writers, Liglav A-Wu from Taiwan and Tami Sakiyama from Okinawa, the paper explores the situations of indigenous women on colonized islands, relating them with the accounts of indigenous women writers from other parts of the world. In doing so, this paper intends to delineate the common thread that encompasses indigenous women's collective experiences, which include the cases of women in Taiwan and Okinawa in their colonial situations.

Women Abducted and Returned: Liglav A-Wu's Story

In indigenous stories, women often lose their place in the community by being kidnapped, stolen, and traded as if they were property. Among the well-known abduction stories are indigenous North American “Yellow Woman” stories traditionally told in the Laguna Pueblo community in New Mexico in the US. The Laguna Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen includes in her 1989 anthology three different versions of “Yellow Woman” stories: “Evil Kachina Steals Yellow Woman,” “Sun Steals Yellow Woman,” and “Whirlwind Man Steals Yellow Woman.” In each story, a woman called “Yellow Woman” is kidnapped or stolen by a male character outside her community, and the story portrays Yellow Woman as a woman who passively accepts the fact that she is kidnapped. The kidnapper rapes her in each version of the story, and in “Evil Kachina Steals Yellow Woman,” she even gives birth to the child of the rapist (Allen 1989, 214). In “Whirlwind Man Steals Yellow Woman” as well, she is kidnapped by Whirlwind Man, who tells her showing his knife, “You must come and go with me,” and “If you won't come, well, I'll have to kill you” (217).

Given no choice but to be kidnapped and raped, this version of the Yellow Woman story indicates her choice, albeit a passive one in a vulnerable situation. The story also suggests that Yellow Woman is not a tragic figure because, interestingly, the abductor's "mother" or "wives" would treat the Yellow Woman, also known as Kochinnenako in the story, with kindness:

No one told how Kochinnenako went with Whirlwind Man because she was forced. Said, "Then Whirlwind Man raped Kochinnenako." Instead, the story was that his mother had greeted Yellow Woman and made her at home in their way. And that when Kochinnenako wanted to return home, had agreed, asking only that she wait while the old woman prepared gifts for Kochinnenako's sisters. (218)

Thus, the story implies that the abducted Yellow Woman survives in another community in which she is regarded as an outsider and a stranger.

In the Taiwanese writer Liglav A-Wu's autobiographical writing entitled "The Children Forgotten by Ancestral Spirits," she writes about her mother, a Payuan, who left their community and later came back. The writer's mother left her community not because she was stolen but because she married outside her community, where so-called *waishengren*, mainlanders in Taiwan, formed a village. After WWII, the mainlanders were the settler-colonists who moved from mainland China to Taiwan. The narrator's mother was "offered" by her grandmother, who was taken in by a broker who urged her seventeen-year-old beautiful granddaughter to marry a mainlander, "a man who came from the world which did not exist in her [A-Wu's grandmother's] world" (A-Wu 2003, 28). According to Etsuko Uozumi, A-Wu's Japanese biographer, A-Wu's father, a war veteran who moved from Anhui in mainland China to Taiwan after WWII, married her mother in the 1960s, when "marriages between mainlanders in Taiwan and the young indigenous women were popular" (112). Her mother, however, accepted her situation and moved to her husband's village, where she gave birth to a girl baby who later writes about her mother's story.

Born to parents with different racial and cultural backgrounds, A-Wu grew up in a family of mixed heritage. While her mother went through discrimination by mainlanders of her fathers' community because of her racial and ethnic attributes as a Payuan, A-Wu had no problem doing well in school and exceeding other children in the community of mainlanders since she was educated by her father, who used to be a teacher when he was at home in Anhui (Uozumi 2004, 112–13). On the other hand, in her eyes, her mother was weak. She recalls her mother would "always hide herself in a dark corner of the room and sob, covering her face with her hands" (A-Wu 2003, 30).² The daughter's impression was that her mother "lived under the protection" of her father (33), and therefore, when her father died, her mother's sadness was "so deep that she would pass out many times" (33). A-Wu had to manage the entire process of his funeral because her mother was too weak to do it (33).

However, after the forty-nine days since her husband's passing, her mother's sudden

determination surprised A-Wu. Her mother declared that she would go back to her tribal community, stating, “Nothing left in the external world has been strong enough to keep me in their world” (33). A-Wu remembered what her mother had asked her: “Once you leave home, they will consider you to not belong there and treat you as an outsider, but what would you do if the new community where you think you belong treats you like a stranger?” (31). A-Wu’s answer as a young girl was: “Then, I’d go somewhere else” (31). As she grew older and went through the same racial discrimination against indigenous women as her mother did, A-Wu understood what it meant for her mother to decide to go back to the community in the mountain she had left or was urged to leave, and where she decided she would never come back once she came down to the flatlands. When her mother came back to the Payuan community after more than twenty years, she had to persevere in the face of the community’s prejudice against her that she had lost her husband as a punishment: “the punishment that those who impudently left out the protection of their ancestors” (28).

A-Wu was worried about her mother, who must have endured the community’s prejudiced and harassing “eyes,” which keep both the conservative and old indigenous mindset and the new values added by colonial settlers, mainland Taiwanese (28). Her mother, however, decided to challenge the intolerant community: “Don’t worry. It’s nothing once I get used to it. I left here for marriage so early in my life that the ancestors have forgotten me. They will remember me someday, though I’ve been away from home for so long” (28). Her mother thus finally restored her place in her home community by persistently seeking that the community re-member her:

When my mother appeared in front of me with the scent of mango flowers, I learned she finally overcame again the time that must have been painful for her to remember. She was right as she said, “It took me five years to have the old folks from the village finally remember ‘the girl who used to be here.’ It required me a hundred times more vitality than when I left the village to have them remember me, but I had the ancestors to remember the child who left the village. It was so exhausting and painful making the effort that I would never leave home again.”

I want to tell it to every indigenous person who has been away from home for a long time.
(34)

Traitress to the Community: Women Who Do Not Return

A-Wu’s story of her mother’s resilience tells the danger of leaving home and being forgotten and the importance of being re-membered or accepted again to restore a place for survival in the community. Once a woman leaves the community, whether according to her own will or someone else’s, she is regarded as suspect or a traitress to her community. In “Whirlwind Man Steals Yellow Woman,” one of the Yellow Woman stories, the storyteller suggests of Kochinnenako, the Yellow Woman, that “maybe the name had become synonymous with ‘whore’ at Guadalupe” (Allen 1989, 218). “Guadalupe,” was

originally the name of a Mexican version of the Virgin Mary, but, perhaps, suggests the name of a place in Mexico or the American Southwest in the story. In Mexican culture, a woman who represents a “whore” is La Malinche, or Malinari Tenepat, an indigenous woman who was sold into slavery by her community and later became a lover of Hernan Cortez, the Spanish conqueror of Mexico. La Malinche is considered a mother of the mestizaje in Mexico after having two sons with Cortez. Thus, she has been considered a traitress in indigenous communities in Mexico because she assisted Cortez's conquest of the Aztec Empire. Interestingly, in the story, the Yellow Woman is compared with La Malinche under the suspicion that they were abducted but may have run away of their own free will.

La Malinche signals a form of indigenous womanhood whose survival strategy was not returning to their community. She is a traitress responsible for the fall of the Aztec, followed by the Spanish colonization of Mexico. The Chicana writer and critic Gloria Anzaldúa (2012), however, challenges the traditional view of La Malinche:

Not me sold out my people but they me. *Malinali Tenepat*, or *Malintzín*, has become known as *la Chingada*—the fucked one. She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt. (Anzaldúa 2012, 44)

Anzaldúa thus continues: “The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer” (44). As a lesbian of color, she was not accepted by her community, where Catholic beliefs were dominant. She terms this situation as “homophobia” and “fear of going home” (41). For Anzaldúa, “home” is not necessarily a comfortable place nor attractive, which Salizán expresses as “the star drawing you near.” Anzaldúa claims that her home is in “a borderland” where “the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (25). The community that Anzaldúa envisions is the place where “*los atravesados*,” or those who “cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal,’” live (25).

Interestingly, Tami Sakiyama also creates in her short stories the community similar to Anzaldúa's “borderland.” The seven pieces of prose fiction called Kuja stories are set in the fictional place Kuja. Sakiyama depicts Kuja not only as a town that used to prosper as an entertainment district next to the US military bases but also as a dystopic community in which “most residents” are “outsiders” and “strangers” and do not include “those who deeply believe that they have been indigenous in the place for generations” (Sakiyama 2017, 78). In other words, the community in the story embraces the people who do not have a home or places to which to return, stay in the place temporarily, and share no communal memory because of their fragile bond with each other.

The story entitled “A Night Walk on Pingihira Hill Road,” one of the Kuja stories, expresses women who refuse to be forgotten by the community of Kuja, where anyone can be forgotten. The story begins with an older woman called Pisara Anga, or Aunt Pisara, muttering something as she is walking up the hill called Pingihira. She is assumed

to be crazy but has the unique ability to listen to the voices of the invisible. She goes up the hill because she hears some voices calling her. In the meantime, in the town, people witness a mysterious figure of a girl wearing a white dress, and the rumor was that it was the ghost of one of the many girls who were raped and killed by US soldiers since Okinawa came under US rule. Anga was thus heading up the hill where she was supposed to give a prayer and console the dead.

As Anga starts praying on the hill, she hears a young woman talking. To the voice speaking to Anga incessantly, Anga asks, “Would you kindly tell me who is speaking to me?” (Sakiyama 2017, 89).³ The woman’s voice expresses disappointment that Anga does not remember her. Anga, completely perplexed, repeats the same question asking who she is. The voice says: “No more prayer, Anga. All you have to do is to remember. Ask yourself, your heart, about whether or not you and I are related. Just imagine what you have in mind. That is most important. Then you will see everything—why you and I are here like this, why your ear picks up my voice. Everything is in your memory, you see?” (97).

The voice persistently urges Anga to remember, and finally, Anga recalls what she did in the past when she was the owner of a brothel. She remembers two mixed-race girls she found on the street and deceived them into practicing prostitution. However, the doubt overshadows her confidence in her memory, and she continues asking whose voice it is. The voice is disappointed: “Anga, I cannot tell it to you. If you don’t remember me, I don’t exist” (104). Anga is supposed to console the dead spirit with her prayer, but she fails. Realizing she was not even able to recall her memory, she hangs herself from one of the trees since Pingihira Hill was the dead-end place for the people “who left their home and ran away (“pingiru”) into the town but lost their place even in the town” or the place supposed to be their destination (80).

In this story and other Kuja stories, Sakiyama describes women from the past who were forgotten as if they never existed. Still, however, women resist by refusing to be eradicated from the community’s memory. Sakiyama’s stories manifest how women, even after their death, criticize the community’s amnesia and urge people to re-member them in their memory so that they can secure their place in the community. In other words, Sakiyama, in her Kuja stories, creates a dystopic community in which women’s resilience relies on the community’s memory, and she is aware of her narrative responsibility to resist communal oblivion and the eradication of women.

Conclusion

Both Liglav A-Wu and Tami Sakiyama tell stories of women’s vulnerability and resilience in securing their place in their communities. In Liglav A-Wu’s autobiographical account, the indigenous community was the destination of her mother, who was eager to return to her ancestors. For her mother, the community is a specific location where people connect. On the other hand, Tami Sakiyama presents a fictional community, Kuja, which

is associated with no specific location, and thus the key to survival is finding a place in the memory of members of the community. Thus, though they share indigeneity in their contexts, the two writers address concerns of their island communities differently. Nevertheless, both writers are aware that women's experiences with survival complicate colonialization and decolonization since women often make use of the colonized situation for their survival. Blurring the boundary between the colonizer and the colonized, indigenous women always focus on their survival, whereby their resilience comes into play in their way.

Notes

1. My translation from Chu's Japanese translation.
2. All the quotations from A-Wu's text throughout this paper are my translation of Japanese text translated from Chinese to Japanese by Etsuko Uozumi.
3. All the quotations from Tami Sakiyama's text throughout this paper are my translation.

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