

[Paper]

## “Overcoming the Past” Concerning the War Experiences on Kumejima

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### **Keywords**

The Battle of Okinawa, Kumejima, Overcoming the Past, Japanese Troops, Suspected Spies

### **Introduction**

During the period of June through August 1945, which saw the end of the Second World War in Okinawa, there occurred a succession of incidents on the island of Kumejima in which island residents were labeled as “suspected spies” and killed by a communications unit of the Japanese Army, with a total of 21 people losing their lives. With fighting on Kumejima limited to scattered incidents after the landing of the United States military in late June, a glance at the scale of the damage would have suggested that the impact to the region was relatively light. In reality, however, the numerous incidents in which islanders were murdered by Japanese soldiers make the island a critical location to examine when considering the impact of the war on Okinawa.

This paper traces the developments that have occurred in relation to “overcoming the past” on Kumejima from the end of the war in Okinawa until the present day, and attempts to consider the significance of these developments, with a particular focus on the course of events that began with the reporting of a statement by a former commanding officer in the Japanese Army in 1972 and on related issues and possibilities.

Broadly speaking, this paper considers the theme of overcoming the past in two senses. The first sense is that of determining the truth behind the murders and of pursuing accountability on the part of the responsible parties. The second sense is that of reflecting on the wartime military-civilian relationship that formed the backdrop for the murders and reexamining the experiences of island residents who were affected by them. It is the author’s belief that considering the process of overcoming the past in these two senses will clearly illustrate the fact that doing so involves a series of efforts sustained over a

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long period of time, and that this consideration will allow a better understanding of the depth of the questions that have been created through the process.

### **Suppressed Accusations (through the End of the 1960s)**

At the time when the Japanese Army perpetrated the murders, the majority of the residents of the island of Kumejima were living in hiding in the mountains, and people possessed only fragmentary knowledge of the actions of the Japanese troops. Because of this, it is not easy to clearly determine the reactions of the residents to the incidents at the time. One of the few remaining clues available is the diary of the chairman of the Gushikawa Village Agricultural Council (the “Yoshihama Diary”).

Beginning some time before the murders, the diary conveys a strong sense of wariness toward the Japanese Army unit deployed on the island. According to an entry from June 26, 1945, shortly after United States forces had landed on Kumejima, “When the food stores run out, it is the brutish Officer Kayama who presents a bigger risk than the landing forces. We will need to consider what to do about this” (Nakama 1971, 284). Ultimately, these fears would be realized.

Continuing into July, the diary contains multiple entries, such as (July 6) “Officer Kayama is threatening the populace” and (July 9) “Officer Kayama is transforming into a bandit” (Nakama 1971, 285). After landing on Kumejima, the US military issued an announcement to the islanders seeking refuge in the mountains to “return home and tend to your crops as soon as possible,” but at the same time, the Japanese soldiers threatened to “kill anyone who comes out of the mountains.” This resulted in a situation where the islanders were “unable to be in the mountains and unable to be in the villages and were moving about in confusion on the roads” (Nakama 1971, 285). In an entry dated July 9, Yoshihama wrote of his anger toward the actions of the Japanese soldiers as follows: “Oh, Your Majesty, the Emperor, whom we trusted!! Now they are transformed completely into bandits and are hindering the ability of the populace to live in peace. Officer Kayama, heedless of our food stores dwindling day by day and craving only an easy life for himself; how long will he run?” (Nakama 1971, 285).

For the islanders, perilously caught between the Japanese and American forces and suffering from food shortages, the Japanese troops had indeed become much like bandits. Then, beginning in late June, the Japanese forces, still positioned in the mountains, began killing islanders who came in contact with the Americans.

The residents of Kumejima learned of Japan’s surrender on August 15, thanks to radios supplied by American forces. However, in the following few days, there were two incidents in which families, including young children, were murdered by Japanese troops. One incident involved the slaughter of Meiyu Nakandakari and his family. Nakandakari had appealed to US forces to cancel plans for a full assault on the island and had encouraged residents to surrender quickly. The second incident was the murder of Jung-hoe Gu (Japanese name Noboru Tanigawa), originally from the Korean Peninsula, along with his

family. After learning of these incidents, Yoshihama wrote a long entry in his diary on August 21 reflecting on “the brutality of Officer Kayama,” writing that if the situation had continued to worsen, “there would have been no choice but to seek assistance from the American forces to subdue Kayama and his bandits” (Nakama 1971, 288).

Since early on, Yoshihama had espoused a policy of no resistance to US forces. There was, however, a significant number of residents who strongly opposed this policy, and as Yoshihama stated, “From the beginning, the communications unit denounced the general populace and myself as traitors, and we were in danger” (Nakama 1971, 295). As will be explained later, it must be clarified that there was a complex relationship between the issue of local residents informing against one another and the incidents involving the slaughter of residents by the Japanese Army, and there existed severe fissures at the time across which residents stood in opposition to one another.

On September 7, Kayama’s unit finally surrendered to the American forces and was sent to the Yaka Prisoner of War Camp on Okinawa Island. At the camp, the former commander was questioned by prisoners from Kumejima, admitted to ordering the murders of residents, and was beaten (Ota 1972, 214). Later, in 1948, several surviving relatives of the murder victims composed a letter of complaint and reported the incidents to the US military administration and the police department. This resulted in the dispatch of police personnel from Okinawa Island to investigate the incidents and the questioning of Kumejima-born former wartime personnel of the Japanese communications unit (Saki 1976, 122). Despite claims that the letter of complaint composed by the survivors was also sent to the Allied Forces Command in Tokyo, there is no record of an investigation, and the appeals from the survivors ultimately failed to achieve any tangible results. Thus, although efforts toward overcoming the past, in the form of attempting to determine the truth and pursue accountability through public institutions, were made during the period immediately following the war, they ultimately did not come to fruition.

During this period, there was a rumor on Kumejima that Kayama was planning to visit the island in secret to see his wife and family there, and there was an incident in which people gathered together with bells and sirens chanting “Kill Kayama!” and set off on a “mountain hunting expedition” (Uezu 1995, 227–228). This uproar speaks to the depth of the wounds inflicted on the local community by the murders and to the extent of the anger toward the former commanding officer, but subsequently, this anger would be left unaddressed without any progress toward overcoming the past.

In the period shortly after the war, it appears that knowledge of the murders on Kumejima was not widespread within Okinawan society, but a magazine published in mainland Japan in 1953 contained an article in which a literary researcher reported on the incidents. The article described how multiple families were labeled as spies and killed with “knives and swords” by the Japanese troops, known by residents as the “mountain troops,” how a Korean immigrant and his family were also executed as spies, and also conveyed the anger and resentment over the slaughter perpetrated by “trusted soldiers” (Uchima 1953, 62–63). The author of the article was a relative of the victims of one of the incidents, and

there is no doubt that he wrote the article with the conviction that the actions of the Japanese Army on Kumejima must be exposed to Japanese society.

Later, in the late 1950s, there was a rumor on Kumejima that Kayama had begun to regret his crimes and had begun devout religious practice, and some of the people who heard this news began to feel that it was appropriate to forgive the former commanding officer (Uezu 1995, 228). The source of this rumor was a private message from a Japanese government official from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, who, after visiting Kumejima and learning of the murders, promised to search for information about Kayama and wrote, “He visits the temple almost every day and prays for the deceased” (Saki 1976, 125). At a time when the hope of pursuing truth and accountability had all but disappeared, the rumor that the former officer was attempting to atone for his actions appears to have brought a small measure of healing to the local community and provided some closure to the memories of the incidents.

Even at such a time, however, this did not mean that efforts to come to terms with the war experience were nonexistent. “Kumejima no sensouki” (Record of the war on Kumejima), a 20-page article in the *Kumejima chūgakkou souritsu jūsshūnen kinenshi* (Kumejima middle school tenth-anniversary commemorative magazine), quoting sources including wartime records from public institutions and the “Yoshihama Diary,” is an important record that depicts in detail the ever-changing wartime situation. The compiler of the magazine, school principal Chishu Nakama, wrote the following passage at the beginning of the article: “It is my profound hope that this war record will become a basis for the future development of Kumejima and also that it will be able to play a role in the development of a new human society” (Nakama 1957, 135).

For the principal who compiled these records, examining the facts about the war was “a basis for the future development” and essential for the revitalization of the local community. His words convey a clear desire to come to terms with wartime events by creating an accurate record and sharing it among the local community, enabling something positive to be obtained from a bitter experience. The record did not attract attention within Okinawan society when it was published. Nonetheless, its publication is important in that it was an effort to overcome the silence and sense of resignation around the wartime experiences and to extend the possibility of overcoming the past into the future.

### **The Impact of the Former Commander’s Remarks (Early 1970s)**

Through the end of the 1960s, in the context of the discussion of the enormous sacrifices made by the Okinawan people during the war, the events on Kumejima received extremely limited attention. One of the only examples to be found is the mention of the Kumejima incidents as tragedies of suspected spies (Yamakawa 1958, 266–267).

Toshi Uezu, a native of Kumejima who worked as a schoolteacher on the island during the war, made the following recollection about her feelings immediately after the war:

Regarding the murders on Kumejima, for a while after the war, I took them to be a part of the nature or the process of war and did not consider them with a particularly critical eye. . . . I was overwhelmed with the weight of the tragedy of the war in Okinawa as a whole, and it was all I could do to try to face up to that. Looking at it from the point of view of the tragedy that occurred on Okinawa Island, Kumejima, which had seen no direct conflict between Japanese and American forces, had been relatively peaceful. Our only hardships had been fleeing the air raids and spending our days in hiding. (Uezu 1995, 217)

Against the backdrop of the massive damage incurred during the war in Okinawa, the incidents on Kumejima were considered minor local events, and efforts to reexamine them to overcome the past were not sustained.

In the 1970s, however, the situation began to change rapidly. Beginning at the end of the 1960s, efforts were begun to record testimony from members of the general public about their experiences during the war, and accounts of civilians being killed or fearing for their lives at the hands of the Japanese Army began to emerge in multiple locations. In addition, the agreement between the US and Japanese governments to return administration of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 saw an increase in desires to reexamine the relationship between Okinawa and the nation of Japan. Against this backdrop, the murders on Kumejima would be scrutinized as an example of the tension between the Japanese Army and the residents.

The incidents on Kumejima became nationally known when the August 15, 1970, issue of the *Ryukyu Shimpō* ran a special article regarding the Kumejima Murders (*Ryukyu Shimpō*, 1970), and the reporter who had written the article had a paper published in the January 1971 issue of *Bungeishunju*, a prestigious literary magazine. Then, in June 1971, a large excerpt from “Kumejima no sensoki,” the article published earlier in Kumejima Middle School’s commemorative magazine, was reprinted in *Sekai* magazine, bringing detailed records of the war to a much wider readership.

Having become more widely known in this way, the Kumejima murders then received a large surge of attention after an interview with former commanding officer Kayama was published in a weekly magazine in April 1972. In the interview, the former commander made the following statement justifying the orders he had given:

If I had not taken hard measures against espionage, we would have fallen to the islanders before we fell to the American Army. In any case, I had thirty-some men under my command, and there were 10,000 islanders. If the islanders started to side with them (the US forces), we wouldn’t have stood a chance. That is why decisive measures were needed to ensure the islanders’ loyalty to Japan. I did it to keep control of the islanders. . . . I won’t make any excuses because as a Japanese soldier, as the commanding officer in charge, I do not believe at all that there was anything wrong with the measures I took. (Sunday Mainichi Editing Department 1972, 35)

This statement contains a clue as to why there were multiple instances of civilians being slaughtered by the Japanese Army on Kumejima, where actual combat did not take place. The Japanese troops were strongly wary of the possibility that with the island sur-

rounded by enemy forces, the islanders might begin to cooperate with the enemy army, and the murders of the islanders deemed spies had been considered justified as a way to prevent this from happening.

Upon learning of the statement by the former commanding officer, the people of Kumejima were stunned. According to Toshi Uezu, a schoolteacher on Okinawa Island at the time, the moment she saw Kayama’s remarks in the newspaper, “I felt as though I had seen the ghosts of the dead” (Uezu 1995, 219). A statement of protest adopted by the Gushikawa Village Council on April 3, immediately after the remarks were published, made the following accusations:

The residents of Kumejima have been trying for so many years to sweep away the nightmares of the inhumane acts perpetrated by those such as former commander Kayama and to soothe the souls of those who were sacrificed and heal the old wounds in their hearts, and now, Kayama’s remarks have revived the tragedy, horror, and suffering of 27 years ago, and the anger of the gentle islanders has finally reached a peak. . . . It is the responsibility of the government of Japan to deal severely with the Kayama incidents and to enact the best possible policy to provide support for and restore the good names of the victims and their families. (Uezu 1995, 229–230)

Having attracted increased attention with the remarks of the former commanding officer, the murders on Kumejima came to be seen as symbolic of the numerous murders of civilians by the Japanese army that had occurred in wartime Okinawa, and the incidents were described in detail across fifteen out of fifty-eight pages in an investigative report by the Committee for the Investigation of War Crimes established by the Okinawa Teachers Union (Okinawa Teachers Union Senso Hanzai Tsuikyū Inkaï 1972, 40–54).

Around the same time, an Okinawan member of the Japanese Diet asked the government for a response, but citing the statute of limitations, the government showed a reluctance to pursue accountability, and the prospect of national compensation for those affected was subsequently denied in an official response from the Diet. During this time, the Japanese government dispatched investigative staff to Kumejima, but the investigation was a superficial one, failing even to hear testimony from witness or bereaved relatives, and it ended without even arranging a meeting with Kayama (Oshima 1975, 312).

The long-standing silence had been broken by Kayama’s remarks, and a chorus of voices, ignored for over 20 years, burst forth, calling for the pursuit of truth and accountability. Having resumed its movement, the effort toward overcoming the past was first and foremost a demand for the government of Japan to pursue truth and accountability, but the Japanese government did not answer the call.

### **Discord Still Shouldered by the Local Community**

It was a young local man who organized a protest rally on Kumejima in May 1972. A journalist who accompanied the man and participated in the rally recorded it as follows:

At the appointed time, villagers with flashlights joined the gathering one after another. Most were middle-aged or older, and many were elderly. . . . There were perhaps 150 adults in the venue. At that point, I happened to glance out the window and got a surprise. A crowd of around the same number of people as were inside was standing in the square next to the community center. These were most likely people who were hesitant to enter the venue. . . . It seems that that heavy silence of the people of Kumejima has remained unchanged. However, I believe that the fact that, for the first time, so many people stood up and came to a rally such as this demonstrates their internal volition without the need to speak. This is clearly different from the act of merely speaking about their anger. (Saki 1972, 132)

With the condemnatory movement that surfaced after the former commanding officer's remarks, the will of the people of Kumejima was definitely beginning to change. That change, however, did not lead to a sustained effort to pursue truth and accountability. After the halfhearted attitude of the Japanese government became clear, the level of attention toward the incidents dropped sharply, and bereaved relatives began to step back from their demands. Masahide Ota, a native of Kumejima, illustrated the response of the local community at the time as follows:

Apparently, if the situation were to have been aggravated any further, there would have been problems for the local community. It seems that people realized the inconvenience of the situation, and the bereaved decided to embrace forgiveness. In fact, there were also people who were unable to remain on Kumejima due to the incidents and were living on Okinawa Island under assumed names. Realizing that there might be trouble for these people as well, I too decided to abide by the decision of the bereaved. (Ota 2016, 336)

The “problems” mentioned above that were the source of this concern were, namely, the involvement of local residents in the murders. It is believed that the process by which the Japanese troops labeled and executed “spies” involved, in most cases, information provided by local residents, and there therefore existed deep-seated discord between locals regarding what occurred during the war. A journalist who was conducting continuous interviews around the Kumejima incidents released the following remarks conveying what he heard from residents in connection with the slaughter of Jung-hoe Gu (Noboru Tanigawa) and his family:

There were several islanders who had been coming and going to and from Tsune's place with information, so they probably had also let him know about Tanigawa. I have to say this quietly, but there were even islanders who were cooperating with Kayama's unit of the Japanese Army through Tsune. Ever since the Kumejima incidents have become a big issue, those people who were actively collaborating with the Japanese Army have been holding their tongues in silence. . . . I think there are islanders who are harboring guilt for their shared responsibility in addition to Kayama's troops. (Oshima 1975, 236)

The “Tsune” mentioned in this testimony was a Japanese soldier who, under orders from commanding officer Kayama, was in command at the scenes of the murders. Illuminating the truth about the murders would require a reexamination of the “cooperation” of the residents with the Japanese Army, and it was likely that this would have a deep effect

on interpersonal relations in the local community. As a result, even the bereaved, who had so strongly advocated for the pursuit of truth and accountability, became concerned that the examination of what happened during the war would lead to the destruction of interpersonal relationships in the local community and refrained from making continuous inquiries. This created an impassible wall on the road to overcoming the past around the Kumejima murders.

After the pressure from Kumejima and the rest of Okinawa died down, it was the Executive Committee for the Construction of the Monument of Sorrow for the Slaughter of Korean Okinawans and Kumejima Islanders, headquartered in Tokyo, that continued the movement to demand clarification of the truth and compensation from the state. The monument the committee was formed to construct was completed in 1974, and an unveiling ceremony was held on August 20, the date of the slaughter of the Gu family. Chishu Nakama, who had published “Kumejima no sensouki” in the commemorative magazine of the school where he had served as principal, made the following statement at the unveiling ceremony:

At the time, our situation was essentially that of a militarized state, and even the people who were used by Kayama may have feelings of grief, so I believe that we should recognize the notion that these people are victims as well.

I believe that the people who were pushed around by Kayama in this place, who were pushed around and made to do things, are also victims of the war, and that it is important to bring relief to the hearts of these people as well.

Now that this monument has been completed, I believe that this should be made into an opportunity for all the people of Japan to recognize these events, to bring relief to the feelings of grief of the bereaved for those who were killed, and also to bring relief to the hearts of those who were used by Kayama as his instruments in the war. (Uezu 2005, 58–59)

At the unveiling ceremony, Nakama reiterated the importance of facing the scars left by the murders with the awareness that the people who were used by Kayama were themselves victims. In this way, the reexamination of the murders including the involvement of the residents was recognized as a new issue related to overcoming the past.

The issue of the residents’ involvement in the incidents was a weak point that made it difficult to achieve the goal of overcoming the past in the sense of pursuing truth and accountability. At the same time, however, keeping this issue in sight would become a starting point for overcoming the past in a different sense, and it would be 20 years after the unveiling ceremony that these efforts would begin to be visible.

### **Opportunities for Introspection Regarding the Wartime Experience**

Toshi Uezu’s memoir, *Kumejima Jokyoushi* (A female teacher on Kumejima), published in 1995, half a century after the war in Okinawa, conveys a strong awareness of the Kumejima murders and how the scars from the incidents were dealt with.

In the afterword of the book, Uezu writes that as she was about to finish writing the

memoir, she received an urgent request from “a certain housewife on Kumejima,” who told her that a relative was rumored to have communicated with Kayama and provided information on spies, and asked Uezu to listen her worries (Uezu 1995, 290). Even half a century after the fact, resentment between residents over the murders continued, and this was an important element of Uezu’s motivation to write the book.

The memoir, which details the yearlong period beginning in the autumn of 1944, when Okinawa was engulfed in the flames of war, contains numerous mentions of Uezu’s own thoughts and feelings at the time. In particular, there are two passages about the accusations of espionage that were directly related to the murders of residents. One of them describes how people received the news that residents had been killed by the Japanese Army.

There was no detailed information, and all that reached the evacuation shelter was a report: “They say that people have been killed!” . . . Then, when it was reported that they had apparently been executed as spies, people started saying things like, “If they were spies, then I suppose there was no other option.” The army’s warnings to potential spies had been severe, and people felt that they must have been doing what was necessary to win the war. (Uezu 1995, 160)

The unquestioning belief that the Japanese Army was on the side of justice and the notion that spies deserved to be executed are essential elements of the mentality behind the reports that were made to the Japanese Army. In her afterword, Uezu makes the following reflection on her own attitude. “Under a militarized nation, and in the harsh situation of being at war, I thought that cooperating with the army was an obligation—was ‘justice.’ Mr. Yoshihama’s uncle (Chikai Yoshihama), who preached a strict policy of non-resistance, was rumored to be a ‘traitor,’ and even I shared those thoughts and felt angry” (Uezu 1995, 291).

The other passage of note in relation to the accusations of espionage deals with a list of people to be killed, of which Uezu became aware after the Japanese Army’s surrender.

It was on September 8 that Kayama’s unit surrendered to the American forces and left the island, but I heard later that there had been a plan to conduct mass executions of residents on September 9. There was apparently a list of 40 people in nine different households, and in addition to Mr. Yoshihama and Mr. Nakama, who was the leader of the civil defense unit, it apparently even included my own family. . . . When asked why she didn’t let us know, “O” said, “If I had told you, I would have been labeled as a spy as well and my family and I would have been killed.” (Uezu 1995, 215)

Even after learning that residents had been killed by Japanese soldiers, Uezu, who had accepted the killing of the spies as unavoidable, had herself been designated as a spy to be executed. Uezu’s experience here illustrates the difficulty in delineating between the people who provided information on spies to the Japanese Army and the people who were themselves executed as spies. Perhaps there was only a paper-thin line, determined by little more than chance, between those who reported and those who were killed. Consider-

ing it in this way, Uezu’s memoir, in which she strove to express her own mentality during the war, was an effort to explore the causes of the violence that was perpetrated while taking into account the strife between the islanders surrounding the murders.

Distinct from the concept of overcoming the past in the sense of pursuing truth and accountability from the Japanese government, this illustrates another approach to overcoming the past, one that attempts to explore the issues around the involvement of the islanders in the violence perpetrated against civilians by the military.

Efforts toward overcoming the past in this second sense were made by multiple parties involved with Kumejima after Uezu’s book was published. In 2005, ten years after the publication of Uezu’s memoir, a former teacher who had been involved in peace education on Kumejima self-published a book entitled *Taiheiyō sensō to Kumejima* (Kumejima and the war in the Pacific), which contained material related to the 1974 construction of the monument (Uezu 2005). Then, five years later in 2010, Toshi Uezu’s two daughters spearheaded the publishing of *Kumejima no sensō* (The war on Kumejima), which contained a large amount of new testimony from related parties (Kumejima no sensō wo kiroku suru kai 2010). Subsequently, in 2016, Masahide Ota published *Kumejima no “Okinawa-sen”* (“The Battle of Okinawa” on Kumejima), in which he outlines the post-war efforts and other circumstances surrounding the murders (Ota 2016).

Each of these works reexamines the wartime experience while taking into account not only the words and actions of the Japanese troops but also the involvement of residents. Efforts toward overcoming the past, in the sense of addressing the resentment and scars left among people due to their involvement in the incidents and bringing forth those experiences to face up to history and the present, have certainly had a continuous presence from the 1970s into the 2000s among people connected to Kumejima.

Isamu Sajita, who has been involved with peace education for elementary and middle school students on Kumejima, was a middle school student in 1972 when the community was roiled by Kayama’s remarks. It was then that Sajita learned of the wartime murders, seeing “adults gathering together, crying and releasing pent-up emotions,” and was shocked (*Okinawa Times* 2017). At length, Sajita came to learn about the resentment and scars harbored by people in the community and became determined to play a role in facing up to the pain and ensuring that the next generation learned of the murders. Through the efforts of those willing to face it head-on, the issue of residents’ involvement in the murders is becoming a driving force behind the sustainment of efforts toward overcoming the past.

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