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Documenting the History of Sexual Violence by the US Military in Okinawa: Feminist Theorization of “the Island of Military Bases”

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Keywords

Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, military sexual violence, demilitarization, long-term military stationing, intersectionality

Introduction

A quarter century has passed since I first saw the chronology of sexual assaults committed by US military in Okinawa titled “Postwar US Military Crimes against Women in Okinawa,” compiled by the members of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV) (1996). It was in New York in February 1996. The chronology was among the materials they had brought on their speaking tour to the United States, the first America Peace Caravan. At that time, the chronology had only eight pages documenting sexual assaults by US soldiers committed in Okinawa since 1945, with brief descriptions when available. This was the first edition published on February 2, 1996, which has been revised eleven times to this day.

To be honest, I do not much recall what I thought of the chronology itself then. Possibly, because OWAAMV members’ presentation of their feminist analysis of the history of Okinawa and the negative impacts of the US military presence there had already struck me so profoundly that the chronology did not leave a stand-alone impression. As I became involved in solidarity activities with OWAAMV, I became a part of the project, updating, translating, and disseminating the chronology. In particular, my responsibility as a researcher/activist involved in international networks of peace movements, feminist movements, and concerned scholars has been to bring and share the printed version of the most updated chronology in English to every conference and meeting I go to in order to raise awareness about the long-term military presence and its gendered and racialized impacts on Okinawa, a “host community” for the US military. At times, that was done with Suzuyo Takazato, co-chair of OWAAMV and the leading member of OWAAMV’s

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sexual crime/assault chronology. For the past two decades, we have attended gatherings and meetings together, including the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women annual meetings in New York, the No Base Network Meeting in Quito, Ecuador, and the International Institute on Peace Education in Turkey, to name a few.

In this process, some OWAAMV members such as Takazato, Harumi Miyagi, and Hiromi Minamoto, who have all worked on the chronology, have exchanged ideas about how we hope people will read the chronology, our reflections on its limitations and potential, and other related issues. As Takazato recently admitted in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun* that featured the chronology on the 25th anniversary of an island-wide protest movement in 1995, it might not have been their idea for this project to continue for 25 years (*Asahi Shimbun* 2020). As important as it is as a historical document, for the chronology project to be continued means that there are still sexual assaults committed by US service members stationed in Okinawa, contrary to the goal of the movement to abolish such violence.

This short commentary is an attempt to shed some light on the meaning of this project by feminist peace activists, OWAAMV, compiling the sexual crime chronology. The focus is on their learning, sharing, and analyzing the history of sexual violence under the long-term stationing of military on their island, “the Island of Military Bases,” as Takazato describes it (Takazato 1996). As anthropologist David Vine reminds us, in the 1950s a central US military strategy was to strengthen their naval power by seizing control of smaller islands, taking advantage of their political vulnerability (Vine 2011). Such a strategy inescapably reinforced control and militarization of several islands, including Okinawa, Guam, and Puerto Rico, that had already been colonized for centuries by different empires. Takazato’s characterization of Okinawa, derived from people’s lived experiences, tells us that military bases do not simply occupy spaces on the island; as wide as they are, they subsume the entire island, the sea, the sky, and the minds and behavior of people, endangering the well-being and even the survival of the people of the island.

Here, I plan to address the question, what does OWAAMV’s documenting of sexual violence by US soldiers show about the Island of Military Bases?

Making Visible the History of Sexual Assaults by US Soldiers in Okinawa

“Enough is enough.” That was the cry of the women in Huairou, China, in September 1995, who would two months later establish OWAAMV. It was their urgent voice, articulated in their historical analysis of structural violence in the organization of the military at a workshop titled “The Structural Violence of the Military and Women in Okinawa” at the NGO Forum of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (the Beijing Conference). A group of seven women from among the seventy-one Okinawan delegates to the NGO Forum formed under the auspices of the Okinawa Prefectural government, performed a silent play that showed the long history of military sexual assaults dating back to the case committed by a member of US Commodore Matthew Perry’s crew in 1853, followed by

the Japanese Imperial Army's "comfort stations," or military sexual slavery, in 1940s Okinawa, the US military's direct occupation between 1945 and 1972, and thereafter (Aguni 1996). This was also their voice of deep rage when they staged a 12-day-long sit-in in front of the Okinawa Prefectural Government building in September 1995, crying out at yet another sexual assault by three US soldiers stationed in Okinawa, which they learned about when they returned from the Beijing NGO Forum. This assault was reported internationally and prompted wide-scale uproar in Okinawa after women's groups, initiated by Beijing NGO Forum delegate members, called for justice to respond to the victim's courage in reporting the case to the police.¹

These women's fury is historically rooted, and it emerged from their lived experiences. It is not an exaggeration to say that everyone in Okinawa knows of some sexual assaults by US soldiers. It has been a part of their history, their daily lives, and an ongoing threat to their safety and well-being.

Outsiders, however, did not fully understand this perception and these cries of anger. It is easier to turn a blind eye to the heavy burden on Okinawa of hosting a foreign military power for such a long time. Only when a particularly brutal case is committed and revealed is the problem reported, leaving the impression that it is an isolated case of violence committed by a "bad apple" in the US military. The sexual assault on September 4, 1995, by three US servicemen against a minor was such a case that drew very wide attention.

Takazato recalls how she and other Beijing NGO Forum participants realized the need to make the history of sexual assaults visible shortly after the women's organizations started their protest actions in mid-September 1995, when a number of media reporters, both in and outside of Japan, started to come to Okinawa (2021).² She recalls being asked the same question repeatedly:

They all came. The BBC from the UK, ABC of Australia, a broadcast corporation from Italy, all three major US networks. They all came and asked the same question, "So, this horrible crime, how many have there been in the past?" I said, "Countless numbers." Then they asked, "Where are the data?" So I said, "If you look at the Okinawan prefectural police records, you will find three to five. But in reality, there have been countless since the end of World War II." I kept saying this. I realized that it was not enough to say "countless." I told Harumi (Miyagi) that we would need to make it visible and invited her to make a chronology of sexual crimes. (Takazato 2021)

Miyagi and Takazato, together with other colleagues, were aware of the power of a chronology-like presentation of the history and issues faced by women in Okinawa. For the Beijing NGO Forum workshop, they had prepared a concise chronology of colonial rule on Okinawa to help the audience contextualize military violence against women in Okinawa. Miyagi, who missed participating in the Beijing NGO Forum for her appearance at the Okinawa City peace festival on September 6, 1995, also used a similar form of presentation and reaffirmed the importance of making visible the history of violence imposed on people in Okinawa. Thus, the sexual crime chronology project started, an

activity that continues to this day.

Postwar US Military Crimes against Women in Okinawa: The Chronology

OWAAMV's first activity outside Japan was the first America Peace Caravan in February 1996, in which twenty members participated. The Caravan members visited several locations in the United States to have direct conversations with US citizens about what their military had been doing to harm Okinawan people. They were particularly concerned about sexual violence, which had continued since 1945, yet only sporadic attention had been paid to it. OWAAMV members wanted to make sure to convey their analysis and argument that sexual violence has continued throughout the US military presence in Okinawa (Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence 1996a).

In preparation for the caravan, they hastily put together the chronology both in Japanese and in English. The first edition is dated February 2, 1996, and contained about fifty cases starting from April 1945, when the US military first landed on the main island of Okinawa during the Battle of Okinawa, until 1995 (Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence 1996b).

The editions in Japanese are: first (February 2, 1996); second (November 12, 1997); third (November 4, 1998); fourth (June 22, 2000); fifth (August 18, 2001); sixth (August 1, 2002); seventh (December 22, 2004); eighth (October 26, 2008); ninth (October 5, 2011); tenth (January 21, 2012); eleventh (January 31, 2014); and twelfth (June 8, 2016). The last one is the most recent Japanese edition, which goes from 1945 to May 2016.

Each entry in the chronology gives a brief description of the crime/assault and, when available, notes about what happened afterwards to the perpetrator(s). For example, "On October 5, 1951, a 48-year-old woman was going home when a GI who was her acquaintance gave her a ride in a jeep. She was raped on a farm road. No charges filed." It also identified the source of this information, *Report on US Military Crimes during the Occupation of Okinawa* by Morio Tengan (Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence 2016).

The format of the chronology followed a Burmese women's group's project to document sexual assault by Burmese military that Takazato had learned about in her involvement with the Asian Women's Association³ while in Tokyo in the 1980s. Though the Burmese military violence cases were documented in more detail, such as identifications of the victims, it was an idea that Takazato quickly remembered when they were compiling their chronology (Takazato 2021).

The twelfth edition published in 2016 includes descriptions of Okinawa Prefectural Police records for almost every year since 1945. Between 1945 and 1971, during the direct US military occupation period, the chronology records over 300 cases of sexual assaults including rape and related murder cases. After the reversion to Japanese administration in 1972 until 2016, about 170 cases of sexual assaults and related murders are logged. To be sure, these numbers do not show the actual number of incidents of sexual

assaults or a statistical analysis.

The incidents documented in the chronology are only the tip of a much larger iceberg. Capturing all the cases of violence is impossible, yet these numbers are already shocking. Takazato shares her own impression when looking at the chronology, reflecting particularly on those who were killed: “I was actually astonished to see these crimes chronicled. This was the first of the kind. The official prefectural records did not have sexual violence listed like we did. We did this out of necessity (to bring to the Peace Caravan), but I myself was shocked to see how many women had been killed like this” (Takazato 2021).

She thinks about the possible link between the murders of women and the wars waged by the US military in Asia. More recent research shows how US military facilities in Okinawa were used during the Vietnam War to cater to the US military’s various needs: as an outpost, as the final training venue before deployment to combat in Vietnam, and as an R&R destination. This direct connection to prolonged war might have contributed to the brutal murder cases of Okinawan women. The victims of these murders, particularly during the Vietnam War period, were mostly women working in the sex industry who were brutally killed while at work. Takazato calls our attention to the resemblance between the method of women’s murders to the method of killing in combat zones, pointing out the violence intrinsic to the military system (Takazato 2021).

It is also striking that for the majority of cases, the perpetrators were not apprehended nor brought to justice. Their impunity, a major factor identified by feminists, has contributed to the continuation of sexual violence and exemplifies the intersectional oppressions of sexism and racism on the colonized and militarized island of Okinawa. Women and girls on defeated and conquered islands became the primary target of sexual assaults committed indiscriminately by the new military occupiers in the post-conflict period, shown in the earlier years in the chronology. Nevertheless, as the reconstruction of Okinawan society proceeded, and the safety of local community members became a concern, leaders of local communities decided to reinstate the sex industry, this time for US soldiers, to protect women and girls of their community from sexual violence (Workshop on Military in Okinawa: Its structural violence and women 1996). Here, choices were made about whose safety should be prioritized. Women working in the newly developed sex industry in post-conflict Okinawa were to provide the protection for the community.

Complexity of “Making it Visible”

The chronology has been introduced on different occasions in the media and other platforms. For the past twenty-some years, we, who have worked on this project, have often distributed paper versions to make the issue more widely known at different meetings and lectures. More recently there have been requests and suggestions to put the chronology on the internet. Such demands have increased as more writings and reports are now online with hyperlinks to citations and relevant information. Indeed, this has become a standard way of sharing information.

The team has had discussions about whether these materials should be made available online. For the moment, those who have been involved in the project have agreed that we will not publish the chronology on the internet. Although we understand that having the chronology accessible in cyberspace would increase opportunities to reach out further and widen our audiences, we have repeatedly decided not to do this. These decisions have been guided mainly by Takazato's expertise and long experience as a social worker specialized in violence against women in Tokyo and in Okinawa since the 1970s. She has helped many victims of sexual assault and knows firsthand how victims survive violence and recover, or more precisely, how difficult the recovery process is. She believes very strongly that the most important condition for the victim's recovery is that she regain a sense of safety. Takazato believes that fear by the victim of other people knowing information about her obstructs the process of her reclaiming a feeling of safety.

The effort to make the history of sexual violence visible is a project that carries deep sensitivity toward victims in a patriarchal society where women's sexual autonomy is not recognized. Victims can easily be exposed to shaming. While paying close attention to the protection of victims' privacy, OWAAMV members are committed to making visible the interplay between sexism, militarism, and colonialism that is manifested as the history of sexual violence by US soldiers in Okinawa.

Meanings of Engaging in Documenting Militarized Sexual Violence

Among the many meanings given to the project, Takazato observes the following:

I wanted to mourn and give a voice to those women who were killed as the result of sexual assaults. Particularly on my mind are the women working in the sex industry. There are years when five women working in the sex industry were killed. At times, their bodies were dumped, and that was how evidence of these crimes was found. What kind of situation is this? Yet, there were no prefectural public rallies organized to protest [as there have been for other crimes]. There was nothing to recognize their deaths as a serious problem to be addressed by the society. So I wanted to make sure these women who were killed are remembered and mourned. (Takazato 2021)

For Harumi Miyagi, an independent historian, exhibiting the chronology validates women's experiences of witnessing, learning about, and fearing sexual assaults by US soldiers in Okinawa. She maintains: "I wanted to show these experiences of violence with clear sources. We have known about the violence, and we wanted to show it. And I wanted to assure readers that these cases are supported by sources" (Miyagi 2021).

Miyagi also regrets the lack of material sources on the modern history of Okinawa:

I have always thought that there are too few records about women, particularly from the modern era in Okinawa. I always fear that women's experiences will be buried if there are no records. Materials on Okinawa before the modern era, like the *Sho* family (the monarch), survived because they were kept in Tokyo, but documents and materials on the modern era, since the Meiji period, were destroyed during World War II (by military attacks on Okinawa).

Post-World War II Okinawa history has been written by men, and women's presence has not been recognized. So I thought women themselves need to keep records about women in Okinawa. The chronology is one such effort and should be considered, maybe, a historical document. (Miyagi 2021)

These reflections imply that women activists have gained strength through carrying out the project to validate their thinking and activities as well as their analysis. At the same time, Takazato and Miyagi bear deep compassion to those women victimized by the structured sexual violence in colonialism and militarism.

Conclusion

In the international community, sexual violence committed in war is now understood as a tactic of war. More news of sexual violence in on-going conflicts has been reported in recent years, and it has drawn people's attention. But if we are serious about abolishing war-time rape, we need to expand our examination of these acts of sexual violence in so-called "peace time," where there is no war being waged. Feminists examining rape have already pointed out the continuum of violence between war and peace. Everyday sexism and misogyny in peace time are rooted in the established patriarchal social order and prescribed gender roles, which make rape in war a weapon of war. I have argued elsewhere that if we want to examine the mechanisms and root causes of sexual assaults committed in war, we must also turn our eyes to so-called peace time and acknowledge the contribution of prevailing societal norms and attitudes to this problem (Akibayashi 2020).

The sexual crime chronology project created by OWAAMV is unique and crucial. Their experiences, living on the Island of the Military Bases, heavily militarized and colonized by outside forces, namely the Imperial Japanese military in the 1940s and the US military since 1945, are also a history of living under the fear of sexual assault. I imagine when women and girls in Okinawa read about the news of sexual assaults by US soldiers on their islands, their fear and anxiety may be very much part of their daily life living a fence away from the US military or living on the Island of Military Bases. At least, I imagine, they grow up witnessing and feeling something that those on mainland Japan never need to feel growing up.

Through the project of compiling the chronology, Okinawan feminists have identified the complex gendered and racialized power structure of the Island of Military Bases and its deeply permeated impacts on the people of Okinawa. The presence of the US military bases on their island means living with the military and its troops, whose activities and behaviors have jeopardized the well-being and endangered the survival of Okinawan people. Having continued for twenty-five years, "The Postwar US Military Crimes Against Women in Okinawa," shows feminists learning and theorizing about militarism, and the possibility of feminists organizing for demilitarization.

Notes

1. In 1995, the Japanese criminal codes required the victim of rape to report to the police on their own in order for the police to open an investigation. This was of course a serious hindrance for rape victims because they were more likely to have to go through detailed descriptions of the crime repeatedly and also be exposed to the social stigma imposed on rape victims. This problem of the Japanese criminal justice system has been pointed out by legal experts as well as those who have gone through the process (see Kobayashi 2008, Ito 2017, or Tsunoda 2013).

2. Beijing NGO Forum organizing committee issued a statement on September 27, 1995 to call for the media to respect the privacy of the victim of the 1995 rape as an increasing number of mainland Japanese reporters were trying to find information in the area where the victim lived, raising serious concern in the small community and among those familiar with the danger of stigma imposed on victims of sexual assaults (NGO Beijing' 95 Okinawa Committee).

3. Asian Women's Association (*Ajia no Onnatachi no Kai*) was established in March 1977 by Yayori Matsui, Taeko Tomiyama, Etsuko Kaji, Masako Goto, Rei Yuasa, Akiko Yamaguchi, and Misako Ando for Japanese women to develop solidarity with women in other Asian countries in their democratization movements and to raise awareness among the Japanese about Japan's "invasion" in economic and sexual terms of other Asian countries (see Akibayashi 2020b).

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