

## **The Subversion of Okinawan Contact Zone Hierarchies in the Domestic Sphere: Studies of Maids in Postwar Okinawa**

Okinawa during the period of American control (1945-1972) can be understood as a contact zone where systemically uneven power structures placed Americans over Okinawans. One of the most visible means of these unequal relationships can be seen through America's stifling of democracy and land ownership rights for the Okinawan people. As understood through the contact zone theory, most relationships between Okinawans and Americans were unequal resulting in the oppression of the Okinawan people. However, there were occasions where this power dynamic was subverted. This paper will examine how the relationships between Okinawan maids and their American employers were, at times, in opposition to the presumed inequalities of a contact zone. The domestic sphere provided opportunities for the traditional roles of Americans and Okinawans to fade away and create a new set of more equal, behavioral norms between both cultures.

World War II occupations created many cases where powers collided, and post-World War II Okinawa under U.S. rule was not an exception. Katsunori Yamazato in his preface to the book *Okinawa and Hawaii: Islands as Contact Zones*, "Postwar Okinawa as a Contact Zone," argues that Okinawa during the period of American control can also be thought of as a contact zone. During the period of American control, the military government made legislation that shaped all aspects of Okinawans lives, often removing democratic options and autonomy from the Okinawan population. For example, during the "land struggles," which started in 1956, the American military, as a symbol of the American government, confiscated private land from Okinawans without proper due process or compensation. These actions disrupted the process of democracy in Okinawa and are a demonstration of how America can be understood as a

colonizing force in Okinawa between the years of 1945 and 1972.<sup>1</sup> Based upon this history, the relationship between the American and Okinawan populations can be understood in the context of “highly asymmetrical relations of power,” and it becomes clearer how these two groups “me[e]t, clash[ed] and grapp[ed] with each other”<sup>2</sup> in a contact zone.

Mary Louise Pratt, a leading scholar of geopolitics, defines the term contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”<sup>3</sup> Using South African apartheid as an example of a contact zone, Pratt explains how white westerners often simply think of apartheid as the segregation of the white and black populations. The suburbs of the rich whites are contrasted with images of Soweto or other government sanctioned black residential areas. Yet, Pratt argues that the reality of apartheid, and all other contact zones are much more complex. She states that the understanding of apartheid changes, “if you think of apartheid as referring to particular forms of relatedness of whites and blacks, as a system in which they are not at all separate, but continually in each other’s presence and contact, in workplaces, businesses, in dealings with the state, through religious organisations, surveillance procedures, through writing of many kinds.”<sup>4</sup> White and black populations in South African apartheid, like all of those people living in contact zones, were not simply living parallel lives but in fact were frequently in contact through a variety of relationships that could be both intimate and inhumanly exploitative at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> Katsunori Yamazato, “Contakuto Zoon toshite no Sengo Okinawa,” in *Okinawa Hawaii Contakuto Zoon toshite no Tousho*, ed. Masahide Ishihara, Ikue Kina, and Shin Yamashiro (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2010), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession*, (1991): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

<sup>3</sup> Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 34.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Linguistic Utopias,” in *The Linguistics of Writing*, ed. Nigel Fabb et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 60.

While not traditionally thought of as a colonizing power in the sense of the European nations' colonization of Africa and Asia, Yamazato argues that by using the rhetoric of the Cold War, the American military government warped the process of democracy in Okinawa, making the American military and in turn the American government a type of colonizing force.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in Okinawa there were situations in which the typical power structure associated with a contact zone were subverted. One such situation was the domestic sphere as seen through the relationships between Okinawan maids and their American employers, particularly the wives and children of American military related personnel. While not true of every maid-employer relationship, there were circumstances in which Okinawan maids could be understood as on equal power terms with their American employer, or even be in a position of power by teaching their employer information about Okinawa or by having temporary control of the house while working. This paper will examine the moments in Okinawa's contact zone where the stereotypical unequal relationships between Okinawans and Americans were perverted primarily through the primary source documents of Marian Chapple Merritt's book *Is Like Typhoon: Okinawa and the Far East* and the testimonies of both the Okinawan maids and the Americans who employed them.

### **Working Conditions for Okinawan Maids**

In Okinawa many describe the job of a maid for American military related personnel during the period of American control (1945-1972) as glamorous (*hanagata shokugyo*, 花形職業). However, this description ignores the countless hardships faced by Okinawan women in this position. Maids were not covered by employment protection legislation. Civil

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<sup>5</sup> Katsunori Yamazato, "Contakuto Zoon toshite no Sengo Okinawa," 20.

Administration (CA) Ordinance Number 97, the precursor to the 1953 Labor Standards Law, set minimum standards regarding the working conditions for Okinawan employees, however maids were specifically listed as exempt from these legal protections.<sup>6</sup> While other categories of workers received the right to limit their workdays to eight hours a day and no more than 48 hours a week and also the right to receive overtime pay, a meal break of at least 45 minutes, annual paid vacation and at least one day off a week, maids were not protected by this law. CA Ordinance Number 97 also provided women and those under the age of 18 special protections from working more than 10 hours in a 24-hour period, working more than 54 hours in any six consecutive days or from working more than six consecutive days without a day off, but maids were also specifically excluded from these regulations.

Maids were also precluded from labor protections through CA Ordinance Number 116, Labor Relations and Labor Standards Concerning Ryukyuan Employees. The stated purpose of this document was “to make provisions concerning working conditions of Ryukyuan employees of the U.S. Forces, Ryukyu Islands (USFR) to the end that there will be maintained a minimum standard of living necessary for the health, efficiency, and general well-being of such employees.”<sup>7</sup> Okinawan employees were given a Bill of Rights of Labor, which included a wide variety of rights such as the right to “safe, healthful working conditions,” the right to “rest and

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<sup>6</sup> CA Ordinance Number 97, Regulation Governing Working Conditions of Ryukyuan Employees, January 17, 1953, Civil Administration Ordinance 1953 Nen-1957 Nen Dai 093 Gō-Dai 171 Gō, Okinawa Prefectural Archives, <https://www3.archives.pref.okinawa.jp/RDA/data01/RDAP000029/index.html?title=米国民政府布令%2FCivil%20Administration%20Ordinance%201953年~1957年%E3%80%80第093号~第171号&page=30>.

<sup>7</sup> CA Ordinance Number 116, Labor Relations and Labor Standards Concerning Ryukyuan Employees, August 18, 1953, Civil Administration Ordinance 1953 Nen-1957 Nen Dai 093 Gō-Dai 171 Gō, Okinawa Prefectural Archives, <https://www3.archives.pref.okinawa.jp/RDA/data01/RDAP000029/index.html?title=米国民政府布令%2FCivil%20Administration%20Ordinance%201953年~1957年%E3%80%80第093号~第171号&page=147>.

leisure,” and the right to “associate himself with other workers in labor organizations.”<sup>8</sup> Yet again, those working “in the domestic service of any family or person at his home” were specifically excluded from these protections.<sup>9</sup> Due to the lack of legislation, the working conditions of each maid were highly dependent upon their employer. This created an extremely wide variety of working environments and issues for maids.

As maids were not protected by legislation their working conditions could be appalling. The environment was completely dependent upon the employer, and for maids that worked under employers that embodied the “highly asymmetrical relations of power,” as defined by Pratt’s contact zone theory, the situation could be quite dire. Speaking at a meeting of the “Counter-Measure Committee for Human Rights of Maids” on June 13, 1957, Haruko Machida, summarized the complaints about the working conditions of maids in the Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ) in the following manner:

Kadena is one [maid] for two [employers]. One maid performs service for two people and receives only ¥1,500 per month. We have heard that each American pays \$8.00 and we should get \$16.00 performing services for two people. There is one timekeeper (maid ‘hanchō’) for every four buildings and it is believed that this person is doing something funny. Wages will not be paid without the signature of the employer. Thirty minutes is deducted when we are five minutes late. If this happens often, several days wages will be deducted. We cannot go home even after five o’clock if we are not finished with the work. However, we cannot go home even if we finish work before five o’clock. We do not receive bus fee and people commuting from Ishikawa [City] receive only a small sum.<sup>10</sup>

Machida also suggested that employers frequently attacked maids. She stated, “It seems that BOQ is the worst of all. It is said that they lock the key during lunch hours and do funny things. I

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<sup>8</sup> CA Ordinance Number 116, August 18, 1953, Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

<sup>9</sup> CA Ordinance Number 116, August 18, 1953, Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Report on Meeting of Counter-Measure Committee for Human Rights of Maids, n.d., Local Nationals, 1958 and Prior: Domestic, Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

know several people who have been criminally attacked. There are some who terminate.”<sup>11</sup> Low pay, unfair working practices and even bodily danger were threats faced by maids working in bachelor quarter residences.

Yet, leaving the bachelor quarters and working in a private home, did not ensure that the working conditions for maids were any better. Maids working in private homes also faced low wages and employers who forced them to work long hours without providing sufficient meals. Machida, in the same meeting, described the conditions of maids in private homes in the following way:

For the household maids there are those who commute to and from work and those that live-in. Those who commute receive about ¥1,100 to ¥1,500 and occasionally they are paid ¥2,000 privately. Those who live-in work about 17-18 hours per day from 5 a.m. until 12 p.m. at night. When a request was made to have an increase in wage it was not accepted. There are places which give one piece of toast and a cup of coffee for breakfast and one handful of rice with salt or soy-sauce for lunch. It seems that Americans learn while on ships coming over to Okinawa that there are shops here which sell canned sardines for Okinawan maids. We have the same dinner meals but the left-overs. Toilets for Okinawans are different and if we make a mistake and are found to be in the toilet designated for Americans we are thrown out even if we are in the midst of using the facility. We cannot drink the ice water in the refrigerator and are not supposed to talk to the garden boys. They say it is ‘T.B.’ even when we only cough and if they want to terminate us there are many reasons they can use. There are instances when we are made to buy a set in case we break one cup. Even in paying wages they purposely use ¥20 bills to pay only about ¥1,000 and count it and pass it on. We have heard that there is one rest-day per week but we are given rest-days only on occasions.<sup>12</sup>

Some maids even faced threats to their lives, as their employers would not let them take necessary medical leave. Machida noted an incident regarding a maid who worked on Oroku Air Base. She stated, “Just before Christmas this maid was not feeling well and went to the hospital on Sunday and found out that she had to have an operation and informed the employer on

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<sup>11</sup> Report on Meeting of Counter-Measure Committee, n.d., Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Report on Meeting of Counter-Measure Committee, n.d., Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

Monday and asked to be absent. The employer told her to correct her sickness after Christmas is over and did not give her a leave of absence.”<sup>13</sup> Even in cases of severe illness, maids were not guaranteed the right to take leave.

One might argue that these conditions of low pay and poor working conditions are to be expected as part of working as a maid. However, when compared to maids working for U.S. Forces personnel on mainland Japan, the maids on Okinawa consistently received less pay and suffered from substandard working conditions. According to a June 21, 1957, article in the *Okinawa Times* Japanese maids made on average between ¥9,000 to ¥10,000 (Japanese yen, equivalent to B¥3,000 to B¥3,333<sup>14</sup>) per month, a much higher salary than Okinawan maids, who averaged between B¥1,100 and B¥1,500 per month. Japanese maids received two rest days per month and worked 12-13 hours per day. Maids in Japan who commuted to work also received two meals a day without cost.<sup>15</sup> While all maids suffered from poor working conditions, it is apparent that the situation in Okinawa was significantly worse than maids working in mainland Japan.

### **Marian Chapple Merritt: An Exception to the Rule?**

However, even with this background of low pay and harsh working conditions for Okinawan maids, there were still instances where the inequalities which are presumed in the contact zone theory were non-existent. Examples can be found throughout Marian Chapple Merritt's book *Is Like Typhoon: Okinawa and the Far East*. Merritt's book was based on her experiences as a military spouse who lived in Okinawa with her family twice, first for a year and

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<sup>13</sup> Report on Meeting of Counter-Measure Committee, n.d., Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Based upon the 1957 rate of 120 B Yen to 1 American Dollar and 360 Japanese Yen to 1 American Dollar.

<sup>15</sup> Bad Treatment of Military Employment - ¥1,000 Lower than Local Economy Translation, June 21, 1957, Local Nationals, 1958 and Prior: Domestics, Okinawa Prefectural Archives.

a half between 1946 and 1947 and the second, for approximately two years, between 1952 and 1954. Merritt was not your typical American military spouse. Born in 1904 in Ashland, Wisconsin, a small town in northern Wisconsin, Merritt was one of five children. Although she contracted polio at the age of four and used a crutch, her family treated her as they treated her siblings and expected the same out of her. After graduating from high school, Marian went on to college and then continued to get her master's degree from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and became a teacher. Marian later married her husband Robert Merritt around 1928. Together, they had a daughter, Natalie, who was born in 1932. With the start of World War II, Robert decided to enlist in the military, joining the Air Force as a public information officer. It was through this position that the family left their home in the U.S. to move to Okinawa. During her time in Okinawa Merritt created the Okinawa Maid School, was a founding member of the Okinawa International Women's Club, was president of the Kadena Chapel Guild, was involved in the Kadena Officers' Wives Club and taught English at Koza Junior High School. Her book *Is Like Typhoon: Okinawa and the Far East* was based upon letters that she wrote to her mother and friends during her time in Okinawa.

Although Merritt's work is not well known it has been used in the past as evidence supporting the idea of American maternalism. American maternalism in Okinawa can be understood as the charitable actions taken by American women, which were done as "mother-like" actions to assist and protect the "childlike" Okinawan people. It was their job as the more advanced people to guide their "children," the Okinawan people to maturity as defined by American ideals. Donna Alvah in her book *Unofficial Ambassadors: American Military Families Overseas and the Cold War, 1946-1965* suggests that American women

sought to counteract the negative effects of the military through nurturing, intimate interactions with Okinawans while maintaining the power differential. In

charitable activities, as “mistresses” of maids, at schools, and in other everyday relations with Okinawans, military wives perpetuated assumptions about Okinawans’ dependency on Americans, which for Americans legitimated the military presence and the allegedly much-needed protection and guidance of the “natives.”<sup>16</sup>

In her work Alvah argues that Merritt’s language throughout the book *Is Like Typhoon* demonstrates the maternal role she took towards the Okinawan people. She points out that Merritt’s word choice when describing her maid and other Okinawans include terms such as “little girls,” “little people,” “little helpers,” and “dear little Okinawans,” which emphasize the small, childlike statures of Okinawans. She also notes Merritt belief that by hiring a maid she and other Americans were helping to rebuild Okinawa was maternalistic in furthering the idea that Okinawans were dependent upon the United States to rebuild their economy and livelihood after the war. Alvah argues that even the title of Merritt’s book, *Is Like Typhoon: Okinawa and the Far East*, is suggested as maternalistic by Alvah as the incorrect grammar of the title suggests “an inarticulate and immature people” while the imagery of a typhoon is used to suggest “an exotic and untamed land.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, this focus on specific words or short passages from the book blinds the reader from seeing the larger, more powerful message of Merritt’s book. Yes, at times her word choice could be condescending towards the Okinawa people, but this is also a result of language of the 1950s when her book was written. A close reading of her work shows that she did not feel that Americans were culturally superior to the Okinawan people even though Americans were exceedingly more materially prosperous at the time.<sup>18</sup> She, in fact, broke the de facto power

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<sup>16</sup> Donna Alvah, *Unofficial Ambassadors: American Military Families Overseas and the Cold War, 1946-1965* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 178.

<sup>17</sup> Alvah, *Unofficial Ambassadors*, 182-183.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 72.

differential in Okinawa by seeing the value of both cultures. In explaining about her book in the prologue Merritt notes, “This book is a personal account of what I saw and did and loved about Okinawa and the Orient. As such it is a collection of experiences -- unrelated experiences -- in a wonderful land peopled by wonderful men and women who have a philosophy of life which is different from that which I have learned as an American. Who is to say which is best?”<sup>19</sup>

Throughout her experiences she finds aspects of Okinawan culture that she feels are admirable, such as their child rearing techniques<sup>20</sup> and the ability to continue working hard with a smile even through times of tribulation.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively she also provides some aspects of American culture which she feels are preferable, such as women’s rights.<sup>22</sup> Clearly Merritt felt the differences between Okinawan culture and her own and saw that each culture had areas where it excelled, but could not assign a superior status to either.

It is because of this cultural openness and understanding that in many of Merritt’s relationships with maids and other Okinawans the typical hierarchy of unequal relationships between Americans and Okinawans were subverted. The most obvious example of this subversion of power is in Merritt’s relationship with her maids. Merritt herself showed much empathy in her dealings with her maids. Although there were times when she felt frustrated due to a breakdown in communication, she could understand how the huge gulf in material goods and technologies between Americans and Okinawans and the inability to read English could lead to mistakes by Okinawan maids. She explained:

Sani-flush [a type of toilet bowl cleaner which when mixed with water creates a highly-corrosive acid solution used to dissolve minerals from the toilet bowl] looked like cleanser, so would be used interchangeably – I suppose whichever

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<sup>19</sup> Marian Chapple Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon: Okinawa and the Far East* (Tokyo: World News and Publishing Co., 1954), iii-iv.

<sup>20</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 282-283.

<sup>21</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 112-113.

<sup>22</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 168-169.

came to hand first, and even Drano [a drain cleaner] at times was tossed into the sink, to the detriment of both the sink and the hands. Vanilla was used in place of soya-sauce. After all, they looked the same. Bedding was rolled up and put away in the closet each morning. That's the way they do it in their homes and many of these girls had never seen an American bed.<sup>23</sup>

Although the relationship between Okinawan maids and American employers was framed in a highly asymmetric power relationship, Merritt broke free from these structures. Merritt did not get angry at her maids when they made mistakes and never reverted to violence towards them. She did not dock their pay or fire them for any missteps in their jobs. She instead took the time to consider the cultural reasons why these errors were being made and use this information to change her communication style so that problems could be resolved.

Additionally, Merritt and her family took the time to study Japanese and *Uchināguchi*, the native Okinawan language of the southern half of Okinawa Island. The family felt that it was not only Okinawan's responsibility to learn English to speak to Americans, but it was also the responsibility of Americans to learn Japanese and *Uchināguchi* to speak to Okinawans. In fact, the Merritt family even requested to their maids that they speak to each other in *Uchināguchi* so that they could practice the language more.<sup>24</sup> Although Merritt never became fluent in either language, her willingness to try to communicate in the local languages demonstrates another way in which she subverted the typical unequal relationship between Americans and Okinawans. By refusing to learn Japanese or *Uchināguchi*, Americans forced Okinawans to speak English, their second (or third) language. When speaking in English, Americans had full command of the language and could control the dialogue. When their Okinawan employees made mistakes, many assumed these Okinawans were simply dumb instead of understanding how difficult it was

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<sup>23</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Natalie Sundberg, May 27, 2021.

to learn an additional language. In the eyes of the American oppressors, English was a more important and powerful language so it was expected that all Okinawans should become fluent in the language. Alternatively, Merritt, by learning Japanese and Uchināguchi, demonstrated that she saw value in these languages and in turn the people that spoke them. She was in Okinawa, so she did not want to limit herself to the American military bases. Learning these languages helped her to better get to know the island and the people that lived there. Also, by learning additional languages Merritt could experience the difficulties associated with the acquisition process and have empathy for Okinawans in their language mistakes. This empathy helped to breakdown the traditional power structures between American employers and Okinawan maids even more.

### **The Subversion of Traditional Hierarchies in the Domestic Sphere**

However, these were not particularly common problem-solving styles for many American employers in Okinawa at the time. Instead, many American women used any gathering, such as club meetings or bridge parties, as an opportunity to complain about and criticize their maids. According to Merritt, American women whined about “how stupid they [Okinawan maids] were, how much they ate, how they let the children run wild,”<sup>25</sup> which Merritt found personally offensive as she knew these claims to be untrue. From her own experiences and observations of Okinawans she saw that Okinawan women were smart, were very careful about taking food unless it was directly offered to them and were excellent as childcare providers. In fact, she thought that in general Okinawan children were better behaved than American children because of the parenting style of Okinawans. These American women, unlike

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<sup>25</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 48.

Merritt, played the role of the oppressor in the contact zone of America controlled Okinawa. While coming into daily contact with an Okinawan, they refused to shift hierarchy of the relationship. As Americans they were in control and their Okinawan maids were clearly inferior as demonstrated by their actions in the home and their inability to speak English well.

In fact, it was an experience with an American woman who employed a maid that acted as the impetus for the creation of the Okinawa Maid School. Natalie Sundberg, the daughter of Merritt who lived with her parents during their time in Okinawa, remembered that one day her mother went to play bridge at the Kadena Air Base Officer's Club with some of her friends. While playing one of the women in the group complained, "I don't understand it. No matter how loud I yell at the maid she does not know what I want her to do."<sup>26</sup> Sundberg recalled that this woman was the epitome of American assumed superiority over Okinawans. She did not like to leave the base and was not willing to associate with the local Okinawan population. This type of thinking made Merritt furious. She herself thought that her time in Okinawa, outside of the military gates was the best writing, "Strange to say our very best times were not with Americans, but with Okinawans,"<sup>27</sup> yet this woman cloistered herself within the confines of the American base and found reason to complain about every interaction with Okinawans.

The Okinawa Maid School provided free training for Okinawan women who wanted to work as maids in American homes. Each class was two weeks long and provided 60 hours of hands-on maid training for six to eight Okinawan women. However, Merritt understood that it was not only the Okinawan women who needed training. She felt that American women also needed training on how to employ an Okinawan maid and that both sides needed to improve their skill sets to improve this working relationship. To improve the skill sets of Americans, Merritt

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Natalie Sundberg, May 27, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 100.

provided each American employer with a sheet of comments and suggestions to consider when working with their maid. Many of these suggestions revolved around clear communication. Merritt wrote, “Mistakes occur. If you do not explain, how can they know? There are hundreds of opportunities for misunderstandings. If there is a mistake, was it your fault or theirs? Did you explain?” She later added, “If you do not like the way your maid learned to do things in the maid school tell her. Explain your way, but be sure she understands.”<sup>28</sup>

Through these statements Merritt subverts the hierarchy of American colonialism in Okinawa in the domestic sphere. “Stupid” maids can no longer be blamed for all the problems between maids and their employers. Merritt instead firmly places a great amount of responsibility on the employer and a lack of effective communication between the two groups as the source of most issues in the home. As employers are a large part of the problem, they too need to change their behavior. They should not simply be upset at their maids when they made mistakes because it is also the responsibility of the employer to teach and support their maids. This way of thinking frames American employers and Okinawan maids on more equal footing as it places responsibility on both groups to be better at their roles in the home.

Additionally, inside the home maids frequently disrupted the hierarchy of Americans over Okinawans. Based upon this assumed hierarchy Americans should have been in complete control of their homes when their maids came to work. Maids should have worked in the shadows and never disturbed their employer at their home. If an Okinawan maid was disruptive to an American employer, the American should have told them to stop and forced them to do some other job. Yet regularly this was not the case. Merritt often had maids training in her home as part of the Maid School curriculum and while they were there, these trainee maids had control

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<sup>28</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 52-53.

of the home. One day Merritt's husband, Bob, had a rare weekday off and wanted to spend it at home. He planned on sleeping in late and then lounging around the house. However, he was not able to relax as he wanted to. He was woken up early because the maids needed to practice changing sheets. He decided to get up and go to the kitchen to drink his morning coffee, but the maids soon came to the kitchen to learn how to polish the silver. He moved to the living room and started to smoke but was unable to use an ashtray because one of the maids needed to wash them. He decided to flick his ashes on the ground since the floors hadn't been swept yet, but "felt someone looking at him" and realized that he needed to move so that the maids could practice mopping. Even though it was a cold day, he then moved to the screened porch but once again he was forced to move as the maids wanted to remove the mats and sweep the porch. He finally moved to the only room left, the bathroom, and locked himself in there but almost immediately heard knocking on the door as it was time to clean the bathroom. He eventually left the house to go to his office to relax.<sup>29</sup> Bob, although slightly frustrated by this experience did not act out in anger towards the maids. He did not yell at them for disrupting him or force them to leave the room he was using. He treated them with respect and understood they had a job to do regardless of his desire to relax. This attitude could be seen in other employers too. Tomiko Ikehara recalled a similar situation while working for an American family on Kadena Air Base in the 1950s. Her employer would frequently sit on the sofa and watch television during the day, but when Ikehara came in the room to clean it, she would leave the house allowing Ikehara to complete her cleaning undisturbed.<sup>30</sup> These examples demonstrate that in certain households, maids had surprising amounts of freedom and power in their work. These maids were able to clean in the order they chose, even if it caused a disruption to their employer. They were not

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<sup>29</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 50-51.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Tomiko Ikehara, May 31, 2022.

under the strict control of the employer but were able to control their workday and even at times force their employer to follow their lead.

Depending on the household, the hierarchy between American employer and Okinawan maid could be even further blurred as employers and maids got to know each other better. When Americans were open and curious about Okinawan history and culture, they would frequently ask their maid to answer their questions. Instead of being the empty vessel to be filled with knowledge regarding the superior American ways, these maids could share information and be in the teaching position. These maids became more than a lowly employee but an expert on Okinawa willing to share their knowledge with others. They became more equal to their employer as they were considered an insightful person with information to share. For example, in the Christmas 1958 edition of the *Spark and Quill*, a magazine published by the U.S. Naval Security Group Activity (USNSGA) on Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, an unnamed author of an article on history and common practices of Okinawan tombs used his maid as a source of information to research the topic. Describing her as “the handiest source of information,” she provided firsthand knowledge regarding which family members would be interred in a tomb and the practice of washing the bones of the dead.<sup>31</sup> Her explanations were then passed on to other Americans through the magazine, which spread her teachings far and wide. Merritt, too, frequently used her maids to provide her with additional knowledge on Okinawa. For example, Merritt was very curious about the charcoal cooking stoves that some Okinawans had for preparing food but had no idea how to use them. She enlisted her maid to teach her how to use the stove. The Merritt family eventually bought three of these stoves and used them to charcoal broil steaks.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Tombs,” *Spark and Quill*, Christmas 1958, <https://www.navycthistory.com/images2/okihaggerty13big.jpg>.

<sup>32</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 29-30.

This sharing of knowledge could go beyond a simple collection of facts and instead change Americans' perceptions of Okinawa's history and culture. C.B. lived in Okinawa between 1951 and 1953 and his family employed three maids while living on Kadena Air Base. One of the maids, T, who was around 25 at the time of her employment, spoke English quite well and shared her memories of the Battle of Okinawa with C.B., who was a child at that time. Nearly 70 years later, he still remembers her descriptions of how, "there were gray ships everywhere, more ships that we had ever seen."<sup>33</sup> These descriptions of the Battle of Okinawa would have been in stark contrast to the way Americans learned about and understood the Battle. Her stories placed the Okinawan experience in a much more central role than the way that American history told stories of the same event and helped C.B. to realize how devastating the war was to the Okinawan civilians on the island.

Merritt's maid also helped her to put her cultural biases in perspective. During *Obon* season, an annual holiday which commemorates ancestors, Merritt asked her maid what her personal beliefs were regarding the spirits of her deceased relatives. This discussion led to an exchange on the burial practices of Okinawans. Merritt expressed her aversion to the Okinawan practice of leaving deceased bodies in tombs and then cleaning them afterwards, but her maid let her know that she felt American burial practices were foul, "Thinking about the cleaning of the bones, I said to the maid that I thought their manner of disposing of the bodies was not so good and she said with a shudder, "Oh, Okusan, in America I hear you just dig a hole and put your people in it. I think that is very horrible." When I stopped to think of it, I had to agree that she had a good point there."<sup>34</sup> Through this discussion with her maid Merritt is able to see her own biases when discussing burial traditions. All practices related to death have a "horrible" aspect

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<sup>33</sup> Facebook Direct Message to Author, September 22, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Merritt, *Is Like Typhoon*, 187.

to them and it is because Merritt could talk about them with her maid that she was able to understand the frightful aspects of this American tradition. The knowledge provided by the maid distorted the assigned hierarchal roles of Americans and Okinawans showing Merritt the similarities between both cultures.

A photograph from a maid's wedding also provided physical proof of the ways in which the American over Okinawan hierarchy was subverted through the relationships between maids and their employers. When Tomiko Ikehara, who worked as a maid on Kadena Air Base, got married, she invited her employer and employer's friend to her wedding. Ikehara still has a copy of a formal group photograph from the day and upon looking at it in 2022 what surprised her most was that both American women sat in the *seiza* (kneeling) position, the formal way of sitting on the ground in Okinawa. She was sure that neither of the women had previously had experience sitting in *seiza*, but they were able to recognize the cultural norms of Okinawa and adapt to them.

This photograph is, in fact, a physical symbol of the various ways that the hierarchies of American controlled Okinawa were subverted between American employers and their Okinawan maids. Instead of the bright colors that Americans typically wore to weddings, both women wore more sedate colors, with the employer's friend even wearing a black dress. In America it is rare to wear black to a wedding, as it is seen as a color for funerals, so she must have consulted with an Okinawan, most likely her maid (who also attended the wedding) to determine the proper type of dress for this event. The dresses were also quite conservative, covering the arms and cleavage, showing that, again, the women were aware of the cultural differences in dress and respected them. Finally, looking at the photograph both the American women are not smiling. In an American wedding photograph, all attendees would be encouraged to have a large smile on

their face, but these two women actively chose not to smile for the camera and match the expressions of the women around them. These choices demonstrate that the women were able to adjust their actions to match the societal norms of Okinawa, showing that they found value in the culture of Okinawa. Even though Okinawa was officially controlled by America at the time, these women did not force their American ways at this event. They did not arrive in bright colored dresses that showed off their arms or cleavage. They did not refuse to sit on the ground for a photograph, insisting instead on either a chair or to stand, and they did not smile for the camera as is typical in American photography.

Although the cultural zone theory correctly points at the numerous inequalities Okinawans faced during the period of American control, it did not always hold true. Instead, there were instances where these hierarchies crumbled leaving Okinawans and Americans on more even grounds. The domestic sphere created personal relationships between maids and their employers which led more open and closer to equal relationships between these two groups.

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