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Japan's Sacrificial Daughter: Sexual Exploitation in Post-war Okinawa

Kathryn Blau

Although the U.S. occupation of mainland Japan ended following the 1952 U.S.-Japan security alliance, the Japanese island-chain prefecture Okinawa continued to be occupied by the U.S. military until 1972 when it was returned to Japan. The United States claimed the Okinawans were an oppressed people and used this reasoning to justify their continued occupation on the island. However, this outlook disguised the multiple forms of violence that emerged from military occupation, including sexual exploitation and violence against women. This paper seeks to examine how women's voices have been lost in the international dialogue between the United States, and Japan and how, despite the differences in advocacy between generations, Okinawan women have mobilized and pushed back to make Okinawa a safer place for the women living there.

The sexual exploitation of Okinawan women by military forces has a historical precedent and reveals connections between the Japanese and U.S. military forces. Before the U.S. victory over Japan in WWII, the Japanese imperial army created 130 military brothels on Okinawa and the women forced to work there were Okinawans (Enloe 2009, 240). When military forces occupy or invade an area, they will often consider the sexual abuse and exploitation of the area's population as a natural trophy for the victorious country (Takazato 1999, 71). In this way, the Japanese military leaders established brothels, which demonstrated that violence against women was structural and ingrained in the Japanese military culture and system. Sexual exploitation followed the American victory and the stationing of troops in the post-WWII Okinawan occupation. Over 200 cases of rape and assaults committed by U.S. servicemen against Okinawan women have been formally reported and documented by the U.S.
government since 1945 (Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002, 240). Despite the American justification for their continued occupation of Okinawa, the U.S. provided little judicial support for Okinawan women with only 20 percent of the cases ending in arrest or prosecution (Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002, 240). Living under martial law during the U.S. occupation, Okinawan women were not guaranteed many legal protections because they were Japanese citizens without the legal protections of either the Japanese constitution or the American constitution (Sakihara 2009, 137). However, even after the occupation ended and Okinawa was returned to Japan, the continued presence of U.S. military bases on the island led to higher sexual assault rates in Okinawa than in mainland Japan (Okinawa Times, 4 July 2001). In this way, the militarization of Okinawa by the U.S. forces has led to the sexual exploitation of Okinawan women becoming a prominent part of Okinawa's post-war history.

During the extended American occupation of Okinawa, there was a common narrative of Okinawa being sacrificed to the U.S. forces by Japan. Unlike mainland Japan, Okinawa Island was seen as expendable, something Japan could leave behind for the U.S. forces to take over (Enloe 2009, 241). As this paper will demonstrate later, women would often become the face of this narrative as they represented the sacrificial daughter of Japan. Women who worked and died as nurses during and immediately after the war were considered with high regard, becoming symbols of Okinawan identity in the postwar era (Angst 2001, 250). However, not all women who were sacrificed and exploited during the U.S. occupation were regarded this highly. Okinawan women who were sexually assaulted by U.S. servicemen and sex workers were regarded as shameful. Although one out of every fifty Okinawan women (considering a total population of 915,000) was involved in prostitution (Takazato 2000) and most prostitutes did not have access to other kinds of work to support their families (Angst 2001, 255), there continued
to be a significant stigma against prostitutes on the island. These prostitutes would often be subject to sexual abuse and assault from American servicemen (Angst 2001, 257). Many survivors of sexual assault, prostitute or not, were uncomfortable sharing their names because it would make it difficult for them to live with dignity (Takazato 1999, 73). Additionally, despite the number of women being sexually assaulted and exploited in Okinawa, there were few institutional protections from the occupying forces for these women. Punishments for American perpetrators were usually light and the suspect was returned to the U.S. Until 1972, crimes committed by American servicemen on Okinawa were handled by a military court-martial which did not guarantee many rights and protection for the Okinawan women because they were not included under the constitution (Takazato 1999, 71). This inequality and unfairness characterized the post-war occupation of Okinawa and led to an overwhelming distrust of the military. Many activists in Okinawa during this time called on the U.S. military to account for their actions, pleading with the Japanese government to not abandon Okinawa.

Following the 1972 return of Okinawa to Japan, the island retained the majority of its U.S. military bases, accounting for 72% of U.S. military bases in Japan (Angst 2001, 244). For the generations that were born during Okinawa's return to Japan, the bases became a normalized part of life. Okinawans who were born after 1972 thought of the U.S. bases as an inevitable part of their local landscape (Enloe 2009, 246) and dissociated from war (Schultz 2002, 283). However, the violent actions of various servicemen brought attention to the fact that Okinawan women were still being sexually abused and exploited. Residents were outraged when, in 1995, a twelve-year-old Okinawan schoolgirl was abducted and raped by two American marines and an American sailor (Enloe 2009, 242). Because this was an example of a larger phenomenon, activists began to call on the Okinawan, Japanese, and American governments to provide more
protection and support for Okinawan sexual assault victims. However, Okinawan politicians tended to focus on rebalancing international power dynamics between Japan and the United States and policies regarding the bases rather than support for sexual assault survivors. They championed the rape to argue for the elimination of U.S. bases on Okinawa, conveniently exploiting the abuse of women to back their political initiatives (Angst 2001, 255). The crisis about the schoolgirl only became significant because it is representative of the crisis of Okinawan sovereignty (Angst 2001, 256). In this way, the focus of the rape became less about the exploited victim and more about international politics, representing the way the Okinawan voices are silenced in dual oppression by Tokyo and Washington.

When it comes to military crimes in Okinawa, decision-making about the bases remains in the political spheres of Japan and the United States, and the Okinawans are not granted significant leverage. Within these international structures, Okinawan voices are negligible influences (Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002, 246). Women's voices are especially silenced by these international systems. Under this international dialogue, the larger governments replaced the private importance of rape and the suffering of the young female victim with the good of the political whole. For instance, the U.S. and Japanese governments did not downsize the U.S. military’s operations in Okinawa, as the citizens of Okinawa and women wanted. Instead, they moved a few military operations to a new offshore facility (Mikanagi 2004, 97). When the Okinawan voices were silenced by these international systems, advocates increased their fight against the exploitation of Okinawan women, making the raped schoolgirl a preeminent symbol of postwar Okinawan victimhood (Angst 2009, 142). Activists described Okinawa as the prostituted daughter of Japan who was sold to the United States (Angst 2001, 246). Women born after 1972 empathized with the experiences of their mothers who lived during the
occupation period and shared a solidarity founded on their shared war experiences with those of the women sexually exploited in the post-occupation period (Schultz 2002, 279). This is how post-occupation Okinawan women pushed back against international accords that attempted to silence their voices.

Today, many Okinawans do not feel a direct connection to the effects of the war and the occupation. To the youngest generation of Okinawans, military bases are dissociated from war, and the war itself is perceived as a distant historical event because the young people are not directly linked to it (Schultz 2002, 288). There are a small number of Young Okinawan anti-base and anti-war activists activists on the island. However, they have to rely on their grandparents' or great-grandparents' memory of the war, suggesting the impact of the collective memory of World War II (Schultz 2002, 288). For the other young Okinawans who do not feel a connection to the collective memory of the war, they perceive the military bases as a benefit rather than a threat. Seeing the military presence in conjunction with the higher standard of living and as opportunities for cultural exchange, the young Okinawans see the bases as an opportunity for social mobility within Japanese society where interactions with the West are ideal (Schultz 2002, 289). The younger generation understands that the bases have negative consequences (Schultz 2002, 289); yet, they still perceive many benefits from the U.S. presence on the island (Schultz 2002, 289). This is representative of the emerging perspective that young Okinawans have regarding the bases.

Within all three periods of post-war Okinawa, three prevalent trends have been identified. First, when the yen is weaker than the dollar, women's bodies are more likely to be commodified. For example, in countries where there is a foreign military presence, servicemen are more likely to view women's sexuality as a commodity to be purchased when there is a large economic gap
existing between the country deploying the military presence and the country receiving the military presence (Takazato 1999, 75). Regarding Okinawa, the devaluing of the yen makes it more affordable for servicemen to exploit poor Okinawan women's bodies. This will exaggerate the disparities in wealth between the servicemen and Okinawans. This economic gap further contributes to the growth of prostitution in Okinawa. Second, Okinawan women's voices have been ignored in larger political discussions. As Judith Butler has argued, women's voices are often lost in a generalized voice of identity politics (Angst 2001, 248) and the political responses of the Okinawan and Japanese governments demonstrate how the sexual exploitation of Okinawan women is both absorbed into larger international processes and forgotten (Mikanagi 2004, 97). Third, Okinawans are more likely to organize against the presence of bases if they have a direct connection to the negative consequences. If they are directly affected by the problem of the bases, young women are more likely to become involved in the peace movement (Schultz 2002, 291). In this way, it is shown that women who were the most politically active were people most directly affected by the military presence or impacted by the collective memory of World War II (Schultz 2002, 288). These activists advocated for making Okinawa a safer space for women.

These activist groups expressed frustration with both Japanese and American officials over the exploitation of Okinawan women. Because both are charged with fostering the militarization of Okinawans' lives (Enloe 2009, 243), the advocacy groups call out both governments for not protecting sexually exploited Okinawan women and rape victims. These pleas are unlikely to be heard by the Okinawan officials because they cater to the desires of the larger U.S. and Japanese powers. Following the 1995 rape case, when feminist activists worked
hard to get prefectural support toward the funding of a long-awaited rape crisis center, the Okinawa government refused to house the center in the prefectural government building and limited the number of funds they contributed (Angst 2001, 259). Since then, prefectural funds have been cut for other social services that protect Okinawan women who have been sexually exploited (Angst 2001, 259). Feminist groups were outraged by the lack of support from the local government (Takazato 1999, 77). These groups believed that the Okinawans should be given the same kind of security that has been guaranteed to the people of the mainland (Takazato 1999, 77). Because these efforts have not been actualized by the government, Okinawan women turn to self-organization as an effective means of change.

As the Okinawan women organize themselves, they work on this issue in three main ways. The first way is that they develop their local organizing throughout the island (Takazato 2000). Throughout the island, many activist groups advocate for peace and the demilitarization of Okinawa. Of these groups, women's groups make up the majority (Spencer 2003, 127). Additionally, these women's groups uniquely cross the divide between North and South that existed within the men's groups (Spencer 2003, 127). Men's anti-military activist groups in urban, southern Okinawa were not able to coordinate with their rural, northern counterparts as well as the women's groups (Spencer 2003, 127). As part of these organizing efforts, these women's groups would organize vigils, protests, and public demonstrations (Takazato 2000). Secondly, Okinawan activist groups uncover what has happened in the past to address the sexual exploitation of women on the island (Takazato 2000). These activist groups utilized conversations, workshops, television dramas, and historical research to inform their historical narratives of sexual exploitation on the island. Additionally, to provide support for women that experienced sexual assault and rape, these groups began providing counseling and social services
to prostitutes and women working in military base towns (Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002, 252).

Finally, the Okinawan women advocate for a safer Okinawa for women by making international connections through regional and international networks (Takazato 2000). This has largely been done as Okinawan feminist groups have distanced themselves from the Japanese government.

Activists have sent many petitions and letters to the governments of Okinawa, Japan, and the United States to spread their message and call for the demilitarization of Okinawa (Takazato 2000). Specifically, during the 1994 Beijing Conference on Women, women organizers from Okinawa formed a delegation of 71 women throughout the prefecture separate from the Japanese delegation (Fukumura and Matsuoka 2002, 257). The Japanese delegation was not adequately addressing Okinawan women's unique needs in the delegation, demonstrating the lack of support from the Japanese government that the Okinawan women organizers experienced during this time. To make sure that their voices were not silenced, the women activists became their own political entity on the world stage. As one member put it, the men are like the small tinder wood that catches fire, and the women are the big logs that afterward keep the fire burning (Spencer 2003, 138). These women activists took control of the Okinawan narrative and fought to make Okinawa a safer place for women.

Throughout post-war Japan, Okinawan women's voices have been lost in international discourse, yet they exemplify the ways that women have mobilized and advocated for a safer, demilitarized Okinawa. This paper did not discuss children born from sexual assault and the potential stigma surrounding them. Additionally, it did not explore how mixed-raced children fit within the narrative of Okinawa during this time. These are points for potential future research on the topic. In closing, as women fight for a safer Okinawa, they reveal the sexual
exploitation of Okinawan women by U.S. servicemen, a prominent theme in the post-war period.
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