

Living with the Bones: War Memory and Protest against the Military Bases in Contemporary Okinawa

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65 years have passed since the Battle of Okinawa ended in 1945. Several years ago, Medoruma Shun, an Okinawan novelist well-known in Japan, questioned the term “postwar” in the context of contemporary Okinawan history: “Have we ever had ‘postwar’ in Okinawa?” Medoruma’s question implies that Okinawa has been connected with “wars” for more than half century, after the end of the Battle, through the U.S. military bases. In other words, he questions, “Is war truly over in Okinawa?”¹

Yakabi Osamu, a historian of modern history of Okinawa, also approaches the same question from historical, social, cultural point of view. Yakabi starts his discussion with the assumption that the war survivors are surviving, and asked himself how the postwar-born Okinawans, those who have never been in the battleground hovering between life and death, can “learn” experiences and memory of “those who have been through it.” In his recent book, Yakabi puts great emphasis on the importance of learning process of war memory for the postwar-born Okinawans, with the terms: “learn”, “re-learn”, and “unlearn and learn.” He takes so crucial of this, because war memory will widen the eyes over Okinawa today, critically, living with the military bases and protesting against militarism and its cultural configuration.

“Learn”, “re-learn”, or “unlearn and learn” are the terms repeated in Yakabi’s writings, and it means not only just to research objectively the facts in history, but also to listen to witnesses closely, and to ponder upon war memory, approaching in self-reflective way: “if I were there, what and how could have done?”²

I would like to consider here Yakabi’s question of “learning” war memory by exploring two people’s activities that concern war memory in Okinawa today, *Gamafuyah* and *Han-no-Hi no Kai*. Both groups were organized in the 2000s, during and after the U.S. Marine combat aircraft that clashed the school building in the Okinawa International University, in August 2004. Both groups were not affiliated with national/prefectural/local offices. *Gamafuyah* is a volunteer group for gathering the remains of those who had died fighting in the Battle of Okinawa. *Han-no-Hi no Kai* is also a group of common people who study history of the drafted Koreans’ sufferings in the Battle of Okinawa.

In Yakabi’s discussion on war memory, he focuses more to the witnesses.

And, here, I will step into the realm of “absence”, or, that is to say, “away from home”. “Unknown”, “unidentified”, “forgotten”, “incalculable”, and so on, are words often used to refer the remained bones and the drafted Koreans in Okinawan history. Of course, we have the difficulties to know the exact facts surrounding on them, but, we must search for another way to reach out them in our awareness of history. Because what have happened on war memory regarding the remained bones and the drafted Koreans concerns Okinawa, we cannot stay detached from it, or “absence”. A lot of people died in the Battle already, “those who have been through it” have been gone, and we will, sooner or later, be confronted with a crisis of war memory impended.

And a crisis of war memory is aggravated by global capitalism and the Ampo militarism in Okinawa today. *Gamafuyah* approaches the bone-gathering project in the redevelopment area which was returned from the U.S. military bases, and they concerned decolorization of war memory because of the long-term occupation and rapid redevelopment by the global capital. Members of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* has found it crucial to “re-learn” war memory of “Others”, because the Ampo militarism has had various kinds of cultural configurations, inflaming hostility toward other Asian nations. Protesting against the military bases in Okinawa, *Han-no-Hi no Kai* found it important to cultivate historical awareness from the perspectives of common people in Asia. And it would help to deepen the philosophy in protesting against the bases in Okinawa: “We refuse to kill, and to be killed.” They have created “Asia” as something they can connect with to create peace, and in imagining “Others” through their war memory and “absence”.

Gamafuyah: People Digging the Caves

They call themselves “*Gamafuyah*.” *Gama* means cave, *fuyu* means digging. “*Gamafuyah*” stands for people digging the caves, in local language in Okinawa. They dig the caves, not to hide from something, but to search for the bones of the dead in the Battle of Okinawa.

I first knew their name in a letter to the Okinawa Times. Gushiken Takamatsu, 56, a postwar-born Okinawan, a member of *Gamafuyah*, wrote a letter to the editor, and it came out on December 15, 2007. He said,

62 years have passed since the Battle of Okinawa ended. A lot of the war remains, which tell us the wounds and pains of the Battle, have disappeared, and then we can only imagine how it was through the verbal witness of the elders or in the documents. Furthermore, those who have experienced it are now aging, and it would be more difficult for us to listen to their war memory directly.

Gushiken has the same question of “time” as Medoruma and Yakabi share.:

In this condition, there is still something which tells us the disastrous experiences and memory underneath our feet, in the ground, and actually they are crying out. Yes, it is the bones of the dead in the Battle.

Gushiken has worked to gather the bones remained in the caves in southern

part of the island for years, where became a fierce battlefield in 1945. In the 2000s, Gushiken decided to start searching the forgotten formerly- battleground in midst of Naha city.

There have been bones buried underneath the amusement area in Naha. Do you know the New Midtown was the site of a fierce fighting battle?

The New Midtown is on the hill in northern part of Naha city. The hill was called the “Hill Number 52” by the Japanese Army, and the “Sugar Loaf” by the U.S. Forces, during the Battle of Okinawa. Gushiken continued,

When the redevelopment of the New Midtown started, in the course of construction, there endlessly appeared the bones broken in pieces all over the surface of the planed “Sugar Loaf.” We, small number of volunteers, attempted to gather and pick up the bones, but our effort was like a drop of water in the bucket. We brought up the matter with the local government and media, but they didn’t take it seriously. We witnessed countless trucks carrying mud and clay with the white broken bones out of the redevelopment area. The bones were not of cats and dogs, but of the humans. We would like anyone just to treat them politely.

While Gushiken was writing this letter, *Gamafuyah* started digging and searching for the bones at the eastern end of the New Midtown, Makabi district. Gushiken concluded his letter with the words calling for people to understand the importance of gathering the bones in Makabi district and wait a little while before any redevelopment of the area, where we would be able to treat the dead politely and gather their remains in the last district in Naha.³

Redevelopment of the New Midtown started in late 1990s, during the Governor Ota Masahide’s administration. I would like to review the history of New Midtown briefly, and as it is, in a sense, embodied in the postwar Okinawan history.

This area has Uenoya, Ameku, Aja, Mekaru, Asato, Makabi, and Furujima districts. All these rural districts are used to be part of Mawashi village. In Mekaru, there was a villa for the royal family during the Ryukyu Kingdom era. When the Battle started, the Japanese Army settled camps all over this area, for the “Hill Number 52” was the bulwark of defense of the Japanese Army Headquarters in Shuri. In May 1945, the U.S. Forces began assault on the Army in this area, and for a month, they had engaged in a desperate battle. Numbers of civilians were embroiled in this area, because when the Japanese Army evacuated civilians, they were abandoned by the Army in the battleground without arms and shelters. Furthermore, the Army drafted the Okinawan men and boys into their defense machinery; consequently, this area became one of the highest rates of casualties of civilians. More or less, 25% of the families were annihilated in this area.

When the war ended in 1945, all the Okinawan civilians were interns in the civilian camps in northern part of the island, and the U.S. Military Government hadn’t permitted them to return to their original villages for 2 to 4 years. In the case of Naha and Mawashi, resettlement program started in late 1947. In 1951-3,

however, before and after the coming into effect of the Peace Treaty, the U.S. Forces seized this area and compelled protesting people to leave since housing construction in the area for the families of the U.S. Forces had been planned. The Mekaru case was known as one of the biggest land struggles protesting against the military bases in the 1950s.⁴ Today, memory of land struggle seems being almost forgotten by new residents in the New Midtown.

When the return of land of this area was determined in 1974, after the return of the administrative rights over Okinawa from the U.S. to Japan, there were more than 1,000 houses, schools, kindergartens, playgrounds, swimming pools, PXs, and even ice-skating rink, all for the American families of the U.S. Forces. The landscape was just like a suburban town in America; if not for the fence, the barbed-wire, and rows of shelters of the Okinawan clinging to the lower slope beyond the fence. This simulated “American town” disappeared by 1987.

In late 1980s and early 90s, the 190-hectare forest on the “Sugar Loaf” was called the “Ameku released district”, being a sort of sanctuary for birds and snakes, for nobody mowed the lawn any more in the “ghost town”. When the Okinawan subcontractors of the Japanese Major construction companies started setting the infrastructure in place, we often heard the strange urban legend of ghost stories going around; most were about the dead during the war time, that is, people were still aware of the dead in everyday life on the island, whether consciously or not, and “living with the bones.”

At the time when Gushiken witnessed the soil with the bones being bulldozed out in mid-1990s, the Ota administration was vigorously promoting that this redevelopment plan would change the “Keystone of the Pacific” in the U.S. oversea base system, that is Okinawa, the “IT Keystone of the Pacific/Asia” in globalizing world, supported by the Hashimoto Ryutaro regime strongly, especially after the rape incident and the series of protesting actions in 1995. It seemed that the network of fiber-optic communication cables would be set up underground, instead of the bones.

This plan for the new information technology, however, didn’t provide any sensing devices with the bones voicing out in the soil. Going back to the letter of Gushiken, *Gamafuyah* has been involved in the bone-gathering project in Makabi district, where the only area being left, because “we’ve been deeply disappointed at what had happened in the neighboring districts in the New Midtown.” And, he suggested a concept for the project in Makabi, “peace education for citizens” and “to console the souls of the deceased” through work. In other words, the Makabi project is for citizens to “re-learn” war memory through the deed of digging, touching the bones, and listening to “silence” in which the bones voices their war memory.

In June 2008, *Gamafuyah* began the joint project with Bureau for Peace and Gender-Equal Society of Naha local government. They encouraged citizens to participate in this project, and about 50 citizens joined the first program. Participants moved pickaxes, shovels and scoops slowly, and found a male

right thighbone, a right clavicle, and a left one, a humerus, and sometimes a whole skeleton. Cartridges, unexploded shells, and pieces of bomb were also found together with the bones. “Too vivid,” said a college student.⁵ Makabi’s forest had become, in an Okinawan critic on cultural politics, Tanaka Yasuhiro’s words, “abyss of landscape”, where history voices out its discontent.⁶

Gamafuyah set Sundays for this program, and after three months, they were confronted with some difficulties of time-schedule of redevelopment plan. Residents’ association of Makabi district complained that redevelopment plan had been stopped by slow progress of gathering of the unexploded bombs and the bones. The association worried that Makabi was being left behind from economic development, comparing with other part of the New Midtown.⁷

The New Midtown today is the city of global capitalism. When you get off the Omoro-machi station of Naha City Monorail System, you can see the vacant lot and forest on one side, that is Makabi district, where *Gamafuyah* worked. And on the other side, you see the Duty Free Shop Galleria and the American-style urban shopping mall. *Luis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, Bulgari, Cartier, Ferragamo, Tiffany*, et al, and all those global capitalist icons are illuminated for tourists. Actually, the Okinawan residents are prohibited to buy tax-exempt goods. The shopping mall and mass-sales merchandisers have occupied the prime locations. There’s no Okinawan-conventional style building in the midst of the New Midtown, except the Okinawa Branch of Bank of Japan using big amount of red Okinawan tiles on their roof.

Gushiken commented to complaint of Makabi association, “the bone-gathering program has been organized by citizens, but all these dead died in the battle which the Imperial Japanese Government started. No action from the National Government has been made up to now. There is even no help for the bones to come home.”

In February 2009, *Gamafuyah* restarted the bone-gathering project with another volunteer group which has worked with the homeless people in Naha city area. The things, however, hadn’t quite worked out the way they expected it to be. They applied to the the National Special Subsidy for Emergency Employment Creation to pay for work in the project. But the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, which is supposed to be always responsible for the bone-gathering and unemployment issues, replied that the bone-gathering should be within responsibilities of National Government, and reemployment of the homeless should be within the prefectural control. And, the Okinawa Prefectural Government added to it, “This is seemingly so complicated and difficult to wage the noble activities such as the bone-gathering.”⁸

This joint project was not organized just for practical reasons: reemployment and time schedule. At the same time, it could be said that “homelessness” is bridging these two groups; “homelessness” of the bones and that of urban poverty in Okinawa today. In the groundless rapid economic growth of Okinawa as a result of the global and Japanese capitalism in 2000s, the urban redevelopment of

land, which the U.S. Forces relinquished, triggered to open “abyss of landscape” in history. Here is a crisis of historical awareness for war memory in Okinawa, or, “homelessness” of war memory. In the New Midtown, war memory has lost home to settle, while people seeking material affluence, and then, the homeless those who became homeless in this groundless affluence have saved war memory losing home.

These two groups went on approaching the government offices, and finally in early June, Naha city government decided to employ the homeless and unemployed for the bone-gathering project in Makabi for months. Naha city government entrusted the Makabi project with about 23 million yen, and 55 people were hired. They worked for two months and found 172 remains from October to December 2009, in Makabi district.⁹

In February 2010, 172 remains were temporarily enshrined at the National Peace Memorial Park in Mabuni, but Gushiken solicited the National Memorial not to burn them into ashes, because most of remains were left unidentified. Gushiken hopes not to confine them in space which the National Government controls, but to let them come home someday and to be called by their names.¹⁰

Han-no-Hi no Kai: Mourning and Struggle

The number of the Korean casualties in the Battle of Okinawa is, usually said, “unknown”. Some literature said 10,000, others indicated 20,000, sometimes at least more than 8,000, and so on. In textbooks on the history of Ryukyu/Okinawa for high-school students, it shows the chart of casualties created by the Okinawa prefecture government, but there’s no category for the Koreans: “Absence”¹¹.

Han-no-Hi wo Konryu suru Kai, a predecessor of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* was organized in 2004, while the Henoko Struggle was carried out at sea, because the Japanese Defense Facilities Administration Agency started a “boring investigation” for constructing a new airbase at Henoko. Protesting against the new base plan, people were “sitting” on the sea. I often visited their tent station for protest, and one of the acquaintances gave me a flier there calling for supporters to build the *Han-no-Hi* in Okinawa.

“Han” in Chinese character is usually used for “urami” in Japanese, that is “resentment”, but in Korean, “han” has a different sense. In Korea, “han” is accumulative/collective/self-reflective emotions of common people in Korea, formed in feudal/colonial/post-colonial eras, including sorrow, anger, bitterness, delusion, and even longing. But, why does the Okinawan build *Han-no-Hi*, Memorial to Han, in Okinawa now?

When you visit the National Peace Memorial Park in Mabuni, you see *Heiwa no Ishiji* (Cornerstone for Peace), with formed lines and black stones like folding screens. There craves the names of people who died in the Battle; not only the Okinawan civilians but also soldiers of both of the Japanese Army and the U.S. Forces. And you walk toward the cliff and see at the end of the rows, there’re

walls for the Koreans. But soon you realize that the names of Korean casualties are so small in number, and even being divided into two Korean states; Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Republic of Korea. Most of the drafted Koreans are "unidentified," because the Japanese Government has ignored the documents on mobilization in Korea, and if the lists are found, most of the names were changed into Japanese name under the enforcement of change of name during the Japanese colonial period. And, some families refused to crave the names.

Many have criticized that it reflects the views of state-centered war memory. And it has also been criticized that the names of Commanders and soldiers of both of the Japanese Army and the U.S. Forces are there equivalent to victims of civilians. Then, we see the stone of the Koreans, in which problematics in war memory in Okinawa seem clearer. *Heiwa no Ishiji* seemingly reflects the hierarchical social structures/cultural configurations in modern history of Japan/Okinawa/Asia, the Battle, and the Cold War in Asia.

Members of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* criticized this formation of memorial, and decided to build the memorial not by support from any national/public organizations but by common people in Okinawa on their own. They knew there's another memorial for the drafted Koreans in Mabuni, but they didn't think of it as enough. Because another memorial, Memorial to the South Koreans, was established by Pak Chung-Hee regime in 1975, during his military dictatorship; this memorial was built a year before the military exercise Team Spirit, and supported the Japanese and Korean Right. Some of *Han-no-hi no kai* members think that it is still important. Nevertheless, since *Heiwa no Ishiji* divided the Koreans into two states, though they're eventually killed in 1945, they couldn't acknowledge its structures.

In 1999, the first *Han-no-Hi* was built in North Kyongsang Province, Korea, by the Korean survivors of the Battle of Okinawa. Kang In-chang, one of the survivors, visited Okinawa and asked the Okinawan supporters to build a counterpart in Okinawa, because "We were searching for the bones of our friends for years, where they're killed in 1945, but we couldn't find them."

A decade before this, in 1986, 5 Korean survivors visited Okinawa for searching the bones and a memorial service to "take friends home." The bones were not found. Arasaki Moriteru, a prominent historian of contemporary Okinawa history, remembered that "At this time, we couldn't share the present matters in Korea and Okinawa, though we could only talk about the Battle," because of the Korean military regime.¹²

The condition was changed in 1997, after the realization of democratization in Korea. When the examination for military land-use was excluded in Okinawa, 43 Koreans protesting against the military violence by the U.S. Forces in Korea visited Okinawa to exchange and share awareness on the U.S. bases issues. So, when Kang In-chang visited Okinawa in 1999, many Okinawan people clearly found war memory of the Koreans significant, and began to relate it with

protesting against the military violence.

In 2004, many members of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* were involved in the Henoko Struggle. Some supported struggle by donation, some were “sitting” on the sea. Members were Christian pastors, a Buddhist priest, housewives, singers, artists, factory workers, students, teachers, retired people living on pension, historians, and writers, along with Okinawans, Japanese Mainlanders, Koreans, Americans, etc. It reflected the Henoko Struggle itself; people from various different sectors got involved in the struggle.

To support the Henoko Struggle, people worked for a fund-raising campaign, and at the same time, members of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* called for donation to build a Memorial. Despite of their busy schedule, they had study meetings and open lectures almost every month, inviting scholars of history of Okinawa, women’s history, and Korean history. Some started studying Korean language.

People in the Henoko Struggle had thought that Henoko is a local village of Okinawa but really related with the “World”. And, more concretely, Henoko had been connected with Pyong-tek, where another new base plan was in Korea, the GPR--Grand Posture Review of U.S. overseas’ base structure. The Henoko Struggle had a sense of solidarity with Pyong-tek so strong, and many Koreans visited Henoko, and vice versa.

The more this connection went forward, the more people understood the importance of “re-learning” history and war memory of Okinawa-Korea relations. The activities like *Han-no-Hi no Kai* became an action as a sort of “mediacy” between Okinawa and Korea, and between past and present. And, it could be said that mourning for “Others” cultivates a struggle.

It was not so easy for them to raise fund to build a memorial, but in 2005, they found a person who provided a piece of small land on the hill in Yomitan village, viewing the Eastern China Sea. In May 2006, the second Han-no-Hi was built, with a relief created by Kinjo Minoru, an Okinawan sculpture.

Taira Osamu, a member of *Han-no-Hi no Kai*, said, “‘Han’ is a word of philosophy to open our awareness of history for the future.” At the unveiling ceremony, Kang In-chang buried a copy of name list of 2,815 Korean drafted young men, at the bottom of Memorial, because the bones are still missing. Then, a reporter of the Okinawan newspaper asked him, “How do you feel now in unveiling a Memorial?” Suddenly, Kang became exasperated with his question, and said in an angry tone, “Should you ask me the truth what we had experienced in the war time, instead of that question?” This reporter later visited Yong-yan, where Kang In-chang lives, to “re-learn” war memory and the past of Korea and Okinawa.¹³

Protesting against the military bases in Okinawa, in the Henoko Struggle, the activities of *Han-no-Hi no Kai* showed that historical awareness from the perspectives of common people in other nations of Asia could intermediate between philosophy and practice for peace. In Okinawa, people in protest often mentions, “We refuse to kill, and to be killed.” *Han-no-Hi no Kai* has recreated

“Asia” as something we can connect and have solidarity with for peace, imagining “Others” through their bitterness of war memory and “absence”, the missing bones.

“Not Let Death Perish”: Toward a Common Memory in Our Future

While *Han-no-Hi* was built in 2006, I saw a documentary film: “*Shima Kutuba de Kataru Ikusa-yu* (War Experiences in local languages of the islands)” of *Ryukyu Ko wo Kiroku suru Kai*. In this documentary film, more than 100 Okinawan war survivors witnessed their experiences in their mother-tongue and local languages, which have been discriminated and disappearing. The elders spoke so freely, without any blockage of standard Japanese languages. One of the witnesses, a man, spoke about several drafted Korean men, who were buried alive at the cave-in, when the Japanese Army constructed the airfield in central part of the island. Whenever I think of the issues of return of Futenma or any other U.S. bases in Okinawa, I always remember his story of witness.

In fall 2009, the Hatoyama regime raised new agenda for the return of U.S. Marine Futenma Base. In Spring 2010, this agenda was abandoned and another agreement of relocation to Henoko was announced. While we were showered by the regime and Japanese mass-media with disappointing messages in Spring, what had haunted in my mind was the bones underneath the Futenma Air Base; or, if it’s returned, what do we do for them? Do we do the same thing to them as we did to the bones in the New Midtown? The “Futenma Question” is not only a problem of the U.S.-Japan Alliance, but also, and essentially, of responsibilities for war and history.

“Re-learning” war memory is, in a Korean political Philosopher, Lee Chung-Hwa’s words, “Re-memory” of the dead, or “Not let death perish”¹⁴. This cultivates not only our awareness of the past but also to create a common memory in our future.

Postscript

August is always, in conventional expression, or just a cliché, a very special month in Japan. In Okinawa, however, it is inapplicable. August 15, 1945 hasn’t been recognized as the date to mark the new phase of history in Okinawa. It seems just a date in early period under the American occupation. In fact, when war ended is a question that we cannot expect a clear answer in Okinawa. Each survivor has each date of the end of war: Some found themselves under the American control in early April, and others in the end of 1945.

But Higa Toyomitsu, an Okinawan photographer, decided to show his photographs taken at Makabi, on the Memorial Day of the end of war in August this year. Sakima Art Museum, a private-owned museum in Ginowan-city, standing aside of the U.S. Marine Futenma Air Station, opened his photo

exhibition in August, 2010.

The concept of exhibition is “War Story of the Bones.”

Higa Toyomitsu has been known as the one who filmed oral history of hundreds of survivors in the Battle of Okinawa. In Higa’s film, numbers of women talked that the Japanese Army ejected Okinawan civilians from shelters in the caves in the battleground, and sometimes, they killed civilians, including children and babies.

From late 2009 to early this year, Higa went frequently to Makabi to take photographs of the bones and people digging. Though the bones cannot be identified, as Higa thinks himself, he took photographs of the bones of the Japanese Army. He wrote, “These bones of the young Japanese soldiers had been buried underground in the soil and mud of Okinawa, for more than 60 years after the war ended. The soil faded their original color, and the bones have been stained with Okinawan mud.”

Higa’s works in this exhibition have brought about some complicated feelings among the Okinawan and Japanese intellectuals. As I already told, Higa has taken amount of films on war experiences of the Okinawan survivors, and most of their stories indicate that there existed violence by the Japanese Army toward the Okinawan civilians.

At symposium on Higa’s works in August 15, 2010, an anthropologist of Waseda University, Kitamura Takeshi, who wrote a book on war and memory in post-war Okinawa, pointed out that the bones found in Makabi showed the “diversity of soldiers in the Japanese Army.” He presented several cases of the drafted Okinawan boys, or the Korean men would possibly be at that point during the battle.

The point which Kitamura mentioned seems important: Militarism crushes each life and background of individuals. Nobody denies this, but still, I cannot help pointing out that his discussion is not able to avoid risks being absorbed into national memory of war. And in the first place, those who were drafted from Korea and killed in Okinawa were never “soldiers” of the Japanese.

If the bones found in Makabi are of soldiers of the “Japanese Army”, it is much more important for us to imagine what and how people, whose bones (and some part of brain) were found, had done during the battle. It must be crucial on how we imagine about something missing or lost, for instance, those civilians ejected from shelters or drafted Koreans, or in other words, layered hierarchy, of the actual bones which were found at “abyss of history”.

Notes

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 8. *The Okinawa Times*, May 25, 2009.
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