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# Okinawanness as a Form of Indigeneity in Transnational Anti-Militarist Feminist Movement

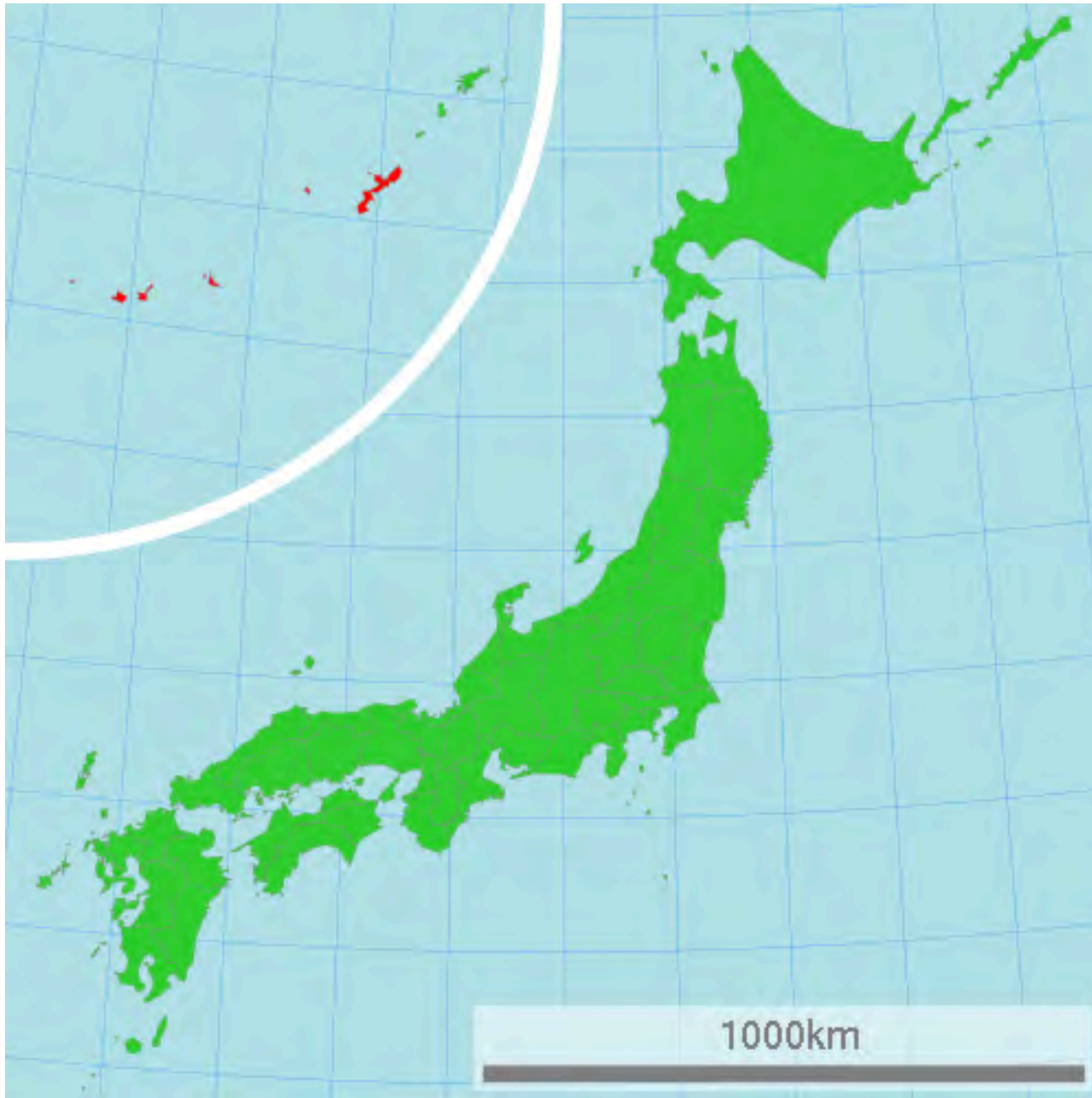
**A**LTHOUGH OKINAWA makes up only 0.6% of the total land mass of Japan, it remains as one of the highly militarized spaces in the Pacific, with 75% of all U.S. military bases in Japan station there. These U.S. military bases are funded predominantly by the Japanese government. The U.S. military presence in Okinawa is commonly approached as a problem that can be resolved by negotiating with the Japanese or American governments. However, as a colonial space in between U.S. and Japanese empires, Okinawa exists in a vacuum of sovereignty.

A study conducted in 2007 by John Chuan-Tiong Lim reflects the ambivalent

identities of contemporary Okinawans. Approximately 40% of randomly interviewed residents in Okinawa identified themselves as “Okinawan,” 30% as “Okinawan and Japanese,” and 25% as “Japanese.” Furthermore, 50 % of the interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with the Japanese government’s treatment of Okinawa, and 40% answered that Japanese government’s attitude towards Okinawa was “unfriendly.” However, to the question on Okinawan independence from Japan, 20% answered in favor while 60% expressed disfavor. Lim’s study shows that articulation of “Okinawanness” as

opposed to “Japanese” is not necessarily aimed towards Okinawan independence from Japan, but instead is more of a form of cultural and political resistance meant to address the inequality Okinawans experience culturally, politically, and socially. These events constantly remind Okinawans that they are less-Japanese, or that they are Japan’s ethnic and racialized minority.

Under such conditions, Okinawa: Women Act Against Military Violence (OWAAMV), was formed as the first feminist, nongovernmental, grassroots anti-militarist organization in Okinawa. At the Fourth World Conference on Women



MAP OF JAPAN. OKINAWA PREFECTURE IS SHOWN IN RED.  
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

in Beijing and Indigenous World Forum in the same year, a co-chair of OWAAMV, Suzuyo Takazato made a statement on gendered and militarized violence in Okinawa in which they conceptualized the relationship between Okinawa and the Japanese state in terms of an all-encompassing Japanese nationhood:

Okinawa is the prostituted daughter of Japan. Japan used her daughter as a breakwater to keep the battlefields from spreading over the mainland until the end of WWII. After the war, she enjoyed economic prosperity by selling the daughter to the United States (translated and quoted by Gerson, 18).

In this statement, Takazato strategically employs an allegorized image of Okinawa as a daughter of Japan, to reflect the tragic rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan school girl by three U.S. service members stationed there at that time. Takazato conceptualizes Okinawa as a dependent daughter of Japan indicating a shared collective identity between Okinawans and Japanese through a biological (i.e. racially and ethnically same) and patriarchal relationship and deprives Okinawa of its agency by conceptualizing Okinawa as a female whose body is an infantilized, sexualized, and passive object of the United States.

Recently, OWAAMV has challenged the conventional ways that locate Okinawans as Japan's ethnic minority in order to use "indigeneity" to seek new ways of addressing Okinawan people's rights in light of exploitation by U.S. militarism and the Japanese state.<sup>1</sup> OWAAMV participated in the weeklong Women's Network Meeting held in San Francisco in 2007 to build a transnational solidarity amongst women in the militarized zone in the Pacific. Delegates from the militarized zones such as Hawai'i, Puerto Rico, Guam, the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines to discuss impacts of U.S. militarism on girls, women, and the environment. Acting as a voice of a nation, OWAAMV maintained its position as representative of the Okinawan nation and

1. The definition of indigenous or indigenous peoples varies by region, groups, and political arenas. The category of indigenous remains a contested site where there is no official agreement on a single definition at the UN level. This site of defining indigeneity presents complex and diverse social issues that indigenous peoples face in the contemporary society because the definition determines which groups of (indigenous) peoples have a right and access to certain resources. Due to the difficulty of precisely defining "indigenous," the UN has developed "a modern understanding" of the term based on: individual identification (as indigenous people); historical continuity (with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies); a strong relationship to place and natural resources; distinct social (as well as economic and political) systems; distinct culture, language and beliefs; a status as a non-dominant group of society; and the active resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive people and communities (The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2007).

participates in the international meeting as a separate category from Japan, rather than Japanese or Japan's ethnic minority. This was a strategic form of articulating their identity to stand internationally in terms of human rights. The indigenous articulation, instead of Japan's minority status, is a key not only to address the contemporary militarized and colonial state of Okinawa but also to seek Okinawan peoples' sovereignty, distinct collective rights, identity, political voice, and constitutional reform.

The logo OWAAMV uses in the various international meetings deploys images of "indigenous" Okinawan women. The first logo has women who are dressed in a costume used in a traditional Okinawan dance. Two women's figures placed together signify sisterhood among Okinawan women (logos 1, 2). The second logo also has a figure of woman who has a bun pierced with a kanzashi (ornamental hairpin). The letters in red above her forehead say unai, "sisterhood" in the Okinawan language. Both of the logos have two purposes: to emphasize Okinawanness and sisterhood among Okinawan women as well as to network transnationally with the other indigenous women with similar experiences of militarism.



LOGO 1



LOGO 2

In the discourse of OWAAMV, indigeneity is employed as a political category that allows them to network and mobilize internationally against militarization. OWAAMV demonstrates that a specific politics of indigeneity has been constructed in Okinawa in response to Japanese colonialism (1879), U.S. militarism before and after WWII, and contemporary militarization in Okinawa; because for the activists, a claim to indigeneity is a form of transnational networking at the United Nations, and with other native groups in a colonial relationship, within a global context.

OWAAMV argues that as a result of the U.S. military occupation, its peoples were the victims of militarized violent crimes and accidents including: robberies, murders, rapes, kidnappings, sexual assaults, airplane and car accidents, chemical spills, and bombings. Even after the "reversion" to Japanese governance,

OWAAMV revealed that there were 4,700 crimes and 141 rapes committed by U.S. servicemen stationed in Okinawa between 1972 and 2000. In this perspective, Okinawan women's bodies have been a patriarchally sexualized location where militarized violence takes place and aggressions are inflicted. During the Battle of Okinawa the imperial Japanese army established approximately 130 military brothels in Okinawa. A little known fact about this policy is that those who were forced to work at the brothels as "ian-fu" (comfort women) were not only Korean women, but also Okinawan women. This highlights the problem of Status of Forces Agreement made between the U.S. and Japan that still maintains a colonial relationship against Okinawan citizens.

In the *Politics of Indigeneity* (2005), Maaka and Fleras affirm that, in order to account for differently understood indigenous rights in various indigenous nations and communities, it is important to theorize indigeneity not necessarily as a form of claiming independence or succession but as "a political ideology and social movement by which a politicized awareness of original occupancy provides a principled basis for making claims against the state" (53). It

is through this framework that Okinawan indigeneity is articulated to mobilize anti-militarist movements in order to address Japanese colonialism and U.S. militarism, not as a way of claiming independence from Japan, but as a political discourse that helps to transform U.S. militarism neo-colonialist forces in Okinawa.

Similarly, Diaz and Kauanui suggest that in a contemporary society indigeneities must be understood as a fluid and political category that is articulated as a result of hegemonic process of colonialism. Different forms of indigenous identities can be politicized as they operate within historically contingent movements, without having to engage in fixed identity politics and essentialization of indigenous peoples. Clifford also emphasizes the importance of recognizing "inventive cultural processes," cultural formations that are embodied by "living bodies with organic structures" (478). Contextualizing indigenous articulations as an "inventive cultural process," the politics of indigeneity serves as a cultural movement specific to a particular space and time—affirming it as fluid and never static, and helps us to understand Okinawan people's contemporary

indigenous articulations against a U.S. militarism that operates through Japanese imperialism as a dynamic form of political transnational feminist mobilization.

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