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THE STRUGGLE OVER MEMORY IN OKINAWA

LA LUCHA POR LA MEMORIA EN OKINAWA

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ABSTRACT: This essay investigates the relationship between contested memories and processes of collective identity construction by critically reflecting on empirical examples of political interpretation and symbolization of historical episodes. The case considered is that of the struggles against the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, Japan. The anti-militarist protest scenario is one of the major stages, along with peace and war memorials, museums, and community centers where history enters the scene, retouched and revisited through the point of view of the actors involved, their interpretations of the past, and their aspirations. Collective memory, in this perspective, takes on the appearance of living history, i.e., a broad, heterogeneous, and evolving set of significant events, processes, and symbols of the past that entertain a vital relationship with the present and generate a common field of contention and interpretation.
KEYWORDS: collective memory, collective identity, conflict, nationalism, Okinawan struggle.

RESUMEN: Este ensayo investiga la relación entre las memorias impugnadas y los procesos de construcción de la identidad colectiva mediante una reflexión crítica sobre ejemplos empíricos de interpretación política y simbolización de episodios históricos. El caso considerado es el de las luchas contra la presencia militar estadounidense en Okinawa, Japón. El ámbito de la protesta

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antimilitarista es uno de los principales escenarios, junto con los monumentos a la paz y a la guerra, los museos y los centros comunitarios en los que la historia entra en escena, retocada y revisada a través del punto de vista de los actores implicados, sus interpretaciones del pasado y sus aspiraciones. La memoria colectiva, en esta perspectiva, adquiere la apariencia de una
historia viva, es decir, un conjunto amplio, heterogéneo y evolutivo de acontecimientos, procesos y símbolos significativos del pasado que mantienen una relación vital con el presente y generan un campo común de contención e interpretación.
PALABRAS CLAVE: memoria colectiva, identidad colectiva, conflicto, nacionalismo, lucha okinawense.

Introduction

The phenomenon of anti-militarist protests in Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture of the Japanese archipelago, emerged during the aftermath of World War II, with the U.S. occupation and administration of the Ryukyu islands. Although enthusiasm for reversion to Japan was not immediate (especially among political association members), between 1950 and 1960 left-wing parties (namely the Okinawa Social Masses Party and the Okinawa People's Party) and teachers' and workers' unions gradually expressed their ambition to return to Japanese administration, developing the reversion movement, a heterogeneous coalition of political and social groups (Tanji, 2006, pp. 56-76).

In this phase, the struggle for return was flanked by the struggle over land, i.e., over property confiscated for the construction of military facilities, a consequence of the disastrous Battle of Okinawa. That organizational model (forms of institutional activism and a certain degree of unity) possibly derived from a still immaculate faith in the potential of democracy and the Constitution, and therefore in the mechanisms of institutional political representation, and from a certain convergence on the ideological principle of the so-called "reversion nationalism" (Tanji, 2006, p. 179).

These protest groups, alongside the escalation of war tensions in Vietnam in the later 1960s, matured into an explicitly anti-militarist vocation (Arasaki, 2001, p. 103). In those years, the *Hinomaru* (日の丸, the Japanese national flag) was brandished by subversives who contested USCAR (The United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands) as a symbol of freedom.

The ambiguous situation of the U.S. occupation generated obvious disadvantages: first of all, the local community was deprived of its

constitutional rights and legal defense as it would have stood in Japan. In addition, the holding of a large war arsenal of both nuclear and chemical weapons terrified public opinion (Ota, 2000, p. 259). Added to this was resentment towards the occupiers, not only because of land seizures but also because of frequent accidents and criminal incidents (Yoshida, 2001).

That coalition inaugurated the Okinawan tradition of protest against the U.S. military presence, determining the development of the *Okinawa mondai* (沖縄問題, the problem of Okinawa), namely the contradiction that still marks the political and social condition of the prefecture, which manifests itself in the tension between geopolitical constraints and the agency and political will of citizens.

However, after 1972, with the return to the widely longed-for Japanese administration, the hopes of the community were disappointed. Indeed, military bases remained on the prefectural territory; constitutional protection and Japanese democracy did not make it possible fully to restructure the status of Okinawa as a U.S. military outpost in the Pacific, nor to respect the will of the local community, expressed through demonstrations and the recourse to the advisory referendum.[1]

Despite the undeniable qualitative leap due to the extension of Japanese constitutional rights, which resulted in the possibility of political commitment in the form of democratic representation (Matsumura, 2015, p. 253), resentment towards the U.S. military was compounded by anger directed at the Japanese central government, which did not seem to defend the interests of the local community. The protest movement, which re-emerged cyclically, underwent a process of transformation: over the years, activism increasingly articulated itself in informal and noninstitutional pressure groups, and less and less in the form of institutional political actors, such as parties.

A conceptual and symbolic overturning also occurred (Tanji, 2006, p. 179). The *Hinomaru,* which into the 1960s the Americans considered a subversive flag and which was the synthesis of the hopes of many, became a symbol of the power structure toward which the protest was directed. This is demonstrated by frequent episodes of remonstrance in the years following the Reversion. On July 17, 1975, when then Prince Akihito visited the *Himeyuri no Tō* (ひめゆりの塔) war memorial with his wife, a young Okinawan threw a

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[1] For example, in 1996, Okinawa Prefecture held a significant non-binding referendum concerning the reduction of U.S. military facilities and the revision of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement. Some 89% of the voters agreed on the reduction of the military burden and on the necessity of a revision of the Agreement (Eldridge, 1997).

Molotov cocktail at the couple.[2] Another emblematic event took place on October 26, 1987, when, during Prince Akihito's visit to Okinawa on the occasion of *Kokumintaiikutaikai* (国民体育大会), the annual national sports event, a young activist, Shoichi Chibana, vilified the national flag hoisted for the event, by setting it alight.

In sum, from 1972 on, the community of protest was affected by a gradual process of transformation. From an organizational point of view, activists gathered in more informal groups, often detached from political parties or mechanisms of democratic representation. From an ideological point of view, confidence in the Constitution collapsed along with the hopes placed on the reintegration with Japan. Anti-militarist and pacifist claims were directed towards the protection of the local political will; with this shift, the themes of the theft of human rights and the suffocation of the local democratic will became *topoi* of the imagery of protest. [3]

Contested History and Processes of Collective Memory Construction

The state of anti-militarist activism in Okinawa today represents the culmination of this process in an articulated, fragmented, in some cases contradictory scenario. The Okinawan community of protest, far from being homogeneous and coherent, consists of a heterogeneous set of groups, part of a tradition of struggle sensitive to organizational and cultural transformations, which diverge in their thematic orientation. The following is a small and incomplete overview to give an idea of the internal differentiation.

The environmentalist cluster includes Henoko Blue, a group committed to protesting against the construction of the new military facility in Henoko and to protecting the ecosystem of Oura Bay, but also the Okinawa Environmental Justice Project, a group committed to analyzing the environmental impact of military facilities in Okinawa and the possible infringement of international regulations and recommendations.

The feminist pole is headed by Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence, a feminist peace movement committed to denouncing gender crimes and the male chauvinist culture linked to military tradition. There is also an indigenist and independentist section, which is mainly committed to analyzing, and contextualizing the military issue within the broader question of the

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[2] The moment was immortalized by an exceptional photograph. This event is referred to as the "*Himeyuri no Tō* incident" (ひめゆりの塔事件, *Himeyuri no Tō Jiken*), July 17th, 1975.

[3] The news caused quite a stir among the public. On October 26th, 1987, the Ryūkyū Shimpō, one of the two major newspapers in the prefecture, published an article on its front page titled "The *Hinomaru* Falls Burning" (日の丸降ろし燃やす。).

Okinawan community's right to self-determination; ACSILs, The Association of Comprehensive Studies for Independence of the Lew Chewans,[4] is one of the main representatives.

Despite the thematic differentiation, there are some aspects of convergence: first, concerning an objective, namely the removal of military structures; secondly, concerning the identification of a discriminatory tendency inflicted on Okinawa that unites the local community and the community of protest, and thirdly, concerning the sharing of an elastic and composite symbolic imagery, the motivational and distinctive source of protest. In Miyume Tanji's words, this constitutes a repertoire of symbols, strategies, images, and stories to support the struggle and strengthen the movement's cohesion (Tanji, 2006).

In the aforementioned imagery, it is possible to recognize a mythical quality, relating to its function and its informal modes of transmission, but also the result of a selective process of stories, episodes, symbols, and images aimed at legitimizing political action. The recurring historical episodes in the counter-narratives of the community have a mythopoetic character. In other words, the past is constructed, in the sense that it undergoes a process of creative re-elaboration and has the function of legitimizing political action in the present. The significance of the topic of "politics of memory" is identified by many authors investigating the case of Okinawa (Figal, 2001; Hein, 2001; Humphry, 2000, 2003; Kina, 2013; Nelson, 2008, 2013; Roberson, 2010; Tanji, 2003, 2006).

The topic of the "politics of memory", namely the political organization of collective memory and interpretive debates over historical facts, is perhaps the most fertile avenue of sociological and anthropological research when considering the case of anti-militarist activism in Okinawa. In a 1998 essay, Richard Siddle was perhaps the first to inaugurate a critical reflection on the political use of historical memory in Okinawa, reflecting on the link between the centrality of history in the local political scene and the long-standing military issue. He puts it this way:

> The past informs the present for activists in contemporary Okinawa. (...) As the past is contested, reinterpreted and moulded, in its populist versions, into the form of a "national" history of an oppressed people longing for freedom, it also acts for some as the cornerstone in the construction of a "Ryukyuan" identity. Essential to such a narrative is the notion of Okinawa as an internal colony of Japan (.…) What it is perhaps more important to recognise is that, despite the rhetoric of

[4] *Lew Chew* is probably the English transliteration of the Chinese 琉球 (*Liúqiú*). The choice not to use the Japanese pronunciation *Ryūkyū*, in all probability, has the purpose of connoting the indigenous and historical specificity of the local community.

> many anti-base activists and the emotional power of their message, Okinawans are not themselves united in their understanding of the past and have not succeeded in forging a "nation" in Okinawa (Siddle, 1998, p. 118)

Richard Siddle refers to the "historical narrative of victimization" (Hook & Siddle, 2003, p. 11), that is, a perspective of thought that informs and supports the political struggle, even if it is only one of several competing versions. To organize collective memory politically, in this sense, is to insert oneself into a fierce debate regarding the interpretation of regional history, aspire to the hegemony of thought, and direct the political choices of Okinawan citizens.

Julia Humphry affirms that the theme of the political organization of memory is deeply imbricated with the political principle of nationalism which, to sustain the cultural homogeneity of the nation, advocates a hegemonic historical narrative, but also with its contestation. Indeed, history is a source of symbolic resources not only for the construction of a national mythopoetic narrative but also for the construction of counter-narratives. The processes of imposition, conflict, and contestation of memories derive from these multiple potentials (Humphry, 2003).

In a dual sense, history has generated the political struggle of the community of protest and the community interprets and revisits the past to support a project for the future (Humphry, 2003, p. 189). To provide a clear example, we can consider the main narrative *topos*, shared by any activist: the Battle of Okinawa (April 1, 1945, to June 22, 1945), an undeniably tragic historical event experienced by Okinawans. From the perspective of many activists, the Battle is a clear demonstration of the structural discrimination historically imposed on them; evidence of the island's suffering and burden selected as the only battlefield on the Japanese home territory during World War II and chosen as the sacrificial victim for the protection of the Japanese imperial system.

The following text is an extract from a leaflet distributed on the occasion of an anti-militarist demonstration held on February 8, 2021, in front of the Okinawa Prefecture Government Building (Naha City), organized by *Heiwa o motomeru Okinawa shūkyōsha no kai* (平和を求める沖縄宗教者の会, the Okinawa Religious Association for Peace). It is an interfaith group that brings together members of the Christian, Buddhist, and local cult faiths.

> Now, in Southern Okinawa, from Itoman to Yaese, large-scale earth and sand extraction is taking place, and the remains of the War victims, including those of their parents and siblings, are being dumped into the beautiful sea for the new Henoko base construction. Okinawa was the only battlefield in the last War suffering indescribable horrors, and all Okinawans have pledged never to make this land a battlefield again and

to console the souls of the victims. This outrage by the government is a blasphemy and oppression of the Okinawan people.[5]

The themes of sacrifice and oppression of the Okinawan people emerge in this passionate plea. They appear to be linked to the memory of the tragic events of 1945, and thus to the memory of the dead and the innocent victims. The construction of the new military facility near Henoko, a small village in the northern region of Okinawa Island, is condemned first of all because militarism, even in a defensive stance, affirms once again the principles that produced the horrors of the War.

Furthermore, a large amount of soil and sand, extracted from areas that were once battlefields, is used for the material purposes of construction. The soil contains "the remains of war victims", and its use for the construction of the new military facility means desecrating the remains and committing an "outrage" and "blasphemy".

This kind of assessment of the tragic events of 1945 is understandable and, in some ways, fair. However, they often omit the contextualization of such a dramatic and unacceptable episode in a broader historical scenario, related to the exasperation manifested in the political phenomenon of nationalism and the global conflicts derived from it. In other words, the Battle is narrated as irrefutable evidence of a structurally discriminatory and violent relationship between Okinawa and major powers, such as the Japanese government, not as one of the many consequences of the exasperation with the world national system.

The second example of mythopoetic use of historical facts can be found in the narratives spread at the indigenist and independentist poles, a rather small section of the anti-militarist movement. Pro-independence group members often recall the era of the Kingdom of Ryukyu (1429-1879), during which Okinawa was the main island of an independent insular state, as evidence of the concomitance of political independence, peace, and freedom.

In that ancestral past, they find the roots of Ryukyuan pacifism (Figal, 2001, pp. 39-42; Smits 2010). What emerges from dialogue with activists who adhere to this perspective is a reference to the historical episode in which King Shō Shin, subsequently to the unification of the Kingdom (1429), imposed a ban on the possession of weapons to control internal conflicts. In that

[5] Translated by the author. Below is the extract in Japanese language:
「今沖縄南部、糸満から八重瀬にかけて大規模土砂採取が行われ、戦争の犠牲となった皆さんの親、兄弟の遺骨もろとも辺野古新基地建設の美ら海に投げ捨てられようとしています。先の大戦で唯一戦場となり筆舌に尽きせぬ惨禍を被った沖縄、誓ったはずです、二度と沖縄を戦場にしない、犠牲者の霊を手厚く鎮魂慰霊することは沖縄県民全ての譲ることの出来ない心情です。政府のこのような暴挙は沖縄県民に対する冒涜であり弾圧であります。」

development, according to them, it is possible to recognize the roots of the anti-militarist and pacifist vocation of the Okinawan community and the political correlation between independence and peace.

The following quotation is an extract from a conversation personally held with a member of a well-established Okinawan association pursuing the political goal of the independence of the Okinawan indigenous community, hence the removal of military bases.

> King Shō Shin since 1478 banned militarism. Civilian-controlled government was being practiced. Very peaceful. Very friendly. So, when Okinawan people go to other countries, they don't hate us [the inhabitants]. [That is] Because we are peaceful. But the Japanese killed ten million (sen man) people in Korea, China, South-East Asia, Pacific Islands (….) United Nations chart has peace, world peace. King Shō Shin already had that spirit of the UN in 1478. Okinawan version of the concept of peace is different from the American. American (…) leaders say: military presence, US military presence is to protect peace. You see? It's a contradiction. How can you protect peace by military power, by fighting? Fighting is the opposite of peace.[6]

This evocative interpretation omits to mention that the unified Kingdom came into being a few decades earlier following a long period of conflicts between local lords, a process that culminated in the seizure of control by Chūzan, the central kingdom, which overpowered the other political units (Akamine, 2017, p. 12).

Moreover, as Richard Siddle points out, the idealist vision of the era of the independent Kingdom omits two aspects significant to the understanding of that historical period: in the fourteenth century there were huge linguistic differences between the Ryukyu islands and within the islands themselves; the incommunicability between communities subject to the same political power, that of the Kingdom, reminds us that in those years there was no national consciousness; in other words, there was no coincidence between the cultural unit and political unit. That is to conclude that the national community that some activists seek in the past simply did not exist.

To that we can add a second consideration: the performing arts of Ryukyu, commonly considered in their most refined forms to be the cultural achievement of the Kingdom and an important identity legacy, were mainly developed during the period of subordination to the Japanese fief of Satsuma (1609-1872), and not in the years of full political independence (1429-1609) (Siddle, 1998).

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[6] Extract of a recorded and transcribed ethnographic conversation held on December 10th, 2020.

These examples are intended to support a thesis: the community of protest emerged in a specific historical context and, from its origin until today, has a dialectical relationship with local history. On the one hand, it is sensitive to the stimuli of major social events, on the other, what happens, or what has happened, becomes a primary symbolic source for the construction of protest imagery, a symbolic repertoire on which to converge and build unity.

Memory, Identity, and Nationalism

The concept of imagined community formulated by Anderson (2006) sheds light on the object under analysis. Anderson describes the national community as an imagined political community in a threefold sense: it is imagined as limited by geographical, although elastic, boundaries; it is imagined as sovereign; and finally, it is imagined as a community because it conceals internal inequalities and differences by representing a "deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 2006, pp. 5-7).

The community of protest in Okinawa does not correspond to a national community. First, that is because the national community is only realized as such with the adoption of a sovereign state; secondly, because independence and separatist aspirations concern only some specific groups, and thirdly because the community of protest is not co-extensive with the local community and not all Okinawans feel represented by their claims.

However, if the analytical focus is placed on symbolic actions, then some similarities with the imagined community concept emerge. First of all, the community of protest does not make individualist or class demands; it imagines itself as the bearer of communal or, *lato sensu*, national interests, and adapts its battle to such scope; in a sense, it wants to personify the active consciousness of Okinawans by representing them politically.

Moreover, it imagines itself as limited because, while recalling global protest trajectories (environmentalism, feminism, and anti-militarism), it associates protest with a specific social and political issue. Finally, it imagines itself as a community because it arbitrarily extends a certain political condition, often defined as a condition of structural discrimination, to the entire Okinawan community, in a synchronic but also diachronic sense. In other words, the Okinawan community, according to the imagery of many activists, is synchronic but also diachronic, linked to a history of oppression rooted in the past.

In sum, the imaginative character that Anderson emphasizes when describing the national community can be recognized in the case of anti-militarist activism in Okinawa. On the one hand, it concerns the imagery of protest, an elastic, malleable, and extensible artifice, the product of a creative

process that is never concluded, also linked to the manipulation of historical facts.

On the other hand, it concerns the belief that the imagery is not the result of a selective construction, but an objective and real narrative. The community of protest makes use of the imagination as an operational plan on which to activate the process of identity construction and, on the symbolic level, extends its struggle and its claims to the entire local community, even though it represents the political position of only one part of it. In other words, it imagines itself as a collective subject, representative of interests that are co-extensive with the local community, and not of particular interests, or class interests; community interests, or *lato sensu*, national interests.

To avoid misunderstandings, one point remains to be clarified: to say that the symbolic repertoire of the community is qualitatively mythopoeic does not mean judging it according to the criterion of authenticity or inauthenticity. Rather, it means recognizing it as a cultural artifact, artifice, or construction. The same applies to the previous claims on collective memory, the normal functioning of which implies that the past is reconstructed based on the present (Halbwachs, 1992; Jedlowski, 2002).

These considerations echo some of Ernest Gellner's thoughts, who recognizes that nationalism is the political phenomenon that historically constructs nations, inventing them where they do not exist, and not *vice versa* (Gellner, 1964, p. 169). In this case, *mutatis mutandis*, it means that the counter-narrative of protest and the symbolic repertoire are not the principle of political action, but its product.

However, this is not to argue that, being artificial, the protest community's symbolic repertoire is false; in fact, it is a mistake to associate invention with the idea of falsehood. Rather, this kind of operation should be considered as an imaginative and creative act belonging to any community, certainly those whose dimensions do not make direct contact and relationship of all members possible (Anderson, 2006, p. 6).

Describing collective memory as the result of the selection and symbolization of historical episodes and contention and negotiation should not imply an assessment of inauthenticity, but, rather, of creativity. Nevertheless, that description should also prompt us to consider it not only as a potential means of supporting political perspectives (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). First, limits to the process of reconstruction of the past are imposed by social frameworks and shared plausibility criteria (Appadurai, 1981; Halbwachs, 1992; Jedlowski, 2002).

Secondly, the case considered pushes us to interpret collective memory as a living history (Malighetti, 2004), i.e., a broad, heterogeneous, and evolving set of meaningful events, processes, and symbols of the past that entertain a vital relationship with the present and generate a common field of contention,

and interpretation that is crucial both for those who have the objective of achieving a radical transformation of the *status quo* and for those who intend to protect it.

Okinawan identity, in this perspective, becomes a highly politicized issue, a contentious process deeply embroiled in political struggle. The case discussed demonstrates that collective memories, hence collective identities, are interpreted and contested in a dialectical relationship with power configurations and that their study is meaningful only when contextualized in the analysis of historical processes and political structures (Jedlowski, 2002, p. 126).

Indeed, the relationship between local history and the Okinawan community of protest is dialectical in nature: on the one hand, its imaginary engulfs, reinterprets, and mythologizes historical facts to legitimize political struggle; on the other hand, the community of protest's development occurred through specific historical processes and it is unintelligible outside of this framework.

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