

book review

Women of Okinawa

Written by Ruth Ann Keyso

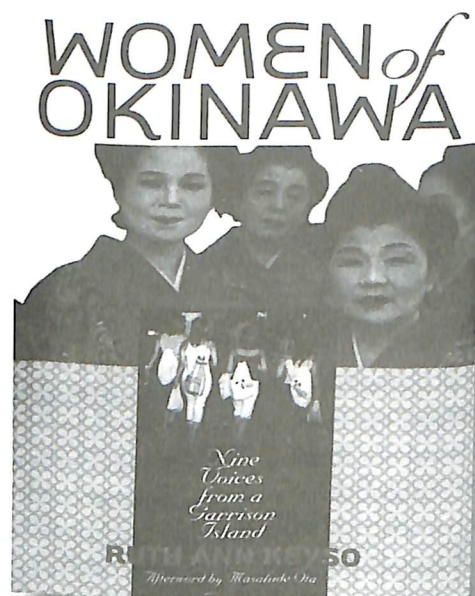
Reviewed by Katherine De Jesus-Clarín

History books are often seen as boring stuff. You read them only because the teacher requires it. Or they're about a past so distant from the present that one can't wait to finish and hurry back to the future. And that's another thing; many chronicles present history as just the there-and-then, and not so much as something strongly interwoven with what's here-and-now. If such is ordinarily the case, Ruth Ann Keyso's book, *Women of Okinawa*, does not come up to that standard.

Okinawa is a good, easy-to-read narrative for anyone interested in taking a glimpse at the island. Geopolitically it is part of Japan, and to a large extent the Americans run it, but the Okinawan people, their history, struggles and culture, do not belong to anyone other than themselves. Well, this might be changing, since young people today are not too conscious anymore of the wounds inflicted by the war and the effect of the continuing American presence in their island.

Although Keyso authored the book, it sounds more like a conversation between her and nine Okinawan women. Her style is easy and flowing, so that you could almost put the book to your ear like a radio and listen in on an engaging and animated conversation over extended lunch. Your imagination does the rest, as the women share stories of lives lost and dreams shattered by a proxy war meant to spare mainland Japan from devastation and pillage. They talk about the 27-year occupation by the

Americans, and the discrimination to which they are subjected by Japan. They talk about themselves, now slowly recovering and discovering their strengths by not forgetting the past.



The book is a retelling of life in Okinawa, in the words of women from three generations, each generation trying to "make sense of life in the island." Three of them survived the ravages of World War II. Three others still burn with the fire of nationalism kindled by the American occupation in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, finally, we hear three young women, in their 20s, with vague ideas about the ghastly war, and who accept the American presence as a fact of life.

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Titbits About Okinawa

Many are not familiar with Okinawa, simply associating it with Japan. Most of us are not aware of the Okinawan people's long history of struggle for peace, equality and sovereignty. That's why it is important that writings like these that present a view of Okinawa as seen and witnessed by the people themselves, and by women at that are published.

Okinawa, Japan's south-westernmost prefecture, is made up of 160 islands, 50 of which are populated. These islands are scattered over an area 1,000 kilometres from east to west and 400 kilometres from north to south. With its beautiful natural surroundings (emerald-green seas, exotic wildlife) and unique culture (textiles, lacquer ware, pottery, performing arts), Okinawa has become an international tourist destination. Most visitors come from mainland Japan, Taiwan and Korea.¹

Four U.S. military bases occupy Okinawa's prime lands. These are Futenma Air Station, the Northern Training Area, Kadena Air Base (the largest U.S. Air Force base in East Asia), and White Beach (used as a logistics support port for the 7th Fleet and home port of the

76th Task Force 1st Amphibious Unit of the same fleet). 75 percent of all American forces in Japan are in Okinawa. Billed as the "Keystone of the Pacific," these bases now constitute America's military stronghold in Asia (after the pullout from the Philippines). They are spread out over 11 percent of the prefectural land, and on Okinawa's main island, where most of the population and industries are located, they occupy up to 20 percent of the land area. Thus, Okinawa's hosting of these foreign military bases stifles its own economic development, hindering the construction of industrial infrastructure and road networks.²

Taking the Women's Point of View

Keyso chose to present Okinawa from a women's perspective. Not so much because men's viewing are not interesting or as sharp, but more to surface experiences and insights usually relegated to the margins of traditional historical accounts. Because women are not ashamed to admit vulnerability—whether it's about feeling mushy, or expressing self-doubt and revealing moments of weakness—their storytelling is more nuanced, more textured, unabridged. They look at life's experiences even from the shadowed angle.

The Americans have been in Okinawa for the last 50 years, and women are the ones who have had the most direct contact with them. They are the waitresses and prostitutes in bars catering primarily to G.I. Joes, housemaids, pregnant girlfriends, mothers of Amerasian children abandoned by Uncle Sam's finest, and wives battered by philandering husbands.

Women, too, were there to rebuild the island after the fierce Battle of Okinawa in 1945. Many of their men fought and died as soldiers defending Imperial Japan. It was the mothers, wives and daughters who worked the fields and

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operated the factories, taught in schools, and nursed the sick and dying, even as they themselves were sick and dying. Women became the primary breadwinners while juggling domestic chores, and many went into business for themselves. The book was written as a tribute to these unthanked, unrecognised heroes of the "garrison island," and to celebrate their triumphs despite economic hardships and class and ethnic discrimination.

Looking Back at the War

The Battle of Okinawa took all of 82 days of fierce fighting between American and Japanese troops. One-third of the local population was killed: 125,000 civilians, as against 12,000 American soldiers and 90,000 Japanese troops. There was bombing everywhere and the roar of fighter planes, the rattle of military helicopters and the bursts of high-powered artillery that seemed to be unending. Survivors are haunted by these sounds, imbedded in their psyche like the bits of shrapnel still in their bodies.

There was no food and no water. Houses were wrecked, buildings burned down. Many women were widowed. Children were suddenly orphaned, many of them too young to understand that they should stop hoping for father and mother to come. Dead people everywhere. Family members were separated from each other, not knowing when they would reunite, if at all.

The women interviewed talk of the pain, sadness and anger caused by the war. They miss the peace and tranquillity of life in the island before 1945. The most cherished possessions of many elderly Okinawans are photographs of their dearly departed, unjustly snatched by a war they had nothing to do with, but paid so dearly for.

The American Occupation followed, and the women talk about the shame of "living with the enemy," while being forced to accept it because their survival depended on it—for employment, for factories to be set up, for schools and hospitals to be built. As one of the women declared, "The fact that the U.S. bases are here enabled Okinawans to eat." Unfortunately, this also meant eating their pride as a people.

Frustration With the Reversion

The next set of women interviewees talked of their involvement in the nationalist fervour that swept the island. To them, this was a time of heightened sense of what it meant to be Okinawan. Fed up with the abuses inflicted by American servicemen on the people, they campaigned for Okinawa's reversion (*fukki undo*) to mainland Japan, hoping that the Japanese government would do two things for them—first, end the American Occupation, and second, recognise their parity with the mainland.

Parity is a strong demand. Okinawans are sick and tired of their development being made to lag behind the mainland. They feel trivialised and ignored in terms of social services like health care, education, employment and housing. Okinawans are even required to apply for visas to go to the mainland. Expressions of their culture elicit curiosity rather than appreciation and respect. As citizens of Japan, Okinawans demand to enjoy the same rights as everyone else.

But reversion, when it happened, turned out to be one big frustration. Not only did the Americans got to keep occupying the land, they continued to violate the people's human rights. U.S. servicemen today still commit crimes with impunity. Rape, forced pregnancies, prostitution, drug dealing, street brawls are commonplace. On top of these, Okinawans have to put up with air pollution, military training accidents, and general contamination of their environment.

A report prepared by a Japanese NGO recounts, "Countless numbers of women were raped, including a 9-month-old baby girl, a 6-year-old and a 9-year-old girl. Women were gang-raped by as many as 20 to 30 soldiers, and some, seeking help, became casualties. Many children were born out of violence in those lawless times. The lands of Okinawan citizens were seized by force to build mammoth military bases which were key facilities for the U.S. military fighting the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars and other conflicts. The build-up of military exercises has brought more contamination and crime. Although Okinawan legal rights were restored with the reversion to Japan in 1972, Okinawa continues to be an island of military bases, even after the end of the Cold War."³

And forget about equal treatment. If anything, the women felt that Japanese culture and practices were being imposed on the people. Resentment built up against the Japanese government. Resistance grew. For example, the *Monbusho* (the Japanese Ministry of Education) directed teachers to ensure that Okinawan students pledge allegiance to the *Hinomaru* (Japanese flag) and to sing the *Kimigayo* (the Japanese Anthem) during an annual athletic meet. But many simply refused to stand and sing. Up to this day, many still do not sing this anthem or recite the pledge.

"The term *dokaseisaku* (defined in dictionaries as a policy in which a nation endeavours to make the lifestyles and ideologies of the people in its colonies the same as its own) had already been applied to Okinawa during the Meiji period; and coercion, cooperation, and resistance characterised Japan's assimilation policy and its effects there." Okinawa has even been said to be "the first victim of Japanese imperialism."⁴

Easy Living Side by Side With America

The last three women interviewed, the youngest and therefore the most far-removed from the realities and indignities of the war and the American Occupation, see Americans as cool cats, looking like Tom Cruise in say, the movie "Top Gun." They think that unlike Okinawans, American men have less hang-ups when it comes to relationships, and that they are richer, more refined and sophisticated.

The presence of the American bases is accepted as inevitable. "I cannot imagine Okinawa without the U.S.," as one interviewee said. To them, the U.S. bases are as much a given in Okinawan life as the dances and speciality foods Okinawa is known for. They talk of working inside the base, enabling them to afford a better life. They seem to be resigned to the reality that the bases are "a big part of Okinawa." Today, there are other important things that demand one's energy—like making a living, raising a family, giving your children good education, etc.—more than the fight to evict the Americans from Okinawa.

Although the book carries an "Afterword," it represents the viewpoint of Okinawa prefecture's former governor. It is not an epilogue, where the women interviewed from the earlier generations could have reflected on the sentiments expressed by the young Okinawans re-

garding the issues they struggled and continue to struggle for.

Okinawa Today

A cursory look at Websites on Okinawa, however, will contradict Keyso's assessment that those born in the last two decades have a vague recollection of the war and the long period of American occupation, and that not many Okinawan people bother to campaign against the U.S. presence and militarism.

The 1995 rape of a 12-year-old girl by three American soldiers, moved Okinawan women attending the Beijing Conference on Women to carry out a series of protest actions. This likewise led to the founding of the Rape Emergency Intervention Counselling Centre-Okinawa (REICO).⁵

There is also a very strong lobby and networking mass movement that seeks to revise the existing U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), to, among others, "expeditiously redress the problems of local residents' concern stemming from the military bases."⁶

The social movement to ensure that the lessons of Okinawa in the face of war and peace, of half a century of chronic military violence, are not forgotten is a growing and vibrant movement. The women, young and old, are main actors in the struggle holding Okinawa Women's Peace Caravans to condemn national policies that condone the gross violations of basic human rights and the dignity of women and girls because of the continued long-term foreign military presence.

Okinawans raise their voices loudly and continue to do so, for the sake of future generations, and for the world to renounce war.

When asked if she ever gets tired of protesting and standing up for what she truly believes in, peace activist Fumiko Nakamura, a film maker, declares: "Never! I cannot do that. I will continue to educate the world about the folly of war and the beauty of peace. I experienced one of life's tragedies: war...and I will never want something like that to happen again." ♪

Katherine De Jesus-Clarim is the list administrator of APGR (Asia-Pacific Gender and Racism), an online discussion list on the intersection of gender and racism for women's groups in the Asia and Pacific region, and APWOMEN2000, an announce E-mail list of the Beijing Platform for Action processes. She is also the co-facilitator of the NOVIB-VAW list, an online discussion group on combatting violence against women amongst NOVIB partners worldwide. All the lists mentioned above are hosted by Isis International-Manila.

Footnotes:

¹ From Website: <http://www.pref.okinawa.jp/overview.html>

² From Website: [http://www2.pref.okinawa.jp/oki/okinawa.nsf/\(doc\)/9EEBEB11530D2CB94925693000018D01](http://www2.pref.okinawa.jp/oki/okinawa.nsf/(doc)/9EEBEB11530D2CB94925693000018D01)

³ Women 2000, Japan NGO Alternative Report by Japan NGO Report Preparatory Committee, 13 August 1999, from Website: http://www.jca.ax.apc.org/fem/bpfa/NGOreport/E_en_Conflict.html

⁴ From Website: <http://www.jpri.org/jpri/public/op8.html>

⁵ From Website: http://www.jca.ax.apc.org/fem/bpfa/NGOreport/E_en_Conflict.html

⁶ Petition Letter of Okinawa Prefecture Governor, Keiichi Inamine dated 29-30 August, 2000 to Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, and other Ministers of Japan, and the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, and the Commander of the U.S. Forces in Japan.