

Okinawa and disaster-struck Tohoku region sacrificed for Tokyo

Nakazawa Yudai with an introduction by Steve Rabson

Introduction

The work of Ōshiro Tatsuhiko often tells of people caught in dire historical circumstances of war and oppression. He was the first of four Okinawan writers to win Japan's prestigious Akutagawa literary prize for his novella "Cocktail Party" (1967, translated 1989) depicting a father who seeks justice for the rape of his daughter by an American soldier in U.S.-occupied Okinawa. "Turtleback Tombs" (1966, translated 2000) narrates the ordeal of a three-generation family who take refuge from the Battle of Okinawa inside their large, traditional tomb, and find spiritual solace in local rituals honoring their ancestors. What distinguishes Ōshiro's writing is his knack for moving beyond the realm of daily media reports and explanatory essays to portray individuals coping with crises imposed on them by distant governments. He draws extensively on Okinawan culture, not only as "local color" background, but to express the motivations and values of people who seek to maintain their connections with the past, retrieve their ancestral lands forcibly occupied by the U.S. military since the end of World War II, and restore their peaceful lives.

His recent story "To Futenma," described below, tells of a family living near the Futenma Marine Corps Air Station amidst the constant noise and potential danger from flying aircraft, and a woman determined to continue her

performance of traditional Ryukyuan dance even as her musical accompaniment is drowned out by helicopters. In the following interview Ōshiro declares his solidarity with people living in the nuclear disaster areas of Tohoku, whose lives are also disrupted and at risk as a result of arbitrary and discriminatory government policies. In Okinawa, Prime Minister Abe pushes ahead with plans for construction of a Marine air base at Henoko in the face of Okinawans' overwhelming opposition expressed in elections, including the recent landslide victory of a governor opposed to the base, referenda, and public demonstrations. Now Japanese riot police are attacking protesters, injuring several. Tokyo's mishandling of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima was compounded by government and corporate misinformation that downplayed the dangers and put thousands of residents at risk. Both outrages result from the marginalization of local areas on Japan's periphery, far from the centers of political power and corporate media in Tokyo, and home to some of Japan's poorest citizens.

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It was through Tatsuhiro Oshiro's collection of stories, "Hatsukayo," that I learned that hibiscus have a special place in the culture of Okinawa. I had arrived in Japan's southernmost prefecture amidst a festival celebrating the New Year in the afterlife, and the sight of people placing offerings of hibiscus -- known as "flowers of the afterlife" -- on their ancestors' graves in the cold rain was something to behold. It overlapped with Okinawa's tragic history.

Newspaper headlines that day were all about the U.S. military realignment, including the transfer of U.S. troops to Guam and the Futenma air station relocation issue.

"The papers here are like this all the time," Oshiro, 86, said as he glanced at the headlines.

"I wrote some 20 years ago that Okinawa was a domestic colony, and I wondered at first if I'd gone too far. But these days, the expression 'domestic (internal) colony' has become widely accepted."

Looking over at the window, Oshiro continued: "It's cold these days, so I bury myself under the covers and wonder whether the people living in the disaster areas (in the Tohoku region) are warm enough. Who would've thought that Okinawa and the Tohoku region would be linked this way in solidarity?"

Oshiro says that the Tohoku region holds a special place in his heart. When he attended the award ceremony in Tokyo for the Akutagawa Prize, which he received for his novel "Cocktail Party," he had also traveled through Fukushima on the suggestion of a former college classmate.

So what is the "new solidarity" this writer -- who for years has focused on the suffering of Okinawa -- talking about? The answer is this: sacrifice that state power imposes on the weak. In other words, political discrimination.

The islands have been a part of Japan only since the late 1800s, when the Meiji government annexed the Ryukyu Kingdom and eventually renamed it Okinawa Prefecture. After the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty were signed in 1951, Okinawa Prefecture was put under U.S. military administration. As a result, while Okinawa constituted a mere 0.6 percent of Japan's land area, more than 70 percent of U.S. military bases in Japan were built there. Meanwhile, the Tohoku region, which relied

heavily on the agricultural and natural resource industries, became an enormous source of labor for Tokyo. Furthermore, the electrical power produced by nuclear power plants that have been built in high concentrations in de-populated areas has not benefitted local communities, but rather Tokyo and other major metropolitan areas.

Both the numerous incidents and accidents that occur because of the military bases in Okinawa and the dangers of nuclear disasters in Tohoku have ostensibly been set off with massive subsidies handed out to local communities. However, we've arrived at a point now where we can no longer overlook the history of the weak being placed at the mercy of national policies, or the contradictions and inconsistencies that have long been left unaddressed.

"This imposition of sacrifice is a carrot-or-stick situation," Oshiro said. "To change this situation, there's nothing but for Diet members from Okinawa to do their job well..."

It was when Oshiro refolded his arms over his chest that a deafening roar was heard outside.

"That's a military plane," Oshiro explained. "They're always flying above, so this area's been designated as a noise pollution area. The nearby Shuri Junior High School is a soundproof facility. There are times when the planes fly even lower, and we have to stop talking altogether." This, I learned, was Okinawa's reality.

Last year, Oshiro published "Futenma yo" (To

Futenma), a book of short stories. In the first story, whose title is that of the book, Oshiro eagerly tackles the Futenma relocation through a family who lives near the air station.

The story reaches its climax when the musical accompaniment to a Ryukyu dance is drowned out by the noise from U.S. helicopters, but our heroine continues to perform. Her determination symbolizes the local culture that refuses to be defeated by the heavy burdens of military bases. At the same time, however, the heroine's grandmother's plan to find a family heirloom buried on ancestral lands that have been seized by the U.S. military ends in failure.

In the book, Oshiro addresses uncompromising will and crushed hopes. "These two extremes represent the essence of the military base issue," Oshiro said. "My intention was to write about the identity of the Okinawan people who want to weave our history together and regain the land that's steeped with memories."

The Great East Japan Earthquake and ensuing tsunami and nuclear disaster have forced many people from the Tohoku region from their homelands. Asked whether this tragedy is something that can be shared with Okinawa, Oshiro rips open a package to reveal the March issue of the literary journal Bungakukai. It features a debate between two of Oshiro's acquaintances -- Fukushima resident, novelist and monk Sokyū Genyū and former foreign ministry official Masaru Sato -- in a section titled "Interpreting 'Japan' through Fukushima and Okinawa."

Oshiro said: "I think it was Jan. 9 that Genyū stopped by here when he was in Okinawa to

give a lecture. That's when he told me about his interview with Sato. Genyu said, "We have to do something that puts us in confrontation with the state."

In the magazine interview, Genyu said there was a parallel between the proposed construction of an intermediate storage facility for radioactive waste in Fukushima and the issue of U.S. military bases. Here, too, the government's failure to act has already led partly to the imposition of sacrifices. Amid the ongoing political confusion in Japan, is there any reason not to be pessimistic?

"Japanese people have grown accustomed to luxuries in their everyday lives, right? I wonder if an ideology or policy that will trim off the excess fat and desires from our lives won't emerge," he said. "But my outlook is not grim."

Asked why, Oshiro responded: "After the massive earthquake, those in the disaster areas didn't panic, and have been acting levelheadedly while being considerate of each other. That's hopeful. There's a very old concept of mutual support in Okinawa, too, called 'yuimaru.' If we're able to foster this spirit around the country, I believe that we'll be able to build a new kind of civilization."

Suddenly, instead of the roar of military jets, birds could be heard chirping outside.

After the interview, I got into a car driven by a local friend of mine, heading toward U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Ginowan. The city was in the midst of mayoral elections, and candidates and their campaign crews drove

around, loudly appealing to voters for their support.

"Look, it's a KC130 refueling aircraft!" my friend said, suddenly. "It's a touch-and-go landing."

We watched as a dark aircraft made a sharp dive in the air right above us. Its explosive noise drowned out election pledges being shouted through amplifiers. This was everyday life here, I thought. Experiencing, if just for a moment, the "sacrifice being imposed on the weak," I was struck again by the weight of Oshiro's words.

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