

Transnational Identities, Communities, and the Experiences of Okinawan Internees and Prisoners of War

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ABSTRACT

Okinawans, people from Japan's poorest and last to be incorporated prefecture, faced unique challenges during World War II. Regarded as racially and culturally "different" from the rest of the Japanese population, but officially categorized as "Japanese" by Americans, Okinawans in Hawai'i inhabited a social space of shifting transnational identities and experiences. Depending upon the parsing, at least two broad and different subgroups of Okinawans experienced detention and imprisonment in Hawai'i. In the first group were local Okinawans, either Issei (first generation immigrants carrying Japanese passports) or Kibei (American-born offspring of the Okinawan immigrants who had been raised in Okinawa or on the main islands of Japan); in the second group were prisoners of war (POWs or PWs) taken in the Pacific Theater or as a result of the Battle of Okinawa. Since Okinawan experiences varied noticeably from other Japanese internees and other POWs, this article explores some of the factors contributing to their detention and eventual imprisonment, and the responses of the local Okinawan community.

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Okinawans occupied a liminal space between being Japanese, and not-Japanese; being American, and not-American; being Hawai'i-born, but not being Local. This was especially the case for those who were Kibei (the children of the immigrants from Okinawa and Japan—thereby birthright American citizens—but who had spent their childhood years in Okinawa or Japan). “Citizenship” for Okinawans was, therefore, a problematic state of being, and this contributed to their unique set of experiences before, during, and after the Pacific War (or “World War II” to Americans).

This article will explore some of the conditions that led to the internment of ethnic Okinawans, some of whom were American citizens, some dual citizens, and some simply citizens of Japan. It will also explore the experiences of Okinawans who were brought to Hawai'i as prisoners of war (POWs or PWs) resulting from their capture in the islands of Micronesia, as well as a result of the bloody Battle of Okinawa. These groups of Okinawans—American citizens in some cases, Japanese nationals in others, and even dual citizens—although incarcerated under different conditions, nevertheless had experiences that were unique compared to others imprisoned in Honouliuli and other Department of the Army internment sites, both in Hawai'i and on the continental United States. Additionally, with a number of sizeable Okinawan communities scattered across the Hawaiian Islands as a result of the industrial sugar and pineapple plantation economy, significant interactions occurred between the prisoners and Okinawans in the community, as well as with those who guarded over them. These features suggest that Okinawan experiences of imprisonment varied somewhat from the other Japanese internees and POWs and are worthy of special attention because of the varying forms of treatment of and agency exhibited by them.

After a brief discussion of Okinawa's unique relationship to Japan, to Hawai'i, and to the United States, an explanation of the methods used to investigate the Okinawan imprisonment experiences will follow. Next, an exploration of the imprisonment of Okinawan internees will take place. This will be followed by a discussion of the prisoners of war captured in the Pacific and especially as a result of the Battle of Okinawa. The responses of the Okinawan community in Hawai'i (as well as those of their Okinawan captives) will also be explored. Finally, some thoughts on the significance of the social category of “Okinawan” and of internment or imprisonment will be discussed.

Background on Okinawa and Okinawans

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1989/1994) notion of *racial formation* is useful in understanding how Okinawans became uniquely embroiled in the international and intra-national politics of the Pacific War. Omi and Winant note that "race" is socially "formed." That is, it is "created" via socially constructed hierarchies and through the establishment and institutionalization of cultural, social, economic, political "difference." Through various social conventions or practices, *nominal* characteristics (i.e., differences in name only) are transformed into *ordinal* differences (or inequalities in value), and varieties of hierarchies can become socially constructed. Thus, through political, legal, symbolic, and common everyday social practices and imaginaries, racial hierarchies become infused and institutionalized throughout societies. In addition, feminist sociologists such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) note that concepts like "citizenship" benefit from an integrative analysis of race, class, gender, and other forms of difference, and that particular locales or social spaces matter in the constructed configurations of stratification systems; in this case I would argue, the implementation of wartime incarceration was so affected. Finally, within the structural limits posed by internment or incarceration, Okinawans exercised a degree of *agency* that is noteworthy. As James Scott (1985) has noted, it is in the margins that the weak often exercise their resistance, however minor it may appear to be, to the oppressive conditions with which they are faced.

Prior to its incorporation as the 47th and last prefecture of Japan in 1879, Okinawa was known as Liu Ch'iu (Ryūkyū being the Japanized pronunciation of Liu Ch'iu), a small kingdom whose realm spanned the archipelago stretching from the Amami Islands in the north to Yonaguni in the south (Kerr 1958/2000:40). For approximately four centuries, its population lived mostly village-based lives, engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing and crafts, largely isolated from the lives of their kings and members of the court in Shuri. The kingdom of Liu Ch'iu's affluence was built on its far-flung entrepôt trading throughout Southeast Asia and parts of East Asia, supported by the tributary relationship it had established with imperial China.

All of that changed in 1609, when the Satsuma clan of southern Japan, in a move sanctioned by the Tokugawa Shogunate, invaded Liu Ch'iu and set up a suzerain government within it. The kingdom of Ryūkyū continued for more than two centuries, but under the surreptitious control of Satsuma.

This arrangement enhanced the status and power of the Satsuma domain, but accelerated the process of the island kingdom's increasing impoverishment. Furthermore, when the Meiji government came to power in 1868, the disposition of Ryūkyū was confusing and economically disastrous; Ryūkyū was transformed from a kingdom to a *han* or domain, and eventually into a prefecture. The diplomatic relationships that the Ryūkyū Kingdom had established with other countries had to be disassembled. The aristocracy, which had resided in Shuri, was dispersed throughout the island and these families were compelled to make their own way. Ryūkyū, after this period known as the *Ryūkyū Shobun* (Ryūkyū Disposition), became "Okinawa," the 47th and last prefecture incorporated into the modernizing Japanese nation.

While other prefectures' incorporation into the emergent nation of Japan were difficult, those processes were far more gradual, less complicated, and less traumatic than it was for Okinawa. Okinawa's physical distance and separation from the Japanese "mainland" were accompanied by linguistic and other cultural differences. These differences were coded as inferiority, and the "other-ing" meant that the central government in *hondo* (mainland) Japan aggressively took control. It appointed Okinawa prefecture's governor (Shigeru Narahara from Kagoshima, formerly the Satsuma domain), imposed heavy taxes to develop the governmental infrastructure, and established an educational system based in "standard" Japanese language and cultural practices. The lateness of Okinawa's incorporation into Japan meant that these required changes occurred at a faster pace and resulted in more social dislocations than in other prefectures.

While social activists such as Noboru Jahana within Okinawa struggled against the Narahara government for social reforms, their efforts largely fell on deaf ears. Activists' appeals to emigrate were also ignored, because the leaders of a modernizing Japan wanted to avoid being embarrassed by what they regarded to be substandard subjects representing the new nation of Japan on the world's stage. Okinawans persisted in petitioning for permission to emigrate in spite of their language "deficiencies." Finally, in 1899, the appeals were granted. Kyuzo Toyama, a young activist, student of Jahana, and entrepreneur was able to convince Okinawa prefecture's appointed governor to grant permission to organize a small group of thirty men to emigrate to Hawai'i to work in its expanding sugar industry. Twenty-six men survived the ocean passage and the physical exams to work in Hawai'i in 1900. They were followed by even more Okinawans, and when the Gentlemen's Agreement was signed in

1907 by women and children, it fueled the natural increase in the Okinawan population. Most families were composed of parents and often eight or more children (Ethnic Studies 1981).

On the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Okinawans in Hawai'i were either Issei (immigrants) from Okinawa, or Nisei (the offspring of immigrants), including a subset of the Nisei (called Kibei, children of immigrants raised in Okinawa or the main islands of Japan). Okinawans had arrived in Hawai'i beginning in 1900, at least a decade and a half after the Kanyaku Imin (government-sponsored immigration) from Japan, and some thirty-plus years or so after the Gannen Mono (earliest contract labor migration from Japan). Okinawans, as a result, were incorporated into an already existing Japanese ethnic community, most of which were from the Chugoku or south-central area of mainland Japan (Kimura 1988).

Okinawans were a double minority on the plantations and in the urban areas of Hawai'i—they were an ethnic minority in relationship to the larger society as citizens of Japan, but they were also a minority in relation to the existing Japanese population in Hawai'i (Toyama and Ikeda 1950/1981). The level of discrimination against Okinawans in both urban and rural areas was palpable, and many elderly Okinawans in Hawai'i still recall epithets and taunts leveled at them in their youth such as, "Okinawa-ken ken, *buta kaukau!*" or "Big Rope!" The first saying is a combination of Japanese and creole terminologies (*buta* = pig and *kaukau* = food) referred to the fact that Okinawans were disproportionately represented among pig farmers, and the dominant source of feed for their pigs was composed of the food scraps they routinely collected from households and restaurants in the neighborhoods, and then cooked into a puree. Thus, Okinawan-ness was often conflated with garbage for pigs. The notion, "Big Rope" was a play on words—*ōki* meaning "big" and *nawa* meaning "rope"—hence the reference of "Big Rope" to Okinawa.

Additionally, family strategies differed. While mainland Japanese (*naichi*) families who could afford it often sent their children to Japan to be formally educated and retain their Japanese *cultural* identity, Okinawans in Hawai'i often sent their offspring to grandparents and other extended kin back in Okinawa for *economic* reasons—to care for children, to permit the immigrant parents to devote more time to wage earning (Maehara Yamazato 2007). When these offspring returned to Hawai'i, many of them more than a decade later, they found themselves awkwardly reintegrating into families with cousins or even siblings who had become Americanized in the interim. The Kibei, by virtue

of their education in the Japanese educational system, which often integrated military and imperial ideological components, were less fluent in English, more formal than their other Nisei counterparts, and thus could be more easily identified and differentiated from other local Japanese and Okinawan residents. This made them more likely to be targets of suspicion, especially on the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Research Methods

The remainder of this article used a multi-method approach to investigate the Okinawan experience in Honouliuli and the various confinement sites throughout Hawai'i and the continental United States. It relied on data retrieved from official records retained at the National Archives and Records Administration II (NARA II), official histories, newspaper accounts, personal essays, and interviews. The NARA II material included interrogation transcripts, policy and protocol memoranda, daily reports (somewhat incomplete), lists of prisoners entering or exiting facilities, etc.

Since Okinawan residents in Hawai'i prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor were officially considered "Japanese," there was no official census designation of "Okinawan" internees in Honouliuli or any other confinement sites. On the other hand, when Okinawans entered Honouliuli and other confinement sites as POWs, they were designated as "Okinawan." Consequently, the following procedures were developed and used to "estimate" the situation of Okinawan internees. First, in narrative reports, some individuals identified themselves as Okinawan or "Uchinanchu." These self-reports were taken as validation of Okinawan identity. Second, when examining official reports and/or lists, the "narrator," or writer/official, may designate individuals or groups as "Okinawan" or "from Okinawa." In such cases, the designation was taken to indicate Okinawan identity of those individuals. Finally, and most problematic, when examining narratives and/or lists of Japanese names, Okinawan names and persons were identified by what might be "commonly considered" Okinawan names. To best systematize the process, the list of immigrants to Hawai'i in the centennial booklet, *To Our Issei: Okage Sama De* was used (Hawaii United Okinawa Association). While that list is incomplete, it provided a rudimentary method to code Okinawan names, and thus to estimate what percentage of the "Japanese" population who were detained might have been ethnic Okinawan. However, those names are in Romanized (*Romaji*) form and the Chinese (*kanji*) characters would provide a more accurate determination of Okinawan identity.

Finally, narratives of various individuals both in Hawai‘i and in Okinawa provide supplemental first-person accounts or stories of the period, either of events here or in Okinawa. Often, they are spliced between other larger narratives that may only indirectly touch upon Honouliuli. However, the triangulation of the different stories or accounts often provide points in time and space that, when viewed collectively, help “connect the dots” and construct a composite picture of the Okinawan experience during this period.

Okinawan Internees

Although it was impossible to determine the exact number, using the methodology described above, it was determined that approximately 12–15 percent of those with Japanese surnames who were interned/imprisoned were probably ethnic Okinawans. Detention centers were to be found across the island chain. After interrogation, the detainees were either held or shipped to the continental United States. Prior to the construction and opening of Honouliuli Camp in 1943, detention on O‘ahu was primarily at the Immigration Station and at Sand Island Camp. In this section, the cases of five individuals will be described to provide a picture of the range of Okinawan internee experiences—why they were arrested, what happened to them, and what they tell us about the internee experiences.

Ten ships carried people (including Okinawans) from Hawai‘i who were arrested/detained and taken to the internment camps administered by the Department of the Army and/or the Department of Justice on the continental United States between February 17, 1942, and December 2, 1943. The distinction between these kinds of camps and those administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) is significant; they should not be conflated, although they often have been. As Tetsuden Kashima notes in his introduction to Yasutaro Soga’s *Life behind Barbed Wire* (2008), it reminds us that just “knowing people before a shattering event occurs can affect the process generated to deal with difficult situations (Soga 2008:15). Being apprehended when others of one’s community are not, takes a heavier psychic and social toll. Okinawans fit this profile. Furthermore, as Ueunten (2007) points out individuals held in Justice Department and army administered camps were detained for possible prisoner exchanges (this was especially true of those sent to Crystal City in Texas where Peruvians and other Latin American Nikkei [overseas Japanese] were held).

Some of the ethnic Okinawans who were eventually interned were picked up almost immediately; certainly a number of internees were arrested within a month of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and they were transported to the continental United States shortly thereafter. Ryosen Yonahara was one of those. An Issei from Shuri, Okinawa, he was arrested on January 7, 1942, a month after the imposition of martial law, and after being detained at Sand Island, was sent out on the first ship on February 17, 1942. He eventually ended up in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In a college theme written in 1947, Roy Yonahara recalled his father's arrest and eventual internment:

... three FBI men came and searched our house. They couldn't find what they came to look for, but they took my father with them. My Mother and sisters cried as he said, "Don't worry, I'll be back soon." I stood by the door and nonchalantly said "goodby." I guess I was a mere youngster for I didn't realize what they were going to do to him. . . . Days of worrying lapsed into weeks, but Father didn't come home. We later found out that he had been interned at Sand Island. Only then did I realize that he wouldn't be home for some time. (Yonahara 1947:1)

Why was Ryosen Yonahara, a Japanese school teacher, apprehended? The transcript of his interrogation hearing held on January 12, 1942, at Fort Shafter is quite revealing. In a highly scripted hearing, the "evidence" was presented. Yonahara, an Issei (first generation) from the Shuri area of Okinawa, was a well-respected Japanese language teacher. As noted earlier, Shuri was the former seat of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and Yonahara's ancestors were high-ranking figures in the Ryūkyūan court. He had been asked, and therefore consented, to serve as a consular officer in rural Maui for the two years prior to moving his family to Honolulu in 1940. In that capacity, he was notified of births in the remote areas of Ha'ikū-Pa'uwela, and had assisted parents to fill out and then send applications for dual citizenship to the Japanese Consulate office in Honolulu.

In spite of his insistence that his children were American citizens and that his own position on the war was one of neutrality, the transcript, like so many others, concludes with the finding: "The Board having carefully considered the evidence before them finds: 1) that the internee is a subject of the Empire of Japan; 2) is loyal to Japan; 3) has not engaged in any subversive activities." Nevertheless, the interrogators' decision was "internment for the duration of the war" (Yonahara 1947). From the Sand Island Internment Camp, Ryosen Yonahara and other Okinawan internees like Ryosei Aka and Kenjitsu Tsuha were taken to various other Department of Justice camps on the continental

United States eventually ending up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the designated “enemy alien” camp where he and they remained for the duration of the war.

When his son, Roy, returned after serving with the American Occupation forces in Japan and the Philippines, he recalled:

I saw my father for the first time in five years. He looked very old and thin, but had that same warm smile that I had missed all those years. The thought that I had somebody to father me again made me very happy. . . . The war had been unkind to many people and my father was one of these unfortunates. He had to suffer all those years for reasons I don’t know. (Yonahara 1947:2)

Unlike Yonahara, Kenjitsu Tsuha was a birthright American citizen, but he was a Kibei. Although born in Hawai‘i, he was taken back to Okinawa by his father to be raised by his grandparents because his mother had died while he was a young child. His father had decided that the family would be better off if he concentrated on wage earning while his parents took care of the younger Tsuha (Saiki 1982). As mentioned earlier, Kinuko Maehara Yamazato’s work (2007) points out that this was especially common among Okinawans in Hawai‘i. After nearly a decade and a half, the 17-year-old Kenjitsu Tsuha returned to his birthplace, in ‘Ewa, O‘ahu, but Hawai‘i was in the midst of the Great Depression. He took on employment as a Japanese language teacher and as an assistant to a Buddhist priest. As Nishigaya and Oshiro point out in this volume, because people in these occupations were more likely to be targeted, Tsuha was arrested and interned. He eventually ended up at Santa Fe with other teachers and priests, most of these men at least twice his age. Young, frustrated, and impulsive, he became one of the “no-no boys” who answered “no” and “no” to both questions #27 and #28 (i.e., willingness to serve in the armed forces and pledging unqualified allegiance to the United States, even when it had interned them), refused to serve in the US military, renounced his American citizenship, and became a man without a country for the next 50 years (Saiki 1982). Unlike those with dual citizenship, Tsuha was a birthright American; when he renounced his citizenship, he was essentially country-less. When he eventually returned “home” to O‘ahu, he became a visiting Buddhist priest (*nembutsu-do*), visiting Okinawan families and administering the memorial rites for their ancestors in their homes.

Masakichi Sesoko (aka Shoichi Sezoko), another Kibei, also renounced his American citizenship after being incarcerated in Honouliuli. A printer for the *Nippu Jiji* newspaper (later renamed the *Hawaii Times*), Sesoko also taught Japanese language classes at Wai‘alae Baptist Church. He was born in

1918 in 'Ewa and, like his brother and sister, held dual citizenship. They were taken back to Japan where he was educated to become a teacher, but, in order to avoid conscription into the Japanese Imperial Army, returned to Hawai'i in 1938. His late return from Japan meant that his English language skills were limited, but without funds, he could only afford ten months of English language instruction. The very occupations he could fill (i.e., Japanese language teacher and newspaper printer) made him a target for detention. In the hearing held at Fort Shafter to determine his loyalty to the United States, he was asked questions such as: "Where is Sacramento located? How many stripes on the Japanese flag?" Since he could not answer the first question accurately, but answered the second correctly, Sesoko was deemed a security risk. What cinched the Review Board's decision was "His answers seem to be truthful and with little hesitancy, but there was an air of his being peeved at his detention. The Board feels he is dangerous to the public peace, safety and internal security of the United States" (Sesoko 1945). In other words, he was uppity and had a bad attitude about being maltreated. On the other hand, by the time he was arrested, detained, and then interned, Honouliuli had already been built, so he was able to remain in Hawai'i. Still, the trauma of being an educated man and receiving such treatment must have been devastating. Although she was aware of his internment, his niece, Jean Fujita, knew little of his experiences because he never talked about it; she only knew he was very bitter about it.

Probably the government's most curiously reasoned case for internment was the one that they made for Chinyei Kinjo, who was the publisher of the *Yoen Jiho Sha*, a weekly Japanese language paper based in Hanapēpē, Kaua'i. According to the hearing transcript, Chinyei Kinjo was a Christian Issei who had resided in Hawai'i for over twenty years, and who had planned to remain in Hawai'i. His newspaper was published with Ginjiro Arashiro, who served as its editor. Together these two figures were "considered the most important leaders of the incipient communistic movement among the Okinawans in the Territory," according to the information shared by John Harold Hughes of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Kinjo March 19, 1942). Despite the recognition of this fact, in the decision to intern Kinjo, the findings were:

The Board, having carefully considered the evidence before it, finds: 1) That the internee, CHINYEI KINJO, is a subject of the Empire of Japan, 2) That he is loyal to Japan, 3) That he is not engaged in any subversive activity, And recommended that in view of the above findings, the Board recommends that the internee: CHINYEI KINJO be interned for the duration of the war. (Kinjo 1942)

How leadership in a “communistic movement” might not be considered subversive is certainly contorted reasoning; nevertheless, the recommendation was the same as it was for the many others—internment. Kinjo departed on the third ship, May 23, 1942.

These interrogations and detainments continued well into 1943. Dr. Henry Shimpuku Gima, a naturopathic physician who had been practicing in Honolulu for some years, was arrested in 1943. Like the others mentioned above, he declined to avail himself of a lawyer because he felt he had done nothing wrong. However, in his initial interrogation hearing, he took advantage of the opportunity to call a character witness; a week later he had to report that the person he had expected to call to testify on his behalf had himself been arrested and interned (Gima 1945). After being incarcerated at Honouliuli, he was then sent on the tenth ship, and eventually to Crystal City, Texas, a Justice Department camp which also held Peruvian and other Latin American detainees who could be used for prisoner exchanges. After the war, he returned to Honolulu, resumed his practice, and became a leader in the community. That included being the first president of the Hawaii Okinawa-jin Rengo Kai, the forerunner of the current Hawaii United Okinawa Association. It is noteworthy that the organization's name would have to be the Hawaii United Organization of Okinawan People because, after the war, Okinawa initially remained under US military occupation, and subsequently, under the US Civil Administration of the Ryūkyū Islands (USCAR); it would not return to its status as a prefecture of Japan until 1972.

The cases above provide some insight into how individuals in the Okinawan community were swept up into the internment experience. The whirlwind speed from arrest to hearing, the inability to contact family members, together with the sense of bewilderment, given their belief that they had done nothing wrong, that they were upstanding members of their ethnic communities, probably contributed to their being considered suspicious. Their loss of rights, and their subsequent segregation from the rest of the population created a vacuum into which new leadership eventually emerged.

Okinawan Prisoners of War

Two distinct waves of Okinawan prisoners of war (POWs) were brought to Hawai'i. The first were those captured during the various battles in the South Pacific islands. Another group of POWs who were held in Hawai'i came after the fierce Battle of Okinawa, the only site of direct land battles in Japan

proper, which produced over 250,000 casualties, immeasurable suffering, and large numbers of prisoners of war.

As American forces advanced across the Pacific, hard fought battle after bloody battle, they took as prisoners of war those Japanese officers and enlisted personnel as well as noncombatants who were part of Japan's colonial *Nanyō* project—its managers and workers. In this initial period Okinawans and Koreans who were skilled laborers were considered and designated “Japanese POWs” since they carried Japanese passports. As the tide changed and Allied forces advanced westward toward the final battles in Okinawa, these prisoners were more differentially identified “Okinawan” and “Korean” and separately designated by rank—officers, enlisted, and noncombatants (see Falgout's article in this volume). The vast majority of the Okinawan POWs were noncombatants.

The operations of the Honouliuli internment and POW camp in 1943 roughly coincide with the turning of the tides in the Pacific War. In fact, after completing their training at Camp Savage, some of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) units actually spent a few days of training at Honouliuli before embarking on their Pacific mission (Higa 2011). They practiced their Japanese interrogation techniques, “name, rank, serial number, unit, etc.,” on the Japanese POWs held at Honouliuli.

This section concentrates on the aftermath of “Operation Iceberg,” the code name for what became the bloody Battle of Okinawa. While it is lesser known than Iwo Jima, the Battle of Okinawa, spanning only about three months, nearly decimated the island and inflicted enormous casualties (Feifer 1992; Ota 1984). Many of the prisoners of war from the Battle of Okinawa were interrogated by MIS soldiers, some of whom were of Okinawan ancestry and Kibei (Ota 1984; Higa 2011). POWs were also processed through the various base camps constructed throughout the Hawaiian Islands. Memoranda and reports from the NARA II files of the western and middle Pacific show an elaborate infrastructure and military posts, arrangements, and trans-Pacific movements of people (see articles by Falgout and by Rosenfeld in this volume). In Hawai‘i, many “camps” were created to temporarily house, interrogate, and process these POWs before they could be released.

In Okinawa, the largest POW camp by far was Yaka Camp in Kin town on the northeast coast of the central part of the island. Until recently, most references to POWs, or PWs as was more commonly used in Okinawa, had

disappeared. Indeed, the site of the Yaka POW Camp was demolished and redeveloped. No reminders of it exist, save for a small marker next to a city bus stop. That is not entirely surprising, since the human condition tends toward ridding itself of unpleasant memories rather than preserving them. Consequently, only a few traces remain—one of the best known is in a song. The composer of “Yaka Bushi” (or “Song of Yaka”) is unknown, although several names have been associated with it. However, this folk song resonated with enough of the population that it has persisted, and been passed on from one *uta-sanshin* teacher/performer to another (*sanshin* being an Okinawan three-string plucked musical instrument resembling a banjo, always with vocal accompaniment). “Yaka Bushi” makes reference to the near total destruction of Okinawa, where the ordinarily lush tropical landscape was leveled, left denuded, trees merely bare branches. It also refers to wives and family members held in yet another camp across the Onna Mountains—this one a refugee camp in central Okinawa: Ishikawa Camp on the other side of the mountains, which was the largest of the refugee camps in Okinawa (see photos of Yaka Camp and Ishikawa Camp).

Though mournful, the song ends with a metaphor of hope, that the dried-up tree will have another chance, and its flowers (and metaphorically, its people) will again be able to bloom and thrive. Anthropologist James Roberson (n.d.) cites another blue song about being a POW, not necessarily at Yaka, and notes in the final verse of PW Mujō:

If only there had not been this thing, war
This pitiful figure, I [we] would not have become
How pitiful is a PW

So, who were these prisoners of war? Many were ordinary Okinawans caught in the Japanese empire’s drumbeat of hyper-nationalism and patriotism. The Japanese Imperial military forces fostered such fervor, instituted conscription, and recruited via the school system. The Blood and Iron Loyalist Troop of high school male students, the Himeyuri (Student Corps) nursing students were all assigned and attached to support Japanese military units.

Masahide Ota, previously the governor of Okinawa and now a staunch pacifist, was one such student conscript. In a conversation with me in March 2012, Governor Ota described how the patriotic fervor in the high school system persuaded many young Okinawan youth like himself to join the Blood and Iron Scouts for the emperor. After being captured, he and other PWs were

Yaka Bushi

Author Unknown; translated by W. Ueunten

Nachikashi ya uchinaa	なちかしや沖繩	How sad, my Okinawa
Ikusaba ni nayai	戦場になやい	You are a battlefield
Shikin umanchu nu	世間御万人ぬ	All the people of the world—
Nagasu namida	流す涙	tears are flowing.
Namida nudi wamiya	涙ぬでい我身や	I drink my tears
Unna yama nubuti	恩納山上げてい	And climb Unna Yama
Umanchu tu tumu ni	御万人とう共に	With all the people
Ikusa shinuji	戦凌じ	I wait for the war to end
Awari yaka mura nu	哀り屋嘉村ぬ	A crow is crying in the dark night
Yami nu yu nu garashi	闇ぬ夜ぬがらし	In pitiful Yaka Village
Uya uran wami nu	親うらん我身ぬ	I no longer have family
Nakan uchumi	泣かんうちゆみ	Can't help but cry?
Njo ya Ishichaa mura	んぞや石川村	You are held in Ishikawa Village
Kayabuchi nu nagaya	茅葺ぬ長屋	In one of the many long grass- roof houses
Wami ya Yaka mura nu	我身や屋嘉村ぬ	while I am held in Yaka Village
Shinaji makura	砂地枕	My pillow is the sand
Kukuru isamiyuru	心勇みゆる	Four C-ration cigarettes
Shifun iri tabaku	四本入り煙草	Make me feel a little better
Sabishisaya chichi ni	寂しさや月に	I am letting my sadness
Nagachi ichusa	流ち行ちゆさ	Fly up to the moon with the smoke
Nunchi [nundi] kugaritoga	ぬんち[ぬんでい] 焦がりとが	How is it I feel restless?
Yaka mura nu kariki	屋嘉村ぬ枯り木	The dried up tree in Yaka Village
Yagati hana sachuru	やがてい花咲ちゆる	Is going to get a season
Shichin ayusa	節んあゆさ	When its flowers will bloom



Yaka POW Camp. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.



Ishikawa Refugee Camp. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.

shaved and sprayed with DDT for delousing purposes. Unlike others who were sent to Yaka Camp, he was sent to a smaller camp near Kadena town. Because he had attended high school and could read, write, calculate, and had some English proficiency, he was given a job and was able to earn a bit of money. He remained in Okinawa until the US military government began to recruit students to study abroad.

Another POW, one who spent a little time in Honouliuli, was the late historian Michael Mitsugu Sakihara, who retired from the faculty of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. He was also one of the pioneers of the contemporary field of Ryūkyūan and Okinawan studies. Sakihara also joined up to be part of the Iron and Blood Loyalist Troop, in his words, “an impressive name for an unimpressive group of middle school boys who had volunteered to serve in a support capacity in the Japanese military during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945” (2009:187). After the surrender in late June, he and 53 others of the Troop who were captured were sent to Honouliuli, Sand Island, and then via Washington state, south to Angel Island, California. In an essay reflecting on his POW days at Angel Island, the late Mitsugu Sakihara noted :

Apart from the KP duty, it was very much like we had already experienced at the prisoner-of-war camp in Honouliuli, on the Hawaiian island of O‘ahu. . . . Here on Angel Island the food was a little simpler than at Honouliuli, but it was still good: toast, jam, butter, fried eggs, bacon, cereal, milk, and coffee. That was our first breakfast. . . . (2009:187)

Sakihara noted that he and other POWs at Honouliuli were fed three times a day, and they were able to purchase items with scrip. Sakihara recalled he bought a copy of Sanseido’s *Japanese-English Dictionary* with his dollar scrip and tried to learn some English words. But his English language abilities really developed during his stay at Angel Island.

Sakihara did not describe much of his journey to Hawai‘i. For that we must rely on the accounts of others discovered and documented by Dr. Masanori Nakahodo. Nakahodo notes that while stories of the MIS soldiers such as Takejiro Higa and Taro Higa using their *Uchināguchi* (Okinawan language) skills to persuade Okinawans to come out of the caves, thereby saving hundreds of lives, are now better known, less is known of the POWs. Examining the memoirs of POWs (which are still available only in Japanese), Nakahodo provides a window into their chaotic, fearful experiences. One of those sent to Hawai‘i was Seiki Miyazato who left behind a record in “My Memo” (n.d.).

On July 8(?), 1945 we left Okinawa, arrived at the Saipan port on the fourth day. The ship was an infamous “naked carrier” since they were stripped of their clothes and plunged into oil stained “dumbles” or compartment. The note starts by describing it as a “ship of hell,” landing at island of Oahu on July 24(?) The prisoners were confined at Honouliuli Camp. Someone named the place “Red Clay Girls School.”

Moreover, Mr. Miyazato (and other POWs) was moved frequently—from Honouliuli to Kāne‘ohe, and Fort Hase Camp, then to Sand Island, and via a ship named *Comet*, to Hawai‘i island, and then back to Kalihi on O‘ahu. Miyazato worked outside the camps on several projects, before being returned to Okinawa in December. This account provides one confirmation of a pattern of frequent POW movements, which is noticeable in the NARA II documents (Nakahodo 2012).

Other POW accounts discovered by Nakahodo, including one by Chosho Tokuyama, suggest that the direction of movement of POWs from Okinawa was first to Honouliuli, and, subsequently, to Sand Island (Nakahodo 2012:3). There is mention of frequent visitors to Sand Island, individuals seeking information about their family members in Okinawa. The POWs were ministered by a Rev. Shiroma from Hilo who promoted a Southern Baptist ministry; but through his travels, he was able to share information about individuals with various family members. Shiroma, an Okinawan, somehow managed to escape internment, possibly because he was a Christian minister.

Occasionally, there were some “miracles.” A mother met her son, Noboru Gima, after many years of separation. He had been born on Maui, but had been taken to Okinawa as a young child, and was not able to return. When the war began, he had been assigned to Japanese soldiers and had been captured in Okinawa by American forces, and then transported to Hawai‘i as a POW. His mother heard about his status as a POW in Hawai‘i and was able to reunite with her son after many years (Nakahodo 2012).

The frenetic comings and goings of POWs from Okinawa and other parts of the Pacific quickly came to an end within two years. Often, the Okinawan POWs were conflated with the Japanese POWs. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* of May 21, 1946, reported that “Four hundred Japanese prisoners of war who have been working on Oahu and will be transferred permanently to Guam and Saipan aboard the Marine Wolf... The Japanese are all skilled laborers from Okinawa according to the report and will be used for construction and maintenance work there” (Epstein 1946a).



Marching POWs down. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.



POWs at docks awaiting transport. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.



Trucks POWs for Hawaii. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.



JPOWs trucks. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.

By December 13, 1946, the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* reported the last of the remaining 1,733 Japanese POWs in Hawai‘i left for their homes in Japan, Okinawa, and Korea. “Although Hawaii is now free of the prisoners of war, there still are more than 100,000 being held in the Philippines, Okinawa and the Carolines, Marianas and other Pacific Islands” (Epstein 1946b).

Okinawan Community Responses

On December 7, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, most Okinawans reacted as other Hawai‘i residents—with shock and fear. Some lost their homes as stray bombs reduced their homes to rubble. Artist Seikichi “Chick” Takara recalled bombs destroying his family home in the McCully area of Honolulu. It was later determined that his neighborhood was destroyed by errant anti-aircraft fire returned by the American forces.



Student conscripts. Photograph courtesy of Okinawa Prefectural Peace Museum.

Many Okinawans eventually entered military service. Okinawans in the existing Hawaii National Guard who were draftees became part of the segregated unit 100th Battalion who, after training on the continental United States, were sent to the European Theater. After a stellar performance, but with their ranks severely decimated, the Purple Heart Battalion was incorporated into the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, volunteers whose combat record still stands unchallenged for a unit of its size and duration. Okinawans also played important roles in the Military Intelligence Service, which operated in the Pacific Theater (Higa 2011).

As the Allied victories increased in the Pacific, detention facilities were constructed across the Hawaiian Islands to process the POWs that flowed through. Some facilities like Honouliuli were planned, while others were more makeshift. In places like Honouliuli and Sand Island, regular visits by clergy and family were sanctioned certain days. Nakahodo (2012) mentions clergy such as a Reverend Shiroma who “visited the camp on Sunday to talk about Christ and, at the same time, he told us about Okinawa and of any recent information.”

At Honouliuli and other POW camps, visits and exchanges were so frequent, that on February 12, 1946, an article appeared in the *Hawaii Hochi* quoting Captain H. R. Howell, commander of the Engineering Unit, stating that talking to the POWs and giving money or gifts were prohibited and should be stopped. Nevertheless they continued. Often the items were brought to the POWs and were culturally expressive or significant (e.g., sweets and treats wrapped in the traditional manner in the leaf of a banana plant: *ka-sa bento*). In fact, “Chick” Takara also recalls accompanying his mother to a detention area in Kapi‘olani Park near the Honolulu Zoo to visit a relative or family friend. He recalls his mother packing a bento (lunchbox) of prepared foods for the visit and a trolley car ride, and the visit conducted through the wire fence. Most of all, he recalls that the guard gazed away just long enough to let Takara’s mother slip the *bento* under/through the fence to the relative held in the POW camp. This was, of course, not officially permitted, but was routinely practiced.

The ambivalence of soldiers guarding the POWs stands in stark contrast to the volumes of regulations on how POWs were to be treated. Writer-playwright Jon Shiota, a Nisei Okinawan from Maui, captured this ambivalence. More often, however, Okinawan POWs were simply being greeted and socialized for a few minutes while they were out on work details. Jon Shiota, who was

assigned to Kilauea Military Camp describes how on at least several occasions, Okinawan women would gather along the roadside when he and other guards transported the POWs for work details in 'Ōla'a. Stops before intersections netted questions about their relatives in Okinawa, and warm exchanges between the prisoners and the residents were commonplace. One young POW was given some money by a woman at one of those stops; he asked Shiota to purchase some supplies for him, and with some trepidation, Shiota complied with the request (Shiota 2009).

Summary and Conclusion

Okinawans—Issei, Nisei, Kibei, and prisoners of war—were people who were “caught in between”—and therefore were likely to be ensnared in the nets of suspicion. As the latecomers of the Japanese immigrant population in Hawai'i, the Okinawan Issei and Kibei were visibly less acculturated to Hawai'i and American societies than the larger “mainland” Japanese population who had immigrated at least some 15 to 25 years earlier.

Additionally, last to be incorporated into the modernizing Japanese “nation,” their citizenship in Japan was subject to question. This meant they often overcompensated to demonstrate their loyalty and identification with Japan, even more visibly than other *naichi* Japanese. Okinawan community leaders were therefore those who could best reproduce the persona of respectable Japanese—speak “proper” Japanese and circulate in those leadership circles because their Japanese education and experiences provided that kind of human and cultural capital.

Okinawan Kibei, although born in Hawai'i, had been raised in Okinawa or mainland Japan. Furthermore, the colonization of the Ryūkyū Kingdom and its subsequent incorporation into Japan as Okinawa prefecture, meant that the “neo-Japanese citizens,” especially the males, were conscripted and caught in the defense of the Japanese nation. They became prisoners of war on their home island, or POWs as a result of becoming enlisted or noncombatants on distant battlefields on faraway Pacific islands, or in their own island home.

In conclusion, Okinawans in the context of the Pacific War, were not only internees who were incarcerated, but also prisoners of war from battles in the Pacific and the Battle of Okinawa. Some resisted military service and were sent to higher security camps on the continental United States. Ironically, even some of the soldiers who captured and interrogated these Okinawan POWs were themselves of Okinawan descent. Moreover, the staff in some of

the POW camps in Hawai‘i, like some of those who worked in the mess halls or even the guards were of Okinawan descent. Consequently, although their formal “citizenship” designations or social roles may have diverged, Okinawan cultural identities served to bridge the chasms of the nation-states, or of suspected loyalties. Finally, the larger community of Okinawans in Hawai‘i, through the informal extended-kin networks, provided moral and material support to the prisoners. In short, the situations faced by Okinawans, were troubling, extraordinarily confusing, and resistant to simple categorization as either aggressors or as victims. They serve as a reminder of the human capacity of agency even in the midst of extraordinary oppressive structure. ❖

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