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Storied Islands: Imagined Indigeneity as a Strategy for Transforming the Okinawan Community

Ikue Kina

Abstract

While there has been postcolonial discussion of the problem of the colonialist gaze objectifying “Okinawa,” the notion of an “Okinawan community” has not yet been fully elaborated. This is partly because the process of imagining “Okinawa” has emphasized the communal struggles against the external colonizing powers more than the internal dilemma caused by diversifying forms of values and beliefs, which often frustrates people’s communication with each other. In the historical process of mobilization and acculturation, the question of who comprises the Okinawan community has been coupled with the question of indigeneity and colonialism; however, the Okinawan community has actually never been monolithic, consisting of both Okinawan and non-Okinawan residents, and Okinawa has always been a site where diverse values and ideologies have contact, collide, and compromise with each other.

The complexity of the Okinawan community also results in people’s declining ability to share indigenous memories. Failure to be attentive to indigenous memories at the same time means a decline in the sense of place, a sense indispensable for knowing who you are culturally and where you are located in terms of history as well as in relation to other beings both human and non-human. It is a crucial sense that makes one aware of others with whom s/he shares a place in everyday life, in other words, aware of his/her community. My contention in this paper is that imagining the “Okinawan community” requires a desire for caring, a sense of responsibility and commitment for the continuation not only of the people but also of the place that has been nurturing their lives and in return is nurtured by their memories.

For storytellers and writers, including novelists and poets, who transform the memories of place into stories, a challenge they face today is to tell stories on and of the islands in a way that can communicate with listeners with different linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds. In this paper, I shall examine how storytellers could make a
pivotal contribution to proposing a community for Okinawa to continue in the future and, in doing so, how imagining indigeneity and gender experience plays a key role in recuperating or renovating communal consciousness toward inclusion rather than exclusion. I shall discuss these by taking examples from Tami Sakiyama’s “Kuja Stories,” interpreting how she demonstrates her sense of community and indigeneity in creating her stories and characters located in Kuja, a fictional and marginalized space where people who share “otherness” converge and comprise a community.

**Key words:** Okinawan community, indigeneity, storytelling, Tami Sakiyama, borderlands

This paper is part of a larger project to explore the power of stories and storytelling in order to sustain a place that we recognize both as our physical and imaginary home. The key concept that motivates this exploration is “a sense of place,” which is a sense, indispensable for knowing who we are culturally and where we are located in history as well as in relation to other beings both human and non-human. A sense of place is the term that has been used in ecocriticism to express indicate an ecological view of human beings in relation to their natural environment, but it can be interpreted as a term that connotes the sense that makes us aware of who comprises our community, in other words, with whom we share our place in everyday life.

I may also need to explain the term “Okinawan community,” which I use throughout this paper. It actually implies multiple levels of Okinawan communities regardless of genealogy. For example, it suggests entire communities in Okinawa, including not only people who were born and raised in Okinawa but also other people such as those who live in Okinawa but were not born and raised in Okinawa, as well as those who are of Okinawan descent but live outside of Okinawa. In this paper, however, I shall especially focus on the people who live in Okinawa. I call them the “Okinawan community” as a whole because those people, whether they are so-called settlers or not, are key figures who have the main responsibility for sustaining the islands as a place for living.

It may not be too much to say that we have not been paying enough attention to the aspect of Okinawa as a community, perhaps because the process of imagining “Okinawa” has emphasized the communal struggles against the external colonizing powers more than the internal dilemma of diversifying values, beliefs, and sense of identity that often frustrates people’s communication with each other. In the historical process of mobilization and acculturation, such as trading with Eastern and Southeast Asian countries, then being colonized by Japan and the U.S., the population of Okinawa has become more mixed culturally and racially as well. In addition, in the past decade, a number of people have immigrated to the islands of Okinawa, not only from Japan but
also from foreign countries. The Okinawan community has never been monolithic, and Okinawa has been a place where diverse values and ideologies have contact, collide, and compromise with each other. It may be possible to view Okinawa as a “borderland,” a place where there are conflicts, resistance, coalitions, and transformations of diverse subjects, as the Chicana critic Gloria Anzaldúa defines it. According to Anzaldúa, the borderland is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” and “it is in a constant state of transition” (3).

While the notion of “borderland” uncovers the power struggles and helps us to shift our perceptive position from the margin to the center, it does not clearly articulate what is expected as a consequence of the struggles. The increasing complexity of the Okinawan community results in changing people’s relationship with their place, especially people’s declining ability to share indigenous memories. Failure to be attentive to indigenous memories at the same time means a decline in the sense of place. My contention in this paper is that imagining the “Okinawan community” requires a desire for caring, a sense of responsibility and commitment for the continuation not only of the people but also of the place that has been nurturing their lives and in return is nurtured by their memories. To center the place more than the people and to take a place-centered approach, therefore, by “indigenous memories,” I do not necessarily question whose memories we talk about; rather, I am more concerned about where those memories are located because questioning the location of the memories is questioning which community keeps their memories and how they pass them on to the younger generations of that community.

But is it really possible that we can talk about the memories without talking about whose memories they are? The feminist critic Oka Mari points out that the relationship between the subject and the memories is rather subversive. She states:

The memories of “an event,” or the traces of “an event,” simultaneously exist everywhere. However, “they” are located in the places that cannot be captured by one’s subjective consciousness. Behind the witness . . . there is a voice of the other, pointing at the trace of the event but with no concern. It is this voice of the other that connects the trace of the event and the witness. The only way for us to contact the trace is by responding to the voice of the other. The witness never can describe the event perfectly . . . there is always the voice of the other prior to “me.” . . . What it means by the act of sharing the memories of the “event” is nothing but the response to the other’s calling voice with incompetency and absolute passivity. (97-98)

In Oka’s perception, the memories dominate the subject; in other words, a subject has no control over the memories, and the memories control the subject.
For some storytellers, including writers and poets, their task is transforming the memories of the place into stories so that the memories are not only sensed but also shared in the community in the form of stories. However, in the Okinawan community today, the storytellers are challenged to tell stories on and of the islands in a way that can communicate with listeners with different linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds.

Tami Sakiyama, an Okinawan novelist, is perhaps one of the few storytellers who are aware of such a challenge. She was born on Iriomote Island and moved from one island to another until she and her family eventually settled in central Okinawa. Sakiyama remembers that she would constantly face a different audience, and she had to be conscious of her language every time her family moved to a new place and she had to speak in a new classroom. Her new classmates would tell her that she spoke “a strange language,” and she tells that she was so embarrassed that she became a stammerer from the fear of articulation (“Interview”). Her language was stigmatized not only by the speakers of Japanese but also by the speakers of Uchinaaguchi, which is based on the languages spoken on Okinawa’s main island and tends to ignore the languages spoken on other islands in Okinawa, such as Iriomote, Ishigaki, or Miyako. This background made her consciously choose to locate her position as a speaking subject in the margin of the socially and culturally marginalized. For her, writing enables the process of expressing the stories of place that are too marginal to be visible. While she struggles to recuperate the voices that have remained unheard, she tries to find or invent language that can express the memories of place to her audience in the diversifying Okinawan community.

Between 2006 and 2008, Sakiyama published seven short stories in the Japanese literary magazine Subaru. She named those stories “Kuja Stories,” and the readers only assume that the stories are set in Koza, an area located in the central part of Okinawa where she has been living for more than 40 years of her life and therefore feels most at home. In her stories, she calls the area “Kuja,” which is presumed to be an Okinawan pronunciation of “Koza,” and it is her deliberate choice to express a form of the Okinawan community both in her imagination and reality. Known as a place that is a red-light district for U.S. servicemen, Koza is a kind of place that has been nurtured by people’s memories.

In “Kuja Stories,” Sakiyama represents the place as a kind of “borderland,” where socially marginalized people make a community that she calls “the town” and depicts in one of the Kuja stories as: “Here in this town, when one says ‘residents of that town,’ it doesn’t include those who believe they are indigenous because of their long-time residency in that place for many generations. Most residents of that town are outsiders: the outsiders with stories in their backgrounds” (66). Then the writer explains who comprises this community. For example, there is a man who first dropped by this town as a tourist, hooked up with a girl, and ended up staying for more than thirty-years. There are also children who ran away from their poor life and abusive parents, and grew up in their refuges, and now have their own families. Others are also runaways, for example, a
man who ran away from his debts, a woman who ran away from her abusive husband, and a couple who ran away to get married. There are also those with criminal records and an old man who lost his memory and came to this place as a young homeless person and continued living in the place that he felt was something of a home (66). Sakiyama then describes:

The community was made up of those people. Then the population gradually grew, first a little, after the battle, and continued to grow and finally got promoted from “village” to a “city.” This is why this town always accepted the strange outsiders. On the contrary, they welcome the outsiders. . . . In fact, residents of this town themselves believed that the town existed as the place for those with troubled backgrounds. (66)

The community that Sakiyama depicts is filled with insecurity because their memories of the place turned fragile. The story entitled “In the Season of the Psuguru Breeze” is a good example of Sakiyama’s struggles against the loss of the memories in Kuja. The story, in which a main character is a woman writer, goes like this. One day the narrator, who is perhaps a woman writer, encounters a young mixed-race man with dark skin standing lookout on top of a hill in a local playground. How they start a conversation is a mystery. Speaking in perfect Japanese but greeting the narrator in Okinawan, perhaps because he thinks the narrator doesn’t understand Japanese, the man, who looks like an African-American but has the Japanese name Hiroshi, urges her to come along with him to his house to meet his grandmother, Hide. Hiroshi tells the narrator that he had left the town but returned. He brought the narrator to meet Grandma Hide, believing that the narrator will be able to listen to Hide’s stories. Paying no attention to the reaction of the narrator, who is perplexed with no idea why he brought her to meet his grandmother, Hiroshi continues explaining that Hide, an illiterate old woman, has not spoken in more than 30 years, but he can sense that she is trying to say something. Hiroshi says: “Grandma is going to be 90. She is fine now but will get too old soon. So it seems she strives to tell us something while her mind is still clear. I came back to this town because I sensed her feeling. I am dying to recuperate my grandma’s lost language” (147). The only reason the narrator was chosen by Hiroshi to bring to Hide is perhaps because she can communicate with Hide in Okinawan, which, however, is not the language of the Okinawa Main Island but rather a language that is a mixture of languages from Ishigaki and Miyako islands. At the end of the story, Hiroshi shows the writer a notebook-like diary that Grandma Hide has been keeping, saying: “This is a short note that grandma has been keeping. I said “keeping,” but since grandma Hide is illiterate, the letters are like “grandma’s language,” so to speak, but even if this is nonsense, the notebook manifests grandma’s spirit” (157). Hiroshi keeps speaking to the writer, who cannot make sense out of the situation: “Don’t you understand yet? My
grandma and I just entered your consciousness because you desired a story. We are you. Since you are I and you are my grandma, there is nobody else who can decipher the grandma’s language” (157).

How can we make sense of this story? I would say that the guy, Hiroshi, who is of mixed race and born in this town, and Grandma Hide, who tries to express her spirit in a language that doesn’t make sense to anyone, both represent the memories in the place, or, in the case of this story, Kuja. She can be the embodiment of indigeneity based on Kuja. The narrator of this story tries to write a story out of the memories, and the voice of Hiroshi is the voice of the Other, trying to connect with the narrator in order to express the lost voice of his grandmother. In other words, in her novel, Sakiyama requires the storyteller to be what Oka defines as “the witness,” who struggles to comprehend and verbalize her situation through “the response to the other’s calling voice with incompetency and absolute passivity.”

Throughout the seven stories, Sakiyama’s attempt is to illuminate the voices of women who are fading away with the lost memories of Kuja. She writes stories to remember them, to remember the women with no name but who struggled to survive the harsh reality of Kuja or Koza. For Sakiyama, storytelling is a strategy for continuing the memories of the place and rescuing those women from oblivion in the community. The story of Hiroshi and Grandma Hide represents the difficulty of communicating the stories to linguistically and culturally diverse listeners, but interestingly enough, Sakiyama deliberately gives Hiroshi, the mixed-race character who in the history of mixed-race people in Okinawa has not always been immediately accepted as a member of the community, the crucial responsibility of the agent who finds someone to make Grandma Hide’s voice heard. In a similar manner, the author gives the agency of “the response to the other’s calling voice with incompetency and absolute passivity” to the narrator, who is not indigenous to this place but has lived there “alone for nearly a quarter of a century” (142). As she calls herself “retreat” (142), it is not clear if she is an active participant in the communal activities in the place. Sakiyama’s narrative choice of giving a significant responsibility for continuing indigenous voices to those characters who neither comprehend Hide’s language nor seem to take part in the community tells us about her vision of indigeneity: for Sakiyama, whether he or she is genealogically Okinawan or located in Okinawa seems to have less precedence than whether they have the ability as well as the willingness to listen to other voices.

Both Hiroshi and the narrator are impaired in terms of knowledge of the indigenous language, but Hiroshi’s strong desire to understand Grandma Hide’s lost language and the narrator’s positive vulnerability in communication with others tells us that indigeneity requires not only a base of knowledge but also compassion in order to continue the place and community. The story “In the Season of the Psuguru Breeze” suggests both hope and despair about the continuation and recuperation of memories in lost languages in Okinawa. It also envisions the perspective of Sakiyama’s sense of

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indigeneity: what will be continued has more emphasis than who will continue it; in other words, the storytellers do not always have to be indigenous Okinawans but rather can be non-indigenous persons as long as they have understanding, respect, and a desire for the survival of stories about people, their community, and their place. The opening poem of the novel *Ceremony* written by Laguna Pueblo Indian writer Leslie Marmon Silko expresses exactly how storytelling becomes a prime strategy for survival and continuation of the community:

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
  Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
  all we have to fight off
  illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

The evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.
I keep them here
[he said]
Here, put your hand on it
See, it is moving.
There is life here
for the people.

And in the belly of this story
the ritual and the ceremony
are still growing. (2)
Inside the storyteller’s body, the stories are “growing” or transforming themselves as if they have “life” with physicality. What is more important is perhaps to maintain the growth of “the ritual and the ceremony,” which have “life” of their own inside each story, than to question where this story is kept. Sakiyama’s stories, by keeping us aware that there are still other voices, whether they are indigenous or not, that are yet to be heard, also make us realize that we live on islands where more stories are yet to be shared.

Notes
[1] Okinawa and Hawaii share the problem of settler colonialism, in which culture and knowledge that indigenous people have valued have been trivialized and destroyed by the new settlers. However, I would argue it is too simplistic to set the border between the settlers and the indigenous as the colonizers and the colonized when it comes to the devastation of culture and natural environment as both have responsibility—and contributions as well—to promoting colonialism that shapes the current conditions of the islands.
[2] According to 2010 statistics published on the Website of the government of Okinawa Prefecture, there were about 9,000 foreign nationals who had gone through alien registration and lived in Okinawa. About 61.1% of them came from Asian countries while 25.8% were from North America and 6.9% from South America. Link to: <http://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/toukeika/kensei/kensei_top.html>

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