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《UH・UR 合同シンポジウム》報告

Priestess and Warrior: The Picture of Indigenous Okinawa Women in Folklore

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Abstract

“All Okinawan women are *Unai-gami*.” In *Okinawa Joseishi*, Eisho Miyagi celebrates the unique role of women in the Okinawan society. *Unai Festiva*, *Unai FC*, *Gekidan Unai* ... As Okinawan feminist activism mounted its energy, Okinawan women have united and empowered each other as *Unai* from their indigenous belief. While their spirituality and sisterhood have definitely played an important role in indigenous Okinawan society, representation of Okinawan women seems to have become simplified with their sacredness. What are other aspects of strength of Okinawan women?

This paper examines representation of Okinawan women in folklore focusing on their warriorism. How women’s warriorism are embedded in indigenous Okinawan folklore? How have this philosophy been transmitted and reflected in the representation of Okinawan women? How does it overlap with *unaism*?

This paper examines concepts of *unaism* and warriorism. I discuss how *unaism* and warriorism in oral traditions have served to express people’s thoughts, values, and emotions. This paper aims to give prominence to indigenous Okinawan women forms of resistance, through an analysis of cultural and pedagogical implications in oral traditions.

1. Introduction

“Gender and Indigenous Language and Culture in Okinawa and Hawai’i.” When I looked at this title of our panel session and started pondering what theme to present, I felt extremely conscious about the need to emphasize the subjective dimensions of gender, indigenous, language and culture in my analysis. As an indigenous Okinawan woman, who studies Indigenous Politics in Hawai’i, I have intentionally unsettled myself

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from the subjectivity and objectivity of my research. In critiquing the objectivization of Okinawan women, I must consider which stories of these women have been told and which have not; which voices have been heard. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, asserts that for indigenous scholars, “decolonizing” research means “centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” [Smith 1999: p.39]. Then, how might I decolonize and indigenize analyses of gender, language, and culture in my work?

In this paper, I analyze examples from Okinawan folklore as to be one of the more important ways in which indigenous narratives are represented. My mother, for example, was an ethnographer who interviewed elders to record and compile the accounts of historical record for *shima*; that is, the community. Following her work, I grew up listening to the folklore and life stories of our elders with great interest. These stories, which, in many cases, were narrated in their *shima kutuba* (native community tongue), were rich and highly expressive.

Feminist intellectual Andrea Smith, who works in indigenous studies, posits “nonacademic activist as intellectuals” in an “intellectual ethnography,” which shifts it from “studying Native people so we can learn more about them” to working “to illustrate what it is that Native theorists have to tell us about the world we live in and how to change it” [Driskill et al. 2011: p.4]. Accordingly, my scholarship concerns what indigenous Okinawan theorists have told us about the world we live in and how to change it.

Continuing efforts to deconstruct colonial interpretation, adoption and/or co-opting of indigenous knowledge promise great possibilities toward further re-visioning our stories and illuminating our ways of being and knowing, through indigenous-centered theoretical frameworks. Rather than just connecting gender, language, and culture to the indigeneity of Okinawans, this paper aims to give prominence to indigenous Okinawan women’s forms of resistance, through an analysis of the cultural, pedagogical, and methodological implications of oral tradition and folklore. I shall draw particular attention to the concepts of what I call in English *unaism* and warriorism within these forms that embrace the methodological strategies of resistance and transformation.

2. “Shirutūyā ya aran, uminai nu ushiji” - *Unaism*

Unai Festival, *Unai* FC, *Gekidan Unai* ... the word *unai* has in the past and continues now to represent women and sisterhood in the Okinawan society. In the early 80s, as women of color and of the so-called Third World have debated race, ethnicity, and class within feminist discourse, in acknowledging differences among women of different kinds of communities, Okinawan female activists, too, began to reclaim themselves through the terms both “women” and “Okinawa.” In (re)-discovering the

concept of “*unaism*” in their own indigenous beliefs, Okinawan feminist activism energized and women have united and empowered each other as *unai* [Katsukata-Inafuku 2006: p.34].

Unai, in the literal sense, means “sisters of a man,” and derives from the indigenous Okinawa belief in *unai-gami*: a sister who possesses a spiritual power to protect her brother. In *Okinawa josei shi*, Eisho Miyagi celebrates the unique role of women in the Okinawan society, declaring, “All Okinawan women are *unai-gami*.” [Miyagi 1967: p.4].

In *Omoro Soshi*, which comprise the Ryūkyūan era’s oldest written poetry compilations, many verses about *unai-gami* appear. For example, “A white bird is perching on the stern of the boat. It’s not a bird; it’s the *unai* of the sailor.” A white bird, in the indigenous Okinawan belief system, was believed to symbolize *unai-gami* [Miyagi 1967: p.19].

Prior to Buddhism’s and Confucianism’s introduction into the Ryūkyūan islands, which shifted their peoples toward a patriarchal society, women had earned great social status in their communities. The dynasty of the Ryūkyū Kingdom era maintained official positions for priestesses, or *noro*, based on the indigenous concept of *unai-gami*. The territoriality of the regime was performed politically and religiously by both men and women [Katsukata-Inafuku 2006: p.41]. After their invasion in 1609, the Satsuma established a surveillance base in the Kingdom. Imposing new policies, they pursued the separation of religion and state. The position and influence of the *noro* was abolished, and women lost their political and social status [Miyagi 1967: p.52].

The indigenous belief in *unai-gami* is indeed woven throughout Okinawan poetry which, in turn, informs us about the world in which our ancestors lived, there remain so many unread, yet to be dissected, messages to be unpacked from the still-dominant colonial interpretations of gender, power and humanity in Okinawa.

What are other aspects in representation of Okinawan women? I argue that, while *unaism* is depicted via sacred and supernatural characteristics within representations of Okinawan women, warriorism, a different manifestation of women’s strength, is also incorporated in these narratives. Resistance and transformation are keys to re-analyze and deconstruct the colonial understandings of gender, indigeneity, language and culture and can lead us to re-narration and revision representations of Okinawan women in ways of own.

3. “Inagu ya ikusa nu sachibai” — Warriorism

In addition to the sacredness and supernatural power of Okinawan women, warriorism is also found as another aspect of Okinawan *unaism*. The concept of warriorism is described by Indigenous Kanien’keha (Mohawk) scholar Taiaiake Alfred as “a way of life and a philosophy that is capable of carrying our people through their lives in resistance to the sources of their pain” [Alfred 2005: p.85]. This statement on

warriorism connects philosophy to action within assertions of resistance.

Here I shall introduce one story, whose title translates to “Rice Porridge Attack by Yomitan Women’s Troop,” from a children’s book that compiled Ryūkyūan folktales. This story takes place when the Satsuma encroached upon Okinawa Island led by General Kabayama. He invaded the island with 70 navy ships and an army landing on the shore at Owan in Yomitan, and schemed to attack at Amakawa Hill. Intimidated by the Satsuma, Ryūkyūan troops began to run away toward Shuri. Women left behind in Amakawa decided they would have to defend and protect their island themselves, after the men had run away. They brought big pots and started cooking rice porridge, making it so hot that it would burn the tongue, and never become cold.

After landing, the Satsuma planned to cross Amakawa Hill and move their forces up to Shuri. However their troops, which had never fought against women, faced an uphill battle against the women of Amakawa. When the Satsuma arrived, these women poured out all of the hot rice porridge from the top of the hill and waited for it to reach the bottom. Distracted by the vision of women on the top of the hill, some soldiers did not notice the slushy porridge underfoot and either stepped into or fell over this river of porridge and burnt their feet.

The women continued to pour the porridge down the hill in the Satsuma’s direction. After long hours in battle, the now-hungry women started eating their rice porridge. Watching them as they ate, the Satsuma finally realized it was rice porridge that was coming at them, and tried to take a sip of the porridge as well. However, they did not know to blow on it to cool down. As a result, the troops burnt their throats and did not succeed in capturing the territory [Shinyashiki 1970: pp.141-146].

Oral indigenous stories disclose another side of history; in this case, supporting different aspects of women’s history in society that had not otherwise been recorded much in the official archival documents produced during that time. This story, by depicting Okinawan women who took on warrior roles, builds upon the notion that there is both knowledge and action involved in the roles that Okinawan women played in history. In the story, the women’s strategy and method of resistance are unique, incorporating a skill set gleaned from their daily lives: making rice porridge. The narrative therefore serves a pedagogical function, to teach us the value in the kind of traditional wisdom, which develops from everyday life.

Taiaiake Alfred says, “Action is the manifestation in physicality of the spiritual energy of the warrior. It is behaviours, methods, goals, desires, and benefits, all expressed in real ways in relationships with other people and forces” [Alfred 2005: p.81]. By paying attention to actions of female characters in Okinawan folklore, I choose to highlight their “way of life” and/or “resistance to the source of their pain” [Alfred 2005: p.113]. The representation and manifestation of Okinawan women’s energy within the concept of warriorism is, as I understand it, centered on the belief of *unaism*; a commitment to “protect” their brothers.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott provides extended understandings of the resistance of subordinate groups and their uses of anonymity and ambiguity in rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, and ritual gestures [Scott 1990: p.137]. The methods that Scott describes are seen in this Okinawan narrative of historical events, presented in folktales with anonymity while transmitting the story across generations, is one way that subordinated indigenous Okinawans exerted resistance. In addition, weaving their methods around and throughout the structure of political oppression in the story presents another art of thereof.

Re-analyzing the narrative from an indigenous feminist perspective reveals another message in the story, critically reflective of the methodology of resistance. In other words, the story itself is already describing how we as Okinawans should fight against oppression. It emphasizes the importance of warriorism and the belief in our own lives, as well as the consistency of philosophy and behavior, will bring victory to women in their quest for liberation.

4. Transformation

This next folktale contains another representation of warriorism.

This is an excerpt from a song about a couple from Nosoko, on Ishigaki Island, and is derived from the oral stories of Nosoko Māpē.

Nusuku Māpē nu kanu shama
Hai nu fusuma yu
Umui kugarite ishi nu kata

Māpē in Nosoko
 For someone on Kuro Island
 I have been longing and

Banga umuin
Jinto tsindara yo

My heart is as hard as stone
Jinto tsindara yo

This story expresses the grief of Māpē and Kanamui, a young Kuro Island couple who were torn apart because of an imposed policy implemented by the Ryūkyū government in 1730 [Arashiro 1969: p.147]. Intended to facilitate land development, it divided Kuro's population, sending displaced residents to Ishigaki Island [Hoshi, Ibaraki, and Oshiro 1976: p.109]. Young Māpē, in this tale, climbs up a mountain in order to look at the other island, yet she cannot see it. When the people search for Māpē, they find that she has disappeared, and in her place is a rock that they've never seen before. Filled with great sorrow, they believe Māpē has become fossilized on the mountain [Hoshi, Ibaraki, and Oshiro 1976: p.109]. Although it was based on one particular couple, in fact there were many couples and families who were forcibly separated because of this imposed policy [Arashiro 1969: p.147].

Considering the historical background of this story, it is clear that these song lyrics are intended to express compassion toward the couple, while also articulating the Ryūkyūan people's suffering under political oppression. Implied in Māpē's love for her sweetheart is an inner strength, present in her devotion to the place; one so strong it would transform her into a rock. Metaphorically expressed in a love story, this tale describes the aggravation and sadness felt by the peasant class about their situation, vis-à-vis expropriation of their land and the forced exodus ordered by politicians.

Another interesting point to analyze in this story is Māpē's transformation into a rock. Like the *omoro* about *unai-gami* that I introduced in the beginning, there are implications in these episodes that exemplify indigenous ways of understanding the world we live in. From woman to *unai-gami*, *unai-gami* to a white bird, Māpē to a rock... In Okinawan folklore, there are many other stories that depict transformation of human beings into sacred creatures, supernatural beings, etc. Why do such transformations occur in Ryūkyūan stories and what are they telling us?

Nuu-chah-nulth (First Nations of the West Coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia) chief and scholar Umeek, introduces an indigenous worldviews and ontology drawn from Nuu-chah-nulth stories, often critical of Western scientific rationalism. In his book *Tsawalk*, for example, Umeek argues that "Transformation or Change is a Natural Condition of Creation." He further states that, "things and life forms do not just hold still" [Umeek 2005: pp.63-64].

This conception counteracts the predominant colonial discourse on indigenous cultures, as being static or "fossilized" in the past. Transformation is an active, an ongoing process, and an indigenous methodology that reflects complexity, diversity, and fluidity of indigenous peoples. Why did Māpē become a rock? Her becoming "fossilized" onto the mountain could be also interpreted as representative of women's resistance to change. Moreover, her transformation to become a part of the mountain and remaining there, instead of just disappearing, imply to remind all her people with their identification with the land and their inner strength and endurance.

5. Indigenous female body and gender/sexuality

Another example which threads all concepts of resistance, transformation, warriorism and *unaism*, can be found in the famous story of *Uni Mūchī*. It inspired a traditional custom in Okinawa, on December 8 of the lunar calendar, in which people consume *uni mūchī* to expel evil spirits.

It is the story of a brother and a sister who lived in Shuri. The brother, who had become an *oni* (ogre), lived in a cave and did great harm to the people of that land, making them very afraid of him. Worried about her brother, the sister went to check on him and found him eating human flesh and bones. Although they were siblings, the sister decided she had to get rid of this ogre, who caused such trouble for the community. A

few days after their encounter, the sister made *mūchī*, with wire and returned to the brother's place. They sat together at the edge of a cliff; the sister offered the wire *mūchī* to her brother. As they ate this together, the sister exposed her private part to her ogre brother. He asked her, "What is your lower mouth for?" The sister answered, "My upper mouth is to eat *mūchī*; my lower mouth is to kill an ogre." Thus threatened by the sister, the ogre fell off the cliff and died [Hoshi, Ibaraki, and Oshiro 1976: p.22].

In this story, the sister is not, as per tradition, a "protector" of her brother. She functions rather as a protector of the greater community. In setting up the ogre character, the story presents the sister's personal characteristics of warriorism and *unaism*. Similarly to the previous story of the women warriors, the sister here utilized her wisdom as the weapon to overcome this brother who had become an ogre. At the same time, its implication is that she also possesses supernatural powers.

Examining Okinawan myths and folklore, Tatsuhiro Oshiro's analysis is that the vulva is represented as embodying the supernatural power to expel evil spirits [Hoshi, Ibaraki, and Oshiro 1976: p.23]. The interrelated representations of supernatural powers vis-à-vis the female body in this story demonstrates a methodology of indigenous resistance and reflective of the transformativity of women's power or strength.

In the typical colonial, anthropological and/or touristic representation of Okinawan, the indigenous women have been highly exoticized, eroticized and misinterpreted in heteropatriarchal ways that help to reinforce internalize hierarchical gender relationships, which then become internalized by Okinawan ourselves.

In *Queer Indigenous Studies*, Driskill et al. states, "the erotic...[could be] a site of resistance and transformation for all Indigenous people." They claim, "Heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity should be interpreted as logics of colonialism" [Driskill et al. 2011: p.33]. Moreover, Cherokee Two-Spirit (Queer) scholar Qwo-Li Driskill offers the idea of a "Sovereign Erotic" as a way to heal our sexualities as a part of decolonization [Driskill et al. 2011: p.174].

Many indigenous peoples have internalized heteropatriarchal discourses of understanding gender, sexuality, and identity. Just as Okinawa has been represented as a "paradise," the Okinawan female body has been represented as a site of fantasy. Reanalyzing representation of the erotic in indigenous narratives, I believe, might transform our own attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Adding the concept of "Sovereign Erotic" and reinterpreting the female body with resistance narratives has the potential to reshape the relationship of our bodies to our traditions and histories.

Rethinking *Uni Mūchī*, in terms of how we interpret it and in considering what aspects of the story were told while other parts were not told, can help Okinawans to better understand the ways in which we may have understood the representation of the indigenous eroticism as shameful, irrational, or even something to fear. This paper challenges Okinawan people to consider further possibilities within it, if we can see the female body as a site of resistance.

It is known that women's tattooing or *hajichi* was an old Ryūkyūan custom in rites of passage. It is also known that women at that time purposely got tattooed to show "native-ness" and to avoid to be taken to Satsuma.

Colonial discourse has compartmentalized the representation of gender and sexuality in binary opposition of male/female, physical/metaphysical and applied identity labels that does not allow us to imagine transformations from spirits to human, to have multiple faces and strengths, and to be agents of our own political articulation.

The lives of Okinawan women are multifaceted and multitasked. As a sister, as a daughter, as a mother, as a scholar, as an activist, as a rock, as a white bird, as a warrior, and an *unai-gami* ... We take on different labels at our own will. Stories to describe Okinawan women are not one, but many. Indigenous methodological implications in Okinawan folklore open up diverse and dynamic ways of understanding ourselves and the world we live in.

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