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Okinawa en el Corazón: Personal Reflections on Homeland and Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The destruction by fire of the Shuri Castle above Naha on October 31, 2019, inspired a poem, “Shuri-jo, Song of Mourning,” by the author, who reflects here on the ephemeral and eternal aspects of expressive culture, intangible cultural heritage, and a critical assessment of two beloved homelands—Okinawa and its maritime border zone, and New Mexico on the US-Mexico borderlands.

Keywords

Okinawa and New Mexico, border zones, intangible cultural heritage, indigeneity, gender

Shuri-jo, Song of Mourning

soul sanctuary of the Ryukyus
flower of red and gold
high on Naha’s mountain
precious jewel of Okinawa
you pass once again
to intangible realms
of spirit and cultural dream
your fifth conflagration

crimson and yellow dragon flames
dance again on stone foundations
this time in peace, not in battle
but glowing embers recall
the sorrow of centuries
triumphs and disasters

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Okinawa en el Corazón

pain beyond imagination

limestone gateways await
the next resurrection
trees will come down again
from sacred groves
in the Yanbaru hills
lifted back up to the sky
timbers for a roof renewed
a home rehabilitated
for ancient aspirations

coming sure as wind and rain
but not in the lifetime of
this old man in mourning
still grateful for having seen
your glory with his own eyes

Okinawa en el Corazón

As I first approached the Shuri-jo compound, the proud symbol of Okinawan culture, diplomacy, and identity over the centuries, I noticed the contrast between the two entry gates, between the ephemeral and the perpetual. The soaring, carved timbers of Shurimon were celestial in their reach for the sky, but as vulnerable as trees and wood. The Sonohyan-utaki gate was more assuring, with its solid limestone and lingering prayers. The first photograph I saw of Shuri was what was left of its foundations after the bombardment from the big guns of the battleship Missouri in 1945. The historic site was targeted because the imperial forces of Japan had located their command center there. Puerto Rican General Pedro del Valle was among the officers that took control of Okinawa. Ironically, he was five years old when U.S. forces invaded and occupied his own beloved island in 1898.

Like an emerald set in the bluest sea, Okinawa emerged from the clouds on our approach to the Naha airport. I was amazed I could see the whole island from above. I felt privileged to visit my colleagues and their students in Naha in times of peace in the year 2012.¹⁾ We would soon be exchanging ideas about borders, homelands, indigeneity, heritage language, gender, literature, art, and the extraordinary resilience of cultures under stress. Comparative critical regional studies between Okinawa and my native land of New Mexico reveal many striking parallels, both cultural and historical.

In New Mexico, we are a land with a double colonial heritage, whose peoples have endured the invasion of Spain in 1598, then the United States in 1846. Besides Spanish and English, at least six indigenous languages survive: Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, Keres, Navajo,

and Apache. Our peoples know firsthand about the subordination of culture and language. Cultural resistance and adaptation are a way of life. We have learned to respect each other through our struggles with each other. Our expressive culture, our folklore, art, and literature are rich in these themes (Nogar & Lamadrid 2016a, pp. 233–266; 2016b, pp. 751–780).

New Mexico has two UNESCO World Heritage cultural sites—the stone ruins and temples of the Chaco Civilization and the five-story adobe apartment buildings still used by the Tiwa Indians of Taos Pueblo (Martínez, 2015, p. 14). Built of mud bricks and timbers by men, they require the annual attention of women to keep them from melting back into the earth. Female hands have smoothed the protective mud plaster over them for a thousand years. All of our historic buildings and churches are also built of earth. They are as ephemeral as they are perpetual. This explains our interest in Intangible Cultural Heritage. Our UNESCO nominated Cultural Landscapes are desert valleys made green by intricate networks of traditionally governed canals called *acequias*, which carry down the water from mountain snows every year (Ortiz Mayordomo & Gracia, 2015, p. 15).

Our main challenge is that the U.S. stubbornly refuses to sign the UNESCO protocols of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Interestingly, Japan has been a world leader in conceptualizing intangible heritage (Hafstein, 2018, pp. 56–70).²⁾ While Europe boasts of its churches made of stone, Japanese temples and palaces are made of wood. The ideas that inform these structures are what survive the centuries since the wood in them has to be constantly replaced and rebuilt, especially after fires and earthquakes. Besides architecture, other intangible traditions include folklore, ritual, dance, music, agriculture, and foodways.

Four decades before my collaboration with the University of the Ryukyus, my first visit to Okinawa was very fortunately cancelled. In 1970, I was an unwilling draftee to the war in Viet Nam. I had to move heaven and earth to seek authorization for my national service as a teacher rather than a soldier. I chose to be a Warrior for Peace and served in a rural school in a remote corner of the Navajo Indian Reservation. In our tour of Okinawa, my colleagues were surprised that I could identify so many aircraft while we drank coffee near the Kadena Air Force Base. I reminded them that New Mexico is also a military colony of the United States. The kids of Albuquerque had a contest: who could identify the many kinds of airplanes from nearby Kirtland Air Force Base? Laboratories, bases, and bombing ranges where the first atomic bomb was built and tested occupy over 19% of our mountainous desert lands that measure 315,194 square kilometers. In comparison, the surface of Okinawa is 1,207 square kilometers, but the extent of the military complex is similar at 18%.

I return to matters of the heart. My father, also named Enrique Lamadrid, was 20 years old and working as an English and Spanish teacher in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1945. He was born in Cuba but spent his childhood in Spain, then returned to his birthplace as a refugee from the violent Spanish Civil War. Somehow he got a scholarship to study in an American university. Even though he was not an American citizen, he was still drafted

into the U.S. Army in the last months of World War II. He was sent to Okinawa with the occupation forces not long after the Battle of Okinawa. Because he was a fast typist, he worked as a warehouse clerk in Naha. He was moved by the suffering of the people who had survived the terrible battle and had a deep understanding of what they had been through and why. He knew they were not his enemies. In his spare time, he read and even gave books to some Okinawans he met who could read English. He also met some who spoke Spanish! He oversaw the distribution of food, medical supplies, and building materials. He saved his personal rations of cigarettes, chocolate, and Spam to give away as well. He traded and bought souvenirs to take home, including carved ceramics and paintings.

My father befriended a humble artist who made beautiful watercolors. I grew up with those paintings in our house and especially loved a river scene with a wise old fisherman tending his poles and lines. I wanted to be as clever and serene as he was. Because I knew the Spanish word “agua,” I could tell that “Okinawa” was a beautiful place surrounded with water, which of course it is! As I contemplated the natural stone shrines of Sefatuki, as I looked out over the green fields of the Peace Memorial Park with incense and flowers in my hand, my bond was formed—*Okinawa en el Corazón*.³⁾

Notes

- 1) Enrique Lamadrid and Anna Nogar participated in the Gender Studies in Okinawa International Workshop “Re-inheriting the Memories: Women and Gender in Indigenous Traditions,” held at the University of the Ryukyus in Nishihara Town Okinawa, Japan, 10–11 March 2012.
- 2) In November 1994, Japan held a key meeting in Nara Prefecture in cooperation with the UNESCO World Heritage Center, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property.
- 3) *Corazón* is Spanish for heart.

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