The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Shattering Jewels: 110,000 Okinawans Protest Japanese State Censorship of Compulsory Group Suicides

Kamata Satoshi

Translation by Steve Rabson

"I'm over by the gym," my friend Kinjo Minoru told me on his cell phone. I'd been standing at the entrance to Ginowan Seashore Park, site of the "Okinawa Citizens' Protest Demanding Cancellation of Textbook Revisions." The crowd was so big I got tired of looking for him. I'd arrived late, so Asai Mayumi, an editor at Labor Report magazine who had come earlier with Mr. Kinjo, made her way through the crowd to find me.

Mr. Kinjo, with his white hair and white beard, sat on a small wooden stool with a look of unperturbed composure. Above him a light blue flag with the words "Stop enshrinement at Yasukuni" fluttered in the wind. As a spokesperson for families bereaved by the Battle of Okinawa, he was helping to prepare a case for trial. The families were seeking an end to mandatory enshrinement at Yasukuni of civilians killed in the battle as "spirits of fallen heroes who gave their lives for the nation."
"This is a huge turn-out," I said.

"A boy and a girl from the high school in Yomitan Village will speak today," Mr. Kinjo said with the obvious pride of a Yomitan resident. The village had used two local buses to bring participants to the protest. Other communities chartered buses. We'd rented a car. Leaving it in the parking lot of a fishing port about a mile away, we got into the long line there to board a shuttle bus.

On the road below my bus window, young people shouldering banners with slogans and insignia, and families with children were making their way toward the protest site. The atmosphere was bright and lively, as if they were going on a picnic. I recalled the scene in Odessa from Eisenstein's film "Potemkin" in which the townspeople are hurrying through the streets to grieve for a sailor killed by the army. The park where we arrived had also been used for the mass protest in 1995 following the rape of an elementary school girl by American soldiers. I'd come here to report on that protest, but did not participate. 85,000 had gathered then. An even larger crowd was expected today.

We stood near the entrance, so, in a very short time, many people I knew passed by, including Makishi Yoshikazu, an architect in the movement opposing base construction at Henoko, Sakima Michio, Director of the Sakima Art Museum, and Hoshikawa Jun of Green Peace. Chibana Shoichi, known for his protest burning of the Japanese rising sun flag, was supposed to be here, too, but it would have been impossible to locate him. At Haneda Airport in Tokyo I'd met people in various citizen reform movements, and, on the plane, participants in today's protest happened to be sitting in the seats on both sides of me. Among those I'd recognized coming from Tokyo were several reporters covering the protest along with national Diet members. In this way, a ring grew countless links and expanded into a gathering of 110,000. In the sky overhead rose the huge cumulus clouds found in southern latitudes, and, although it was late September, a powerful sun beat down on us. Rows of animated faces crowded together. I couldn't remember ever seeing so many people packed into one protest site.

The Ginowan demonstration of 110,000

A light plane and a helicopter for media coverage circled over the site. Shortly before the protest started, a U.S. fighter plane from the nearby air base at Futenma climbed slowly into the sky along with a four-plane formation that made a far more thunderous roar. It was essential now to hold this mass protest demanding acknowledgment of the truth from 62 years before when U.S. fighter planes also flew overhead. At that time what were supposed to be "friendly troops" of the Japanese military forced people to kill themselves in groups. Now, as then, atrocities--cowardly and unconscionable--continue. The scene at the protest site had an eerie quality, as if time had stopped.

Expurgating the accounts of what happened is yet another compulsory group suicide

For the Japanese Education Ministry to delete the phrase "Japanese military" from descriptions of compulsory group suicides in high school history textbooks "out of concern that it might lead to misunderstandings about conditions during the Battle of Okinawa" is yet another compulsory group suicide--a perfect crime. The opening paragraph in the chapter on the battle in Sanseido's current textbook reads: "The greatest tragedy of the Battle of Okinawa was that so many people were forced by the Japanese military to commit group suicide, killed because they were said to be in the way of combat, or because they were falsely accused as spies." To remove the words "Japanese military" from this exceedingly clear description is to ignore the perpetrators and make it seem as if Okinawan civilians rushed willingly into this tragedy. An Education Ministry that would try to educate with such misleading accounts is nothing but an "Ignorance Ministry." Motivating the change is the government's claim that the military would never order civilians to commit group suicide. This is yet another official stratagem for banning

criticism of the military by denying it ever did such terrible things and portraying it as righteous and beautiful. This, despite the testimony of Okinawan eyewitnesses.

Even more than an hour after the protest started, waves of people were still making their way to the site. It was like nothing I'd seen at any previous demonstration. Those who could not enter the site joined the overflowing crowd along the roadside.

Feelings based on shared memories transcend divisions between "conservatives" and "reformers"

Speaking at the protest were the presidents of the Prefectural P.T.A. Federation, the Prefectural Assembly, and the Mayors' Association, along with the governor, the chair of the Prefectural Board of Education, and student representatives from the high schools. Following them, Yoshikawa Yoshikatsu, chair of the Kakazu Village School Board who had lived through the battle, stepped to the platform. "I am a survivor of the group suicides at Tokashiki Nishiyama," he said.

"After the mayor of the village yelled 'Long live the Emperor!' hand grenades exploded all around us. I could hear the screams of the dying. Our family of eight and about twenty relatives had gathered in a circle. My brother-in-law and my sixteen-year-old brother Yusuke threw grenades at the ground, but they didn't explode. I saw that my cousin had wrapped his arms around his son. Also seeing this, my mother shouted, "Yusuke, throw away the grenades. Let's live while we still can," and our family fled from the suicide site.

"If the military hadn't distributed ammunition and hand grenades, there would have been no so-called 'group suicides.' They passed out grenades and told us, 'in an emergency kill yourselves with these.' If the military's local defense forces hadn't rounded people up for 'group suicides,' those tragedies never would have happened. The presence of the defense forces is proof of the military's involvement." His voice bristled with indignation at the government's denial of the Japanese military's involvement.

Sitting side by side on the platform were the mayors of cities, towns, and villages along with members of the national Diet, the prefectural assembly, and city, town and village councils. This protest, with 22 groups on the organizing committee, 247 sponsors, and massive citizen participation, was a powerful expression of outrage at the Education Ministry. When it was announced halfway through the scheduled speeches that 110,000 had gathered here and an additional 6,000 at local protests in Yaeyama and elsewhere, a roar went up from the crowd. About that time, expeditiously printed "extra" editions of the Ryukyu Shimpo and Okinawa Taimusu were distributed.

A "Meeting Resolution" was adopted unanimously by the protesters. "Textbooks play a vital role in conveying truth to the children responsible for our future. Therefore, the indisputable fact that so-called "group suicides" during the Battle of Okinawa would not have occurred without the involvement of the Japanese military must be communicated to them. It is our solemn duty to teach the lessons learned from the truth about the battle, to hope for peace, and to seek ways of avoiding another tragic war."

This belief in educating for peace is held by the people of Okinawa regardless of whether they are "conservatives" or "reformers." How vastly this differs from the purge carried out by Ishihara Shintaro's reactionary city government in Tokyo which forces teachers to display the rising sun flag and sing "The Reign of Our Emperor" (Kimigayo) This difference lies not only in Okinawa's differing war experience, but also in the importance vested there in sharing memories of it that enable people to live honestly and humbly reflect on the past, and in the effort to understand how relatives must have felt as they went to their most regrettable deaths.

The government claims it's fabrication, that no one ordered people to die. Its demand now for "documentary evidence" from those eyewitnesses who remember what happened is to reject their humanity. Since an individual's identity depends on his or her experiences, denying them is to negate that person's existence. The government calls Okinawans liars. Its denial of their memories is a violent thrust deep into their heart aimed at twisting them inside out.

Even now, Okinawa is a war zone.

I spoke with Mr. Morihitoshi, a 43-year-old company employee from Urasoe City who had brought his three children to the protest, a sixth grader, a third-grader, and a toddler not yet one year old.

> When I first heard that the words 'military involvement' were to be deleted, I was furious at yet another concealing of the truth. It is essential to acknowledge war's brutality and human failings, and to learn from them. If the truth is erased, the need for such reflection disappears and will not benefit us in the future. Even though my children won't appreciate now the significance of today's protest, later they will understand why we came."

On that same day, an article in the *Ryukyu Shimpo* reported that in Urasoe, the city this family had come from, a renovation crew came upon a five-inch cannon shell from an American warship. It was scheduled for demolition the next day. The ten people in the three households within a 106-meter radius had been evacuated. Even as the government tries to obliterate memories of the war, reminders of its terror remain intact.

When the protest ended, we walked in the direction of the ocean from where powerful rays of western sunlight poured down. As we walked toward the sun, Arasaki Moriteru, past president of Okinawa University, said again how deeply impressed he'd been. "Compared with the 1995 protest, so many people came this time there wasn't room to walk in the crowd."

He had come with his second-eldest son, whose wife was pushing a baby carriage—movement activism spanning three generations. At the school where his son teaches, the athletic tournament scheduled for that day had been postponed until the following day. It was thanks to such efforts, that today's protest gathering had been such a success. As a result, children's fresh memories of it would be preserved and passed on to future generations.

"There was also a protest rally in 1982 when descriptions of Japanese army massacres of Okinawan civilians were to be deleted from textbooks," Mr. Arasaki recalled. "The difference this time is that a resolution of Okinawa's forty-one city, town, and village councils led the way."* If people don't raise their voices, the government will try, under the cover of darkness, to erase Okinawa's history, a history on which war weighs heavily. Even now, Okinawa remains a war zone. Following the protest, I was interviewed by some reporters I know. "Many past demonstrations have gotten support from the mainland," I told them. "But this time the current generated here will shock the mainland. I've never seen so many families and children at a protest before. It shows how widespread the movement is in Okinawa. The government can no longer ignore opposition to the textbook revisions." (*Ryukyu Shimpo*, September 30, 2007)

Later I visited Tokashiki Island, one of the well-known sites of "group suicides." I spoke with Komine Masao, now 77, who had been fifteen at the time. It was here that I first heard them called by their wartime slogan, "places of shattering jewels." Only because he'd been able to escape from that place of hell does he survive today.

Survivors of the "shattering jewels": what really happened during the Battle of Okinawa

I wanted to travel to Tokashiki Island after the mass protest at Ginowan Seaside Park in late September to see if a war monument on a hillside was still there. I had first visited the island in the spring twenty-one years ago to collect material for an article ("The Nightmare of Group Suicides in Okinawa," Ushio, May, 1986). At that time, as I stood at what had been called a "place of shattering jewels" and gazed down a wooded hillside into a narrow valley below, a woman living on the island who I called "T-san" in the article explained that "the American soldiers rolled the bodies into the river and blasted with dynamite, burying them." Later, crossing the hills on the way to Awaren Village on the other side of the island, I had noticed a "war monument" facing a small creek. I wanted to see if it was still there.

In March of 1979 an oblong natural rock monument engraved with the words “Third Naval Attack Squadron, Third Battalion” was installed on a stone pedestal. Beside the rock monument was an epitaph composed by author Sono Ayako that she had titled “A History of the Islanders’ Deaths.” “Fathers and older brothers ended the lives of their weaker mothers and sisters. This was done out of love,” she had written.

In claiming that “group suicides” were acts of “love,” she had swallowed the propaganda line of the former Japanese military which had, in fact, invaded the island, rounded up residents, and sent them to their deaths. Her callous insensitivity appalled me.

It was with incredible arrogance that the former military had put up a war monument on this tragic site without building a memorial to those they had lured to their deaths in that hell on earth.

About ten years ago I visited author Haitani Kenjiro’s home not far from here. At that time, too, I stood on this ground and felt the stubborn determination of those who had coerced others to die, and then insisted on calling those forced killings acts of “love.”

Now I can see, in the Education Ministry’s stubborn determination to deny the military’s involvement, a connection to Sono Ayako’s essay “Background of a Myth” written 34 years ago, It is based on Japanese military sources and assertions by former Lieutenant Akamatsu Yoshitsugu, commander of the naval attack squadron, and is intended to restore their honor.

As I noted in my 1986 article, her intent to smear a solemnly tragic experience with the luminous paint of such words as “love” and “myth” is clearly expressed in a verse she called a “limerick.” In it she makes crude word play on the names of places where compulsory group suicides occurred.

> Kerama kera-kera (Cackle-cackle.)
> Akkan be (To hell with you.)
> Zamami yagare (You got what you deserved.)
> Ma Tokashiki (How laughable.)

Zamami was also an island where group killings took place. Lacking even the most fundamental respect for peoples’ lives, this verse commits the crime of desecrating the most meaningful of human memories by ridiculing them with graffiti. You seem to lack any sense, Ms. Sono, even of the pride residents have in their islands.

Terrified of “Surviving”

Komine Masao, the 77-year-old resident of Tokashiki Island I mentioned above, showed me an evacuation cave dug into a hillside. He’d been fifteen at the time of the battle, and with the help of his younger brother who was in the first grade, had dug it for the family to take refuge from the fighting. It was about three meters wide and ten meters deep. A handmade sign board stood at its opening.

> Memories of this place of war
> Must never be forgotten,
> But passed on to our descendents
> With prayers for peace.

“Life is precious. We pray for eternal peace. The date March 28, 1945 must never be forgotten.” These were the thoughts Mr. Komine expressed to me as a survivor of the compulsory group suicides. Entering the cave ahead of me, he caught a poisonous habu snake on the tip of a stick and flung it outside. It was still small, but this was the first habu I’d seen in the wild. I noticed that the concrete wall surrounding the elaborate monument at this “place of shattering jewels” was draped with an overhang to prevent habu from entering the site. It was pouring rain the day the villagers fled here, and I wondered if habu had been here then.

Inside this cave Komine Masao, his grandmother, aunt, and other relatives had sheltered from air attacks and naval cannon fire, but on March 28, the day after the U.S. military landed on the island, they moved to Nishiyama, designated an “assembly location.” Some people, dressed in their best clothes, were already resolved to die.

On that day hand grenades were distributed to the people gathered. How incredible in wartime that the military would give out its precious “emperor’s weapons” to non-combatant civilians. Masao and his relatives sat down in a circle. His mother and sister, who had gone on an errand, returned to find Masao, and they, too, joined the circle. His mother embraced her children in her arms like two young chicks. “My flowers who would be growing from now on will scatter your blossoms today. Even in death, we will be together,” she said as if expressing her dying wish.

Then each family tightened its circle, pressing themselves together, and detonated the grenades. Ear-spitting explosions reverberated and people screamed. By this time, American mortar fire was raining down on them, and one man driven out of his mind began rampaging wildly. As a child, Masao had not been given a grenade, but the local defense soldier next to him had one and it exploded.

On the ground lay people covered with blood. Masao’s mother and sister rushed up the hill, but, in a state of panic, he bolted down into the valley. When he was able to hear again, he climbed back up the hill and saw countless corpses lying one upon another. “Water, give me water,” a woman cried out, but he fled. Thinking she might have lived if he had gotten water for her, he felt terrible and told no one about this.

At the top of the hill was a hurriedly constructed Japanese army bivouac. Soldiers there were aiming their rifles ready to fire, and officers were grasping their Japanese swords. A Korean wearing a field cap and combat boots was carrying flame-activated grenades, and asked Masao if he had a match. That day 315 people died on Tokashiki Island, equaling one-third the population of Awaren Village. People in families with grenades that failed to detonate killed each other with sickles or razors, or by bashing heads with clubs or rocks, or by strangling with rope. Those still alive hung themselves.

“I cried bitterly as I helped my mother to die. We were all terrified of surviving,” wrote Kinjo Shigeaki, former president of Okinawa Christian Junior College, in his book Group Suicides: Engraved in my Heart. “Four in my family died—my parents, my younger brother, and my younger sister. . . . One week earlier an army weapons sergeant came to the village office and distributed hand grenades to all the men, young and old. He issued orders that “If you encounter the enemy, you must throw one of these at the enemy, and use the other to kill yourselves.”

Kinjo Shigeaki in 2007

Sono Ayako herself describes these killings as “group insanity,” so how can she call them acts of “love?” Who sent those people to their deaths? On islands in Okinawa where there were no Japanese military, there were no “group suicides.” Japanese soldiers suspected civilians as spies and terrorized them as punishment by forcing them into places from which there was no escape.

Ten years after the war, when Mr. Komine was working at a U.S. missile site, bleached white bones were discovered that had floated in a river downstream from a former “place of shattering jewels.” I asked him to show me where they’d been found. He shook his head, refusing vehemently, and his expression of horror made me realize how shameful my request had been.

A scar remains on Uchihara Shizuko’s head where her relatives hit her with a club.

The “shattering jewels special attack brigade” forced civilians to follow soldiers in death

Next door to the Komines is the home of Kitamura Tomi, who is 97 years old. During the Battle of Okinawa, her husband was a soldier stationed in Saigon. When she left her evacuation shelter, she found her four children—daughters eight, five and one, and a three-year-old son—along with six relatives including her mother-in-law in a “place of shattering jewels” at the bottom of a gorge. She heard shouts of “Long live the Emperor” and grenades exploded all around them.

When she became aware again of her surroundings, her eldest daughter, sitting beside her, and her husband’s younger sister were both dead. Her younger daughter and her uncle were severely wounded. She didn’t know who had detonated the grenades. Carrying her wounded daughter, she climbed up out of the gorge. “Mama, I’m scared,” her daughter screamed. As they were fleeing, they came upon a Japanese soldier in a foxhole. “Get over there,” he told them. But when they reached the area he’d pointed to, they saw it was a second “place of shattering jewels” where the bodies of people who had already killed themselves lay on the ground. Several mothers had died embracing their children. Tomi’s daughter died soon after that.

With their house destroyed by fire, the survivors in Tomi’s family lived in a tent. Her husband returned after the war. He’d heard that Tokashiki had been completely destroyed, and didn’t believe anyone in his family had survived. “It’s so hard to talk about the war,” she said, then fell silent for a time. “Yet I can never forget it as long as I live.”

Yagi Eitaro, who managed the inn where I stayed in Awaren Village, had seen the protest of 110,000 the day before on television, and felt now that he had to tell of his own experience. He said that, even elementary school children were taught they must “avoid the shame of being captured alive,” told that, even those who weren’t soldiers must “shatter the jewels.” In many families not one person had lived through the battle. He knew of no families with healthy and strong husbands or fathers who had survived.

Fortunately, someone in the Yagi family had experience in the Japanese military and knew it would not protect civilians. Thanks to him, the five family members—Yagi, his parents, and two younger brothers—ignored the resident officer’s order to assemble at what turned out to be a “place of shattering jewels.”

Mr.Yagi remembered two boys from Awaren who had been rescued by the American military and came to urge civilians to surrender. Both were executed by the Japanese military. They were Komine Takeji, 17, and Kinjo Kotaro, 17. In her book, Sono Ayako identifies them as Komine Takanori and Kinjo Kojiro, both 16. Kinjo Shigeaki writes that the two boys were 15 and 17.

Ms. Sono states matter-of-factly that “It makes no difference whether Lieutenant Akamatsu’s squadron shot them on the spot or they hung themselves on the way back to Awaren.” How can she write about this with such cruel satisfaction? According to Mr. Yagi’s recollection, the U.S. military resettled about 1,000 people from Iejima Island during the battle. Among them, four were accused as spies by the Akamatsu Squadron and executed by beheading. Two Koreans, accused as spies, were also executed. This subjugation by terror was not unlike what the Japanese military used in forcing group suicides.

Uchihara Shizuko, 83, who sold candy and juice to swimmers at the entrance to Awaren Beach, greeted us with a bright smile. She showed us a scar on the left side of her head. On that day 62 years ago, amidst yells of “Long live the Emperor,” her relatives had beaten her with a club after the hand grenade distributed to them had failed to detonate. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law had died. Four of ten brothers and sisters in her family also lost their lives. Her husband had been away on the North Pacific Island of Pohnpei.

Shizuko remembers women screaming “Kill me, kill me,” bodies hanging like sacks from tree branches, and her eldest son of ten months crawling among the corpses. Later she was transported by a U.S. military boat to Zamami Island, and admitted to an American military hospital for treatment.

The Akamatsu Squadron was a “shattering jewels special attack brigade.” Only those civilians who could avoid being lured by the military into “battles of shattering jewels” in which they were forced to die were able to survive.

This is a slightly abbreviated translation of a two part article that appeared in Shukan Kinyobi, No. 674, October 12 and 26, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on January 3, 2008.

Kamata Satoshi, one of Japan's leading investigative journalists, is the author of Japan in the Passing Lane, chronicling his experience as a worker at Toyota in

the 1980s.

Steve Rabson translated this article for Japan Focus. He is professor emeritus of East Asian Studies, Brown University, a Japan Focus associate, the author of Righteous Cause or Tragic Folly: Changing Views of War in Modern Japanese Poetry, and a translator of modern Okinawan literature.

Created by Datamomentum