

Reflections on an Okinawan Gama: School Excursion Trips to Okinawa and the Issues of Memory

Takahashi Yuichiro

In the southern end of Okinawa's main island, there are numerous limestone caves, called *gama* in the Okinawan language. In 1945, towards the end of the Asia-Pacific war, they became shelters to Japanese soldiers and local civilians fleeing the advance of the U.S. forces. The caves are now visited by high school students on their school excursion trips to Okinawa as a part of so called "peace education"¹. Okinawa, the smallest of Japanese prefectures, occupies 0.6 per cent of Japan's territorial land. It became the only place in Japan where land battles were fought. Under the jurisdiction of the U.S. occupational forces until 1972, Okinawa still hosts 75% of the U.S. military bases in Japan.

In March 2009, Mr. Uehara, one of the volunteer "peace" guides took me around several of those caves. Once inside, he pointed out a large stone and asked if I saw anything. Those who are spiritually sensitive, he confided, claim that they see an apparition behind the stone. There were only two of us inside this huge cavern. Using a high powered flashlight, Mr. Uehara illuminated what remained of the war sixty-five years ago: shards of plates, bottles, medical vials, and fragments of human bones. Nothing, however, was left intact. Everything was in tatters. When we turned our flashlights off, we were engulfed by utter darkness, something rarely experienced in everyday life. I later learned that in the jargon of volunteer peace guides, this experience was called "the *gama* shock"². I thought I felt a presence behind the stone pointed to me earlier. I knew that it was only in my imagination. But one thing was clear. The place was charged with memories of those who perished.

Questions linger. Who has the right to memories? The survivors? The children of the deceased? Members of volunteer organization as Mr. Uehara who vicariously narrate the stories for the survivors and the deceased? Memories certainly vary. But if narratives are told repeatedly, will they not sediment into certain forms, taking a collective character? Then who is responsible for making, or faking, a collective memory? Who has the right to control the past in the public sphere? Is there not a hegemonic power at work authoring and dissemination of an authorized version of memory? And what of the high school students who visit the caves? Do they have a right to partake in the memory of the war long passed? And if they do, how can they go about doing so ethically? These remain contested issues in Japan.

Here I must pause to explain the uniquely Japanese practice of “school excursion”. While such excursions may exist in other countries, in Japan these junior and high school outings may last from three to six days and requires the participation of every student in the same grade. For unaccustomed eyes, hundreds of students in uniform parading through a museum can be a bizarre sight. Predictably, the Ministry of Education and Science guidelines (1989) situate the school excursion as an exercise in group behavior – its history goes back to the military style march in the late nineteenth century³ – and an opportunity to learn civic virtues.

Popular destinations in the past included the imperial capital of Tokyo, and ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara; after the defeat in 1945, atom-bombed cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were added to the list. These destinations have a potential to fashion students into “uniformly” Japanese subjects. Although the nature of such trips is now more diversified (some schools make trips overseas) and less regimented – students may be offered a variety of activities to choose from on a certain day – the disciplinary character of a state ideological apparatus has been retained. But for the majority “in” group students, not for the minority “out” group targeted for bullying, the trip seems to be remembered as a pleasurable edu-tainment that helps foster comradery. I take a critical stance against it.

Beginning in the mid-1980s Okinawa became a popular destination for such trips. In 1980, a little over 100 schools made tours to Okinawa. By 2006 a record high of 2,615 schools arrived with 439,823 students, accounting for nearly 10% of Okinawa’s tourist arrivals⁴. The local government publicizes Okinawa as an ideal edu-tainment destination for its combination of nature, culture, and the appeal for peace. Okinawa is studded with coral-reefed islands, has different (read exotic) cultural traditions from those on the mainland, and was involved in fierce fighting during the Asia-Pacific War. The shift from opt-centric to embodied tourism is more conspicuous in the Japanese edu-tainment business than in other types of mass tourism still dependent on voyeuristic gaze. In Okinawa, students can try out scuba diving, sugar cane harvesting and learn the region’s unique music and dance forms. As for peace education, while Hiroshima and Nagasaki offer only the trace of the A-bomb blast, in Okinawa they can go inside *gama* caves, where the experience turns haptic. It is claimed that by dirtying their pants on a steep and slippery floor, getting wet from the drops dripping down stalactite pillars, clutching a flashlight as the only source of light, students can sensorially re-experience what people have gone through during the war. But can they really?

Tours to Okinawa have changed a great deal over the past sixty years. The first to arrive from the mainland after the war were veterans and the families of the war dead. They came to memorialize those who died in what they believed was the defense of the nation. The doubt remains, however, whether Okinawans were truly considered part of this nation. The kingdom of Ryukyu, which had retained a nominal statehood, was officially made a part of Imperial Japan

in 1879. Since then, a coercive assimilation policy was imposed on the Okinawans. Emperor worship was internalized in the Okinawan mind. In an effort not to be labeled as second class Japanese, the Okinawan elites, too, suppressed their culture, including the variety of local languages. Towards the end of the Asia-Pacific War, when a contingent of the Japanese troops arrived, the only choice left for the Okinawans, including boys and girls as young as thirteen, was to join the Japanese forces to fight the Americans. The point not to be missed, however, is that the Japanese army came to Okinawa not to protect the Okinawans. Their only aim was to prolong the war, hoping by a miraculous intervention that the nation ruled by the Emperor would be preserved. The Americans, who outnumbered and out-equipped the Japanese, took their headquarters in less than two months after landing. The Japanese commander, instead of surrendering, or carrying out a final *banzai* suicide attack as the Japanese did elsewhere, ordered his troops to retreat to the south and fight a guerrilla war until the last soldier was killed. The Americans countered with heavy bombardment from air, land and sea. Okinawan civilians were caught in the crossfire and left with no place to go. Those lucky enough to survive found shelter in *gama* caves. But they were evicted from the caves by the Japanese army who wanted the caves to house their soldiers. Having been told if captured they would be raped and murdered by the Americans, some civilians committed suicides. If they spoke an Okinawan language, which Japanese soldiers did not understand, they were suspected for spying and executed. Among the dead were Korean forced laborers and sex slaves whom the army dragged along with them to Okinawa.

The Japanese tourists who returned to Okinawa after the war wanted to hear the tales of bravery of their deceased husbands and brothers. And that is what the Okinawans told them. The Japanese came, built memorials for their dead, and went back home. It took much longer for the Okinawans to recover from their trauma and to start a slow process of healing. After all, nearly one in three Okinawans died in the war. Although the exact number of death remains unclear, there is no doubt that the civilian death toll of more than 100,000 was greater than that of the army. On several occasions, I was told that the Okinawans who grew up after the war cannot swim. Beaches were still full of un-collected bones and unexploded shells. They were told not to go near the sea. Going inside a *gama* was out of question. Memories were too difficult to be reconciled.

I learned about the *gama* through Norma Field's *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*⁵ published in 1993. Then in 1995, for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, a film entitled *Gama: Getto no hana* was released. I didn't go and see the film at the time because on the poster were printed words "recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science". The phrase is my pet aversion. Then last year, while net-surfing, I came across a blog of a mother writing about her child who was supposed to be visiting a *gama* on a school excursion. I arrived at this subject by chance.

The film *Gama* is often shown to the students before they embark on a trip to Okinawa. Upon arrival, some schools arrange a meeting with a survivor to hear her/his testimony. The survivors who are now in their eighties must have been about the same age during the war as the students visiting Okinawa. When the fighting broke out, these teenagers too, were mobilized. Some of the boys enlisted in the army ran towards American tanks, carrying explosives in a suicide attack. Girls were sent to field hospitals set up in *gamas* to help the medics. With no medical supplies, surgery meant amputation without anesthesia; treatment meant removing maggots from festering wounds, a task assigned to the girl students.

During their visit to a *gama*, today's high school students are briefed by a volunteer guide about what happened inside the cave. Then the guide asks the students to turn their flashlights off. The moment of *gama-shock* arrives. Students are mostly overwhelmed by horror. They come out into the daylight relieved and with a belief that war is cruel and peace so precious. To me, this is a sentiment that is forged and banal. If this is what "peace education" has accomplished, students have missed an awful lot. In the creation of a dichotomy between war and peace, their experience gets simplified, gentrified, and sanitized⁶. Their experience may be physical, but is certainly simulated. They may smell the dirt, but they do not smell the stench of death. They do not hear the groans of the wounded calling for water. Sentries do not point their bayonets at them, holding babies who have already starved to death still in their arms. The *gama-shock*, the fear of total darkness, is fear of a different order than which the Okinawans experienced during the war. Asato Toshie, an Okinawan survivor, testifies that when she finally found a *gama* to hide in, she thought she was in heaven⁷. The real hell was in the field outside. There, you could have been blown off any minute by the continuous shelling of the Americans. Yet the Japanese forced the Okinawans out of the caves.

What we need to realize is the impossibility of re-experiencing the original. The entry into a *gama* is an entry into a fantasy-land, a variation of a theme park. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, "a simulation carries with it the power of an aura, which is what makes it so dangerous"⁸. The thought that one's grandfather may have been one of the perpetrators is not a pretty one. But putting oneself in a place of the perpetrator as well as that of the victim is an exercise should be taken by those visiting a *gama*.

Okinawa should not be conceived of a destination for a Japanese school excursion of a traditional kind, designed to evoke the ghastly shadow of the nation. In national imaginings, as Renan stated more than a century ago, past fratricides must be consigned to oblivion. Okinawa is where the contestations and the negotiations of memories and identities have been volatile. Once a narrative of victimhood is authored, it becomes difficult to hear memories in polyphony. A culture of selective remembrance leads to a culture of obliteration. Do not presume that you can partake of memories of minoritized peoples. Do not lightly approach a *gama*, a

place charged with memories of the dead and of those still living. At a place like an Okinawan *gama*, whether you come as a tourist, a student on a school excursion, or a researcher doing fieldwork, you must go prepared. You must make yourself humble and vulnerable.

Is it really necessary to visit a place charged with traumatized memories. I have no intention of denying the presence of a *genius loci*. To conjured up the spirit of place, however, demands a rigorous exercise of the mind. Gawking at a ghoulish site should not be part of “peace education”. I wonder what the difference is between physically going inside a *gama* and recreating the scene in one’s imagination. With poet Elizabeth Bishop can we not ask; “Is it lack of imagination that makes us come to imagined places, not just stay at home”⁹? If fear is what is desired, that can be shown in a handful of dust.

Notes

I would like to thank Karen E. Till for her editorial comments. Her suggestions contributed to the clarity of this article more than I can mention here.

1. The Constitution of Japan bans the use of force as means of settling international disputes. Article 9 states “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation”. Because Japan inflicted so much suffering on its Asian neighbors during World War II and became the only country to experience nuclear warfare, thinking about peace constitutes an important part of history and civic classes.
2. Teruya Rinken, Naka Bokunen, and Murakami Akiyoshi, *Okinawa no Ima Guidebook* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995) 133.
3. Hayami Sakae, *Ureshi Natsukashi Shugaku Ryoko* (Tokyo: Nesuko/Bungei Shunju, 1999) 201.
4. Okinawa Prefecture.
<http://www3.pref.okinawa.jp/site/view/contview.jsp?cateid=233&id=17244&page=1> Last accessed on 19 December, 2009.
5. Norma Field, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
6. Andreas Huyssen says for instance that “[t]he fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable”. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 3.
7. Asato Yoshie and Oshiro Masayasu, *Okinawasen: Aru Haha no Kiroku* (Tokyo: Kobunken, 1995) 141.
8. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, “Exhibitionary Complexes” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/ Global Transformations*, Ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Thomás Ybarra-Frausto, with Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, and Ciraj Rassool (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007) 41.
9. Elizabeth Bishop, “Questions of Travel” in *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) 94.

Takahashi Yuichiro teaches performance studies in the Department of Tourism and Transnational Studies, Dokkyo University, Japan. His research interests include the ways in which collective memory is constructed through public ceremonies, museum displays, and tourist production. Professor Takahashi is the author of *Shintaikasuru Chi (Embodied Knowledge, SericaShobo, 2005, in Japanese)*. His recent writings in English appear in *Contesting Performance: Global Genealogies of Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and in *The Rise of Performance Studies: Re-thinking Richard Schechner’s Broad Spectrum* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
ytakahas@dokkyo.ac.jp