

Peace Vibrations on the Island: ‘*Yuimahruh*’ and the Cultivation of American Military Spouses’ Spirit of Philanthropy in Okinawa/Ryukyu¹

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Introduction

This paper attempts to create, through a specific example, an argument that nature has more of a foundational educational impact than any artificial influence. The example in question is the educational experiences of American military spouses in Okinawa/Ryukyu who engage in philanthropy as members of women’s groups placed both on and off local American military bases. The paper firstly describes the characters of three women/spouse-oriented groups in Okinawa: the American Women’s Welfare Association, Okinawa International Women’s Club, and Ikebana International Okinawa Chapter #10. After discussing the cultural, social, and political uniqueness of these groups, the paper critically examines whether, in terms of morality, their activities meet the spirit of international friendship or the spirit of *Yuimahruh*, an indigenous cultural value of reciprocity in Ryukyu/Okinawa. At the end, the paper explores the reasons why these women’s groups are sustainable regardless of continuous changes in membership, drastic social transformation, and endless political tensions.

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Women's Groups & Women's Philanthropy: A Way to View the World of Okinawa/Ryukyu

Etsujiro Miyagi (1992), a historian and journalist of American occupation in Okinawa/Ryukyu, divides the period of American occupation from 1945-1972 into four different periods, along the lines of cultural policy: 1945-1948, 1949-1957, 1958-1964, and 1965-1972 (p. 47-50). Miyagi calls 1949-1957 the time of completion of the rule, because various cultural and educational policies were activated during that period (p. 50-55). For instance, both the Government and Relief in Occupied Areas Fund (the predecessor of the Fulbright scholarships) and the U.S. Army scholarship program started in Okinawa/Ryukyu in 1949. Ryukyu University was founded in 1950. Five of The Ryukyuan-American Cultural Centers were opened, both in the main Okinawa Island and in the remote islands, in 1951 and 1952. The Plaza Housing Shopping Center, an American department store and mall, was opened in 1949. International Social Service Okinawa (ISSO) was also organized by the end of the period, and officially established in 1958.

During that time period, a number of women's clubs associated with the American military (mostly wives' clubs) were also formed in Okinawa/Ryukyu. The United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) women's club was recognized as the most sophisticated women's club in the area at that time. Due to reversion in 1972, some of these clubs, including USCAR women's club, were terminated, but others remain active to this day. This paper introduces three major women-oriented groups which were all formed during the occupation period and which are still active in contemporary Okinawa/Ryukyu. These three groups often share

members and they support and attend the major events each other. None of the group sets up the official “office.” None of the group has Wikipedia page, either. They communicate each other via the webpage, facebook, messenger, email, or cellphone in between taking care of their family and works.

American Women’s Welfare Association (AWWA)

The American Women’s Welfare Association (AWWA) is a philanthropic military spouse group in Okinawa. AWWA is currently formed by five American military spouse clubs in Okinawa (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine, and Enlisted). Although AWWA is a volunteer group, the top position of AWWA traditionally has been held by the spouse of Okinawa’s top American military commander. AWWA was formed in 1972, the year of reversion. However, according to the oral history shared among members, the predecessor of the present AWWA was established in 1952 as the Ryukyu American Welfare Council under American Military rule. Written records about the military spouse clubs’ various social services date back to the 1940s. According to the consistency of the historical records, AWWA seems to have been shaped by the process of political and military transformations during the time post-reversion, because the reversion transformed not only the structure of the governance of Okinawa/Ryukyu from USCAR to the Japanese government, but also the structure of the American military in Okinawa from Army-oriented Ryukyu Command Headquarters (RYCOM) to Marine Corps Base Camp Smedley D. Butler (Camp Butler). The main American military base in Okinawa became a Marine base, instead of an Army base, in 1975, and the top American military commander in Okinawa became a Marine after reversion. Accordingly, the Fort Buckner Women’s Club, the Army officers’ spouse club of

Ryukyu/Okinawa, was the biggest military spouse club until reversion, but the Marine Officers' Spouses' Club of Okinawa became the biggest military spouse's club after.

In 2018, each AWWA military spouse club operates a gift shop on a military base except the Army (the Army on Okinawa Gift Shop on Camp Torii closed in spring 2018). The Marine Gift Shop: Island Treasures on Camp Foster is operated by the volunteers of the Marine Officers' Spouses' Club of Okinawa and associates. Fleet Gift Shop by the Naval Officers' Spouses' Club of Okinawa is located on Camp Shields. The Kadena Air base has the Kadena Gift Corner by Kadena Officers' Spouses' Club and the Kadena Thrift Store by Okinawa Enlisted Spouses' Club. Since the gift shops are located on base, their currency is USD. The products in the gift shops are local, international, new and second hand. The Marine Gift Shop sells various products such as tableware, toys, clothes, fabrics, and interiors, and home decoration goods shipped from Vietnam, Thailand, Hong Kong, and the Philippines as well as local Okinawan and Japanese products such as contemporary local artists' works, jewelry, Asian style antique furniture, and secondhand kimonos. These gift shops are well known in the American military community of Okinawa. On sale days like the summer Christmas sale or the first sale day for new shipments, shoppers can often be found waiting in line before opening. The profits from the gift shops are AWWA's philanthropy funding.²

Okinawa International Women's Club (OIWC)

Okinawa International Women's Club (OIWC) is a non-profit women's social club established in 1954. OIWC's mission statement is "to provide opportunity for

² Not all profits go to AWWA. For instance, Marine Officers' Spouses' Club engages independent philanthropy with some of profits by the Marine gift shop.

International Friendship through social contacts and to further intellectual, cultural and welfare interests in the community.”³ Since “International Friendship” is presumed to be friendship between American and Okinawan/Japanese, half of OIWC members are classified as Japanese/Okinawan and the other half as American. In addition, OIWC is bilingual and uses either USD or JPY currency depending on the character of the events, but follows the American school calendar, starting in September and ending in June. The president of OIWC is usually selected from the American side one year and the Japanese/Okinawan side the next. In addition to a monthly luncheon for all OIWC members, OIWC plans various small cultural group activities such as cooking classes, site-seeing trips, and home parties. Members of OIWC are socially presumed to be either “housewives” or “leisured women,” because most OIWC activities are scheduled on weekdays, and the monthly luncheon is held at resort hotels or officers’ clubs on base.

As described above, since OIWC is a women’s social and cultural group, members having fun together is its highest value. However, OIWC encourages the members to engage in welfare activities as well. OIWC usually provides some social welfare activities such as small group visitations to hospices, nursing homes, and child welfare institutions, which means that OIWC engages in some form of welfare activity for Okinawa/Ryukyu society every month. In addition, OIWC makes welfare donations out of the earnings from their various cultural activities and social events at the end of the year. For instance, in 2018, eleven social welfare groups, such as shelters for animals, children, and mothers, received their requested items (such as air conditioners, electric appliances and devices, music instruments, and furniture) from OIWC.

³ See <https://oiwc.weebly.com/> Constitution and By-Laws of The Okinawa International Women’s Club.

Ikebana International, Okinawa Chapter #10 (IIOC)

Ikebana International was established in 1956 in Tokyo by an American woman as a non-profit international cultural organization of Japanese-style flower arrangement. The motto of Ikebana International is “friendship through flowers”. Ikebana International’s exhibition, held every five years, gathers attendees from all over the world, but most of its activities are geographically divided by chapter, numbered by the order of the foundation. For instance, Tokyo is the founding chapter and Washington D.C. is the first chapter.

Ikebana International Okinawa Chapter (IIOC) was organized in 1957 as the 10th out of what is now 165 chapters all over the world. However, Ikebana seemed to have been regarded and practiced by American military associates even before the establishment of IIOC, given the number of photos of formal/informal events held for American military in Ryukyu/Okinawa taken in the 1950s that have Ikebana flower arrangement decorations. Today, most IIOC members are upper to upper middle class local Okinawan/Japanese women. However, IIOC has been practicing unique interactions with American military spouses. The spouse of the top American military commander in Okinawa usually takes Ikebana lessons as well as receiving the IIOC advisory position, because IIOC has been continuously providing Ikebana lessons to military spouses and associates on the base for sixty years. At its peak, thirteen lessons were provided on base per week, although in 2018 the number of weekly lessons was down to just two.

IIOC usually holds a charity Ikebana exhibition every year, engaging corresponding philanthropic activities. In 2018, IIOC contributed to the establishment

of a cultural center in Hawaii to commemorate Okinawan/Japanese-Hawaiian/Americans who donated goats to save Okinawa from serious food shortages right after World War II.

Comparison/ Summary

Miyagi evaluates that the impact of the American occupation on Okinawa/Ryukyu has two aspects: inhumanity and humanity (1982). The establishments of AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC and their social contributions were the reflection of the occupation's humanity. As AWWA is an integration of the American military spouses' groups, AWWA is inseparable from the American military in Ryukyu/Okinawa. The long-term philanthropy engaged in by AWWA more or less has taken the role of a fortress, defending the American occupation of Okinawa/Ryukyu with a moral vindication that America is here for protecting, rescuing, and democratizing Ryukyu/Okinawa. On the other hand, OIWC has taken a more relaxed approach by emphasizing the creation of fun memories amongst female friends. Instead of totally devoting itself to social service by taking a donor role like AWWA, OIWC expects members to learn each others' cultures, like a gift exchange. To contrast the two, the goal of AWWA is philanthropy, but the goal of OIWC is joy. For OIWC, philanthropy is rather the outcome of joy. Like OIWC, IIOC's purpose is to share joy through Ikebana lessons. Philanthropy is secondary to the development of Ikebana skills and techniques. On the other hand, unlike AWWA, Japanese/Okinawans take a giver role, because they provide an art education for Americans, teaching the knowledge of Ikebana and helping them to acquire Ikebana techniques.

Each group has different ways of making a balance between the communities on and off the military base. The balance for AWWA is made through the division of its donations. AWWA donates half of its funding to social welfare and educational support for the on base community, and the other half to social welfare and educational support for communities off base. However, the balance for OIWC requires human resources, language, currency, and venues to hold events. Unlike OIWC or AWWA, the balance for IIOC involves the equal influence of flowers. IIOC assumes that regardless of whether its members are on base Americans or off base Okinawan/Japanese, housewives and dependents share a similar responsibility to their family members, and having Ikebana in their homes contributes to the quality of their family life. For instance, in 1970, during a riot against an American military base by local Okinawans/Japanese, an Ikebana instructor broke through a picket line to teach her on base Ikebana classes. Okinawan/Japanese workers on base were on strike except Ikebana teachers. And, all Ikebana lessons were held as scheduled.

Today, each group is faced with different and similar challenges. The issue of group dynamics is always a challenge for any group, but relocation and mobility issues affect each group individually. AWWA membership changes continuously every year due to the relocation of members' husbands. At OIWC, American women change membership every year, while Okinawan/Japanese members stay the same. Some of OIWC's Okinawan/Japanese members are pioneer members of the establishment. IIOC has similar dynamics. Ikebana instructor membership is stable, but American students are continuously changing. However, for IIOC, membership mobility seems to be not as serious as any other groups. As an art education, continuous students' change is

expected in Ikebana lessons. Moreover, to solve the matter of relocation, Ikebana International was established and its chapters are all over the world.

AWWA is also facing issues of gender and social recognition. AWWA is about to change its name to American Welfare & Works Association to be more gender-sensitive⁴, because social changes have led to more male American military spouses as househusbands in Okinawa. In addition, the group's name is relatively unknown in today's Japanese/Okinawa society even though the gift shops as well as AWWA are well known in American military community. As a result, applications from Japan/Okinawa are diminishing even though AWWA has funding. There are three reasons. First, the psychological sense of distance between on base and off base is getting wider as a result of reversion. Second, off base economic condition has been improved. Third, the separation of the class between those who need AWWA's welfare donations and those who do not, is getting wider in off base society.

OIWC is faced with the following issues. As a result of constant relocation for over sixty years, the generation gap between Okinawan/Japanese members and American members is impossible to ignore. Some of the youngest members on American side were those who just graduated from college, but the older members on Japanese side are pioneer. In addition, members' social status is a sensitive issue for OIWC. As a result of reversion and economic development, member recruitments are becoming more popular. For instance, while the American side recruits members from the spouses of officers and enlisted soldiers to maintain itself, the traditional members of the Japanese side expect officer's spouse status in order to become members on the

⁴ See <http://noscokinawa.com/awwa>

American side and thereby to maintain OIWC's social status in Okinawa/Ryukyu. On the other hand, the Japanese/Okinawan side requires that new Japanese/Okinawan members have a certain social status as well as leisure time to participate in the activities, but it is falling behind the times because women's social participation has been developing outside of social class divisions. Moreover, the simplification of the classification between the American and Japanese sides is a contemporary issue. Racial diversity among American members and sexual diversity among all members are sensitive issues.

IIOC is faced with a decrease of Ikebana lessons and students on base. Due to lifestyle changes, fewer American military spouses and associates take Ikebana lessons today. However, IIOC seems to be more struggling to communicate, not with American military spouses but with mainland Japan. For instance, at the Ikebana International world exhibition held in Okinawa in 2017, IIOC experienced a cultural gap not with American members of IIOC, but with the members from the main island of Japan.

Scientific Knowledge or Folk Knowledge

AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC are the products of the American military occupation of Okinawa/Ryukyu and they still exist and are active even after reversion. How have AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC continued their practices for over forty-five years in spite of a continuously changing membership? Ken Toguchi (2017), a human geologist, distinguishes folk knowledge from scientific knowledge. Through researching human geography around the coral reefs of the Okinawa/Ryukyu islands, Toguchi discovered that fishery knowledge being shared among local Okinawan fisherman is different from the scientific information framed by topography and biology (p.229-254). Although

women's philanthropy is not directly related to the corals or fishing, Toguchi's argument gives us a clue as to how to examine the essence of AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC.

AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC propose "International Friendship" as the reason for the existences of the groups. For instance, AWWA introduces itself by saying that "AWWA has forged a vital link between American military families and their Okinawan neighbors."⁵ As noted previously, both OIWC and IIOC state international "friendship" in its constitution and in its motto. For instance, in its 55th anniversary yearbook, international friendship and world friendship are repeatedly mentioned, and the president of Ikebana International states, "Let's sow Ikebana International and 'Friendship through flowers' seeds for tomorrow, so that they bloom around the world" (Zhang, 2013, p. 2). International friendship seems to be achieved by AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC respectively. For instance, AWWA's "vital link" is visible in a gift from a lady at the nursing home for leprosy patients to AWWA members. She created a pair of shell art pieces, decorating each with the word "Friendship" in Chinese letters. One was gifted to AWWA and now hangs on the wall of the staff room in the Marine's Gift Shop. The other stayed at the nursing home and hangs on the wall in the community room. It is quite remarkable that American military spouse clubs have been making regular visitations and various supports to the nursing home for leprosy even before the formation of AWWA, because leprosy patients have been historically discriminated against in the societies of Japan, Okinawa and Ryukyu.

However, the matter of international friendship does not allow us to ignore the political debate over the existence of American military bases in Okinawa/Ryukyu

⁵ See <http://noscokinawa.com/awwa>

because the phrase of “friendship” has been often used as a conventional phrase to justify and advertise the American military stationed in Japan/Okinawa/Ryukyu. For instance, “friendship festival” or “friendship day” is the open to the public events on the American bases in Japan.⁶ The joint operation of American military in Japan for rescuing those Japanese victims and survivors suffered by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 was also named “Operation Tomodachi (operation friends).” Friendly events and sincere rescue operations are good to have. However, the phrase of international “friendship” does not cancel out the history of the colonial power balance between local Okinawan/Japanese residents and the American military. For instance, *Cocktail Party*, a short novel written by Tatsuhiro Ohshiro (2018), sharply points out how impossible it is to achieve a literal “International Friendship” between American military personnel and local Okinawans, because one is the ruler and the other is the oppressed.

To these tough political questions, the women’s groups are mute. It does not mean that they do not realize the inconsistency. Instead of having the resilience to explore the answer, women’s groups rather take the position of “quietly fostering a relationship with the Okinawan community through charitable contributions, friendship, and community involvement.”⁷ Their quiet social contribution does not justify their services or it does not receive compliments or social recognition, but it protects their social engagements and it maintains their spirit of philanthropy healthy. Thus, the point at issue is how these women’s groups have been able to quietly continue their philanthropy without sliding into political tensions or being caught by the norms of the

⁶ See <https://yokotafss.com/ff-2018/> & <https://www.navymwryokosuka.com/activity/9f7ea773-f8ae-4852-987a-e9f94bc94bc6>

⁷ See <http://noscokinawa.com/awwa>

economic market for over sixty years? How are the members of AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC able to engage in such time- and energy-consuming labors so quietly without the common religious faith?

Conclusion: Nature and the Spirit of *Yuimahruh*

Members of these women's groups both American military spouses and local Okinawan/Japanese sincerely tell me that engaging philanthropy in Okinawa/Ryukyu is so spiritually rewarding, cultivates their lives, and makes their life in Okinawa/Ryukyu meaningful and joyful. American military spouses also state that although American military stations are located in many places, the clubs and activities like AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC are only on Okinawa/Ryukyu. In fact, even though there are American military bases on the main island in Japan, AWWA, OIWC, or IIOC like women's clubs and activities do not exist. Thus, as a conclusion, this paper presumes the influence of the value of *Yuimahruh* as folk knowledge in Okinawa/Ryukyu that sustains women's philanthropy.

“*Yuimahruh*,” a folkloric expression from the Okinawa/Ryukyu area, means reciprocity at the private level. “*Yui*” means providing/receiving labor without any duty/demand of reciprocity (Sakai, 2002, p. 50). “*Mahrüh*” means circulation. It could be identifiable as a gift theory and a gift economy traditionally practiced in Okinawa/Ryukyu society. However, unlike the “the how of the gift” in Maori (Stewart, 2017) or the gift exchanges addressed in Mauss's gift theory (1990), “*Yuimahruh*” seems originally to have started as a practical necessity, a way of making tax payments. In the 17th and 18th centuries, each village in Okinawa/Ryukyu was identified as a unit of tax. In order to fulfill the duty, Okinawans in the village as well as a village and a

village covered each other. “*Yuimahruh*” is also practiced among neighbors when they have scheduled reroofing or have to rebuild their houses after typhoons. The spirit of “*Yuimahruh*”, the spirit of sharing these obligations, is understood in Okinawa today as the social norm, and that a way to fulfill social obligation is to share the burdens of the social welfare of the community. According to George H. Kerr, the spirit of “*Yuimahruh*” is deep in core of Okinawan/Ryukyuan identity because of the sense and quality of mutual support in its communities, the mutual financial support system created among migrated Okinawan/Ryukyuan in foreign countries in the 20th century, and the remarkable mutual assistance among family, relatives, and friends (2014, p. 228-229). AWWA, OIWC, and IIOC practice a sort of “*Yuimahruh*” because they support other islanders without any public obligation but with a sense that they are living together on the island. Through this practice, they rather learn and acquire the spirit of “*Yuimahruh*” which is the way to connect with the nature of the island, because the spirit of “*Yuimahruh*” is the product of the Okinawa/Ryukyu islands. In other words, regardless of the native islanders or temporary residents, the nature of the Okinawa/Ryukyu islands requires that everyone be treated fairly and equally, because no one on the islands can avoid the Typhoons.

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