

# Community, Resistance, and Sustainability in an Okinawan Village: Yomitan

Miyume TANJI

## Community, Resistance and Sustainability in an Okinawan Village: Yomitan

Miyume TANJI

### Introduction

*The presence of some 737 US military outposts around the world imposes great strains, and there is always the possibility of rejection by the inhabitants of adjacent communities. Chalmers Johnson, author of the acclaimed trilogy on US imperial expansion and its costs, highlights the tensions between overseas US bases and the countries where they are deployed, most prominently Okinawa.[1] Nearly one-fifth of the land surface of Okinawa's small, crowded main island is devoted to 38 bases and facilities for the US military (almost 75% of the US forces stationed in Japan). Johnson depicts Okinawa as a hotspot among other US military outposts, where anti-American opposition might undermine the US alliance network in the Asia-Pacific. He draws particular attention to the US forces' exemption from the local criminal justice system, as well as from responsibility to overcome the environmental contamination of local sites caused by US military usage.[2]*

*Politicians and media commentators often talk of friction between overseas US forces and locals in terms of crimes, accidents, noise and other hazards associated with US military deployment. Yet occasional crimes, risks and hazards barely scratch the surface. From the perspective of local populations living cheek by jowl with the bases, social, economic and cultural well-being is constantly insecure and subject to the priorities of the US military. One*

*key question constantly arises concerning the legitimacy of the bases: Do US military bases protect and advance the well-being of the local populations or undermine it? If the latter is the case, what can local people do about it?*

*This article considers the relevance of Okinawans' experiences to other societies and communities in the Asia-Pacific that also host, or potentially host, the US military. How have communities in Okinawa converted victimization and discontent into political action? In post-WWII Okinawa, the US military presence has fundamentally upset the social and environmental foundations of local life-sustaining systems. In many cases, base-hosting communities have lost their traditional forms of livelihood – based on fishing, agriculture and manufacturing – to become largely dependent on service industries, base-related rent, aid and compensation from the Japanese government. Yet some local communities, whose experience deserves to be better known, have bucked the trend and dealt with such changes using available resources and knowledge. US military bases in Okinawa spread across 21 of Okinawa's 41 municipalities. Density, size and functions of the bases in these cities, towns and villages vary, as do basic geographic and socio-economic conditions. Local responses to, and relationships with, US forces also differ. Some municipalities, communities or neighbourhoods appear more resilient and capable of exerting influence and control over US military bases than others, in efforts to protect their livelihood.*

*The experience of Yomitan village merits attention as a successful case of economic and*

*community development alongside a large US military presence. What is special about it, and what can be learned from it? I argue that to represent Yomitan as a model of 'sustainable development' focusing primarily on its economic growth, balanced with efforts to preserve environmental and cultural resources, is to omit a crucial ingredient: resistance to forms of economic development rooted in militarism inherent in the traumatic trajectory of war and US occupation.*

### Yomitan community development

A visitor to Okinawa normally passes first through Naha, the capital, a dense, noisy and commercialised city full of cars, trucks, shops and concrete houses right next to winding narrow paved roads. A one-hour drive north along the main road, sandwiched on both sides by long fences and the barbed wire of US bases, brings one to Yomitan Village on the west coast of central Okinawa (see map below). Inside the village, the roads are winding and narrow with concrete houses built close to each other, as in Naha, and the US military presence is prominent, evidenced by the tall, white shrine and US and Japanese flag poles at the military gate of Torii (literally "Shrine") Station. Yet something here is different from elsewhere in Okinawa. There is a calmer, old-fashioned and dignified feel to the place. There are more earth colours, green farmlands and sugar cane fields, and more natural (unconcreted) beaches. More buildings have antique features such as traditional Okinawan-style red tile roofs, and stone walls and pavements. In Okinawa Main Island, Yomitan is a particularly attractive place for visitors. What makes it special? What are the implications for other communities living with US military bases?



Yomitan Village in Okinawa Main Island

Yomitan villagers have a strong sense of community, not merely of belonging to a municipal unit of administration. Importantly, this sense of community is a product of policies implemented by the village government, supported and carried out by the residents, following Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972. This process, commonly known as 'village reconstruction' (*mura okoshi*), was led by Yamauchi Tokushin, who became mayor in 1974 and was re-elected to serve multiple terms until 1998. It is an example of community development, involving multiple programs and policies for building a community. The concept of community is explained in terms of five defining elements by Ife and Tesoriero: a scale of population small enough to know each other and manage autonomous social structures; a sense of belonging and identity; holistic interactions among villagers in the realm of personal development beyond functional ties (*gemeinschaft* rather than *gesellschaft*); members' active engagement in the

community; and existence of a unique local-specific culture that members create, as opposed to consumption of globalised, mass culture.[3]

The population of Yomitan is over 35,000, divided into 23 districts called *aza*. Each *aza* has no more than a few thousand resident members: it is a close-knit self-governing unit of villagers' day-to-day affairs, such as education, health, production, recreation and cultural events. Most *aza* existed before WWII, surviving the Battle of Okinawa, and some date back to the administrative zoning set up when ruled by the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429-1879). On any random visit to an *aza*, one is likely to encounter festivals that promote the local: pottery, music, dance, food etc. On the other hand, communal support comes with responsibilities. Contributions to community events such as funerals and other annual rituals also take up considerable time, making demands on personal life. Thus Yomitan Village is composed of geographically close members who know each other well, at least since their grandparents' generation.



#### Yomitan village and the sea

Romanticising the *aza* community, however, would overlook the aspects that are at odds with such modern themes as liberation, individualism, mobility and even the welfare state. Emphasis on the social role of the

community 'can be used to reinforce traditional conservative understandings of the family, privatisation, government cutbacks, and class and gender inequalities'.[4] Social hierarchy is strictly adhered to, according to the traditional order of male seniority rule. It is said that, to become a member of an *aza* self-governing organization in Yomitan, one has to be from a family resident since the pre-war era. Life in *aza*, in many ways, is tradition-bound and could be repressive of women. As in most societies, numerous responsibilities for maintaining a community have traditionally fallen to women: for example, food preparation, cleaning and administration at communal events that are necessary but not publicly recognised or related to wealth-making activities. Yomitan *aza* require many of those, which is probably why the first women's organisation in Okinawa is said to have been formed in Yomitan 100 years ago.[5]

Despite some conservative qualities seemingly at odds with modern capitalist societies, a sense of pride is generally associated with living in 'Yomitan'. For example, a 15-year-old Yomitan male high school student comments:

I am so lucky to have been born in Yomitan with rich traditional arts and beautiful natural surroundings. I want to become a radio personality and tell everyone how fantastic Yomitan and Okinawa are. I want to contribute to preserving the wonderful arts, culture and nature we inherited.  
[6]

Such a positive image of Yomitan has been constructed, over the last three decades through the updating and shaping of 'tradition' to suit the needs of late capitalist rural life that only a small 'village' could meet. Beyond *aza*, an overarching 'Yomitan' identity has developed

under the 'village reconstruction' program after Okinawa's reversion to Japan. Mayor Yamauchi's comprehensive community development program had four distinctive dimensions:

- 1) economic development driven by agriculture as a core industry and strategic marketing of local products;
- 2) locally controlled environmental resources;
- 3) promotion and positive re-evaluation of traditional local knowledge and culture; and
- 4) recovery of land from US military occupation.

In particular, the first two elements, economic development and environmental protection, have been represented as a successful community-based initiative, one that counters the vulnerability of Okinawan communities' dependence on a base-oriented economy. Sasaki stresses the importance of control and ownership retained by the village over planning and building of tourism-related facilities such as hotels.[7] The village manages private capital effectively through a semi-non-profit corporation, the Yuntanza Village Development Company – owned by the village's public employees and members of the Yomitan Chamber of Commerce. Unlike other resort towns, the village prohibited mainland Japanese capital from buying land to build hotels and private beaches, thus maintaining local land ownership.

This has enabled the village government to protect its environment, for example by compelling large hotel chains to use multiple-stage processes of water purification that can then be used for irrigation. Similarly, golf courses are prohibited from using chemical fertilizers. This 'partnership' system has prevented environmental damage caused by the profit-driven tourist industry – as has

happened in other parts of Okinawa. Likewise, the Company and the village have ensured that tourism creates jobs for locals through preferential employment of villagers, including the hiring of cleaners (local people with disabilities). The external tourism industry also entered into an agreement with the Company to use local agricultural products at restaurants, and sell local produce such as fresh fruit and vegetables at hotels – all highly unusual for resorts in Okinawa, which typically provide scant benefit for local workers, manufacturers and farmers.[8]

Additionally, the remarkable growth of beni-imo (red sweet potato) production in Yomitan is an example of community-based economic development. Yomitan has specialised in the production of distinctive beni-imo with strong, purplish red flesh. The Yuntanza Village Development Company purchases the products of local beni-imo farmers at appropriate prices. The Company and Chamber of Commerce further promote mass processing of beni-imo products that require peeling and pasting, creating further local employment.[9] Beni-imo became a Yomitan brand, used in pies, ice cream, biscuits, bread etc. The Company markets these products widely: they are sold in shops along main tourist streets of Naha, at airports, and in specialty shops in mainland Japan. The beni-imo has been turned into a unique local industry and an economic stimulus by the villagers themselves.[10]





A replica of the 'beni-imo (red sweet potato)'.



#### Beni-imo tarts

#### Outside the Yomitan Village Office

This highlights the second dimension of community development: the importance of agriculture as a core industry in Yomitan. Farming, especially sugar cane and sweet potato production, has long been the means of livelihood in Yomitan.[11] In post-reversion 'village reconstruction', the mayor placed a priority on benefiting farmers, and protecting agriculture.

The village also resurrected traditional weaving, characterized by distinctive flower-patterns specific to Yomitan. Yomitan weaving had existed for 600 years, but the industry dwindled with modernization, and was discontinued during the war. Since the 1960s, local elderly women who had witnessed the weaving process have contributed to the recovery of this skill. The village trained weavers and sponsored expositions in major Japanese cities. Both the beni-imo and weaving industries contribute to Yomitan's image as a 'cultural village' instilling pride and identity in villagers.[12]

#### Yomitan as a model of sustainable and endogenous development: an alternative

#### to base-dependence

Yomitan is featured in the *International Journal of Environmental Cultural Social and Economic Sustainability* for its sustainable community development strategy, pursuing a distinctive 'bottom-up approach that builds on its identity as a cultural centre'.[13] Sustainable development usually means economic performance combined with measures to prevent ecological damage. However, Yomitan as a model for overcoming the base-dependent economy means much more. Social scientists in Japan often use the term 'endogenous' along with 'sustainable' development, in reference to Yomitan. Endogenous development refers to internally generated social change driven primarily by local people, tradition, culture, corporations and natural resources. It contrasts with development approaches based on approaches imported from outside, the West, or a colonial power.[14]

Japanese economist Sasaki Masayuki describes Yomitan's development as a 'model' of 'endogenous local development' in an essay entitled 'sustainable development in Okinawa for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.[15] Miyamoto Ken'ichi views Yomitan as demonstrating the type of economic development that many Okinawan communities living with a heavy military presence aspire to, yet rarely attain. They see Yomitan's economic development as the antithesis of a reliance on the 'economic stimulus policies' of Tokyo, so common in Okinawa.[16]

The nature of such base-related income transfer is to suppress local opposition by compensating locals for Okinawa's disproportionate role in the US-Japan security alliance. The US bases in Okinawa were constructed during and after the 1945 Battle of Okinawa. Okinawa's reversion to Japan in 1972 did not significantly reduce the US military presence. After reversion, Tokyo significantly increased subsidies for developmental projects in Okinawa, as well as

rent paid to private landowners and municipal governments whose land was occupied by US bases. The Okinawan economy came to depend on economic aid and subsidies from the central government. This Okinawa-specific economic policy was justified as necessary to provide economic stimulus since Okinawa was excluded from mainland Japan's economic growth between 1945 and 1972. The subsidy-oriented economy following 1972 prioritized short-term projects, especially construction of public buildings and infrastructure facilities, with Japanese companies the main beneficiaries. As a consequence, Okinawa became a mostly 'concrete island', losing much of its natural resources and landscape.[17] Still, Okinawa remained Japan's poorest prefecture in terms of income, unemployment, and other socio-economic standards.

Elsewhere, the Japanese government's heavily interventionist economic policies, sometimes described as the 'developmental state', retreated, giving way to a neo-liberal, market-oriented policy,[18] but in Okinawa government intervention remains in the form of base-centered economic policy. In recent years, the degree of dependence has varied regionally within the Island. Tokyo's economic stimulus policy targeted local governments in the northern region, notably Nago City, where the construction site of a major US Marine's Air Station (to substitute for the one in densely populated Futenma) is planned.[19] Communities in the north – rural and aging – have long experienced economic stagnation. In hopes of regenerating the local economy, most communities have welcomed the government's economic stimulus policy.[20]

Banasick and Sasaki contrast Yomitan's entrepreneurship and self-reliance with Nago City, where Japan's economic stimulus policies have been passively accepted – or, more often, actively induced – on condition of an expanded US military presence.[21] Nago City's eventual acceptance of the planned Futenma Air

Station's replacement facility after bitter community struggle has resulted in the 'Northern Districts Development Fund', specially set aside for local municipalities nearby, for which ¥100 million was budgeted.[22] State-sponsored construction projects and various government aid schemes have been introduced in Nago: for example, 'one state, two systems'-type financial and IT special zones. Taking advantage of government subsidies, Nago City built a 'Multimedia Centre' in the Toyohara District – adjacent to Henoko where the Futenma Replacement Facility is planned – in July 2002, at a cost of ¥2.1 billion. In 2008 it housed 25 international and Japanese companies.[23] These special zones are aimed at inviting external financial and high-tech industry investments, with rent and employment benefits subsidized by the state:

The special financial zone designation, the only one of its kind in Japan, includes a 35% reduction of corporate taxes, low-rent office space, an 80% subsidy for communication expenses, and a 30% subsidy for hiring young workers. Given that wages in Okinawa tend to be about 40% lower than the mainland, the 30% subsidy means that firms relocating to the Nago City financial center can achieve a 70% reduction in labor costs.[24]



**Nago City map**

Increase in base-related revenue since 1998 has generated a number of multi-million-dollar projects including construction of the Multi Media Centre building, Meio University, community centres, a national technical college and the like.

According to a top construction company CEO in Nago, about 80% of the successful bidders on lucrative projects brought to Nago funded by the 'Northern Districts Development Fund' are major mainland Japanese companies, relegating local construction work to subcontractors.[25] The Multi Media Center hired 800 mainly young local employees under 30 to workers at call centres run by mainland Japanese companies since 2004, taking advantage of cheaper Okinawan labour. These projects have brought in workers and students from outside, followed by new convenience stores and one-room apartment blocks, creating a 'town outlook'. [26] Such effects are important, especially in eastern

Nago, where local anxiety about depopulation is high given a lack of job opportunities for young people. From the perspective of many locals, any development is better than none.

However, state financial inputs since Nago's acceptance of the Futenma Replacement Facility in December 1999 have not delivered economic health. The share of governmental subsidies linked to US military presence in the City's revenue kept growing, reaching almost 30% in 2001, endangering the municipality's financial self-sufficiency and threatening the quality of public services should central government subsidies be withdrawn.[27] With the late 2008 global financial crisis, the two biggest construction companies in Nago failed. Taxi drivers and bars were short of customers, the annual Nago summer festival was unlikely to continue because of a funding shortage, and a sense of depression prevailed in the city center.[28] Nago is suffering. Many, therefore, have come to look forward to work starting on the Futenma Replacement Facility—still facing strong opposition—as their last hope.[29]

Base-generated economic stimulation has not led to 'endogenous development' in Nago. It has created only superficial benefits relying on external economic actors, in isolation from sectors rooted in the community. This contrasts with economic change in Yomitan, where growth generated in one area (agriculture, for example) transfers to other local industries such as tourism and manufacturing. Miyagi Yasuhiro, former member of the Nago Assembly, predicts that heavy reliance on major construction projects will give rise to public expenditures for facility maintenance, and is 'likely to far exceed the financial resources of a local government'. [30] (Miyagi and Tanji, 2007). In 2005, Nago's real public debt ratio reached 15.2% and the ratio of current income to expense (the lower the better) of 94.3%, as opposed to 9.8% and 85.4% respectively in Yomitan.[31] Yomitan increased public revenues coming from local produce by 9% in 2008

despite the recession. On the other hand, salaries of Yomitan's public servants were cut by 500 million yen in the years 1998-2008.[32]

Sasaki explains that endogenous development in Yomitan was fuelled by the 'energy' of the local drive to remove US bases.[33] This relates to the fourth feature of Yamauchi's 'village reconstruction', the campaign to recover land occupied by the US military for residents' production and livelihood. At the time of Okinawa's reversion in 1972, more than 70% of the Village was still occupied by US bases. This ratio gradually fell to approximately 36% today. Miyamoto views base removal as a necessary condition for realizing sustainable development in Okinawa, as demonstrated by Yomitan's experience.[34] What then is the connection between Yomitan-style economic development and its resistance to structural dependency on base-related income transfer from Tokyo?

Ratio of US military bases to the total area of Yomitan Village [35]

Year	Total Village area (ha)	Area Occupied by US Military Bases (ha)	Ratio of US military bases (%)
1972	3,448	2,440	70.7
1976	3,448	1,893	54.9
1989	3,517	1,648	46.9
2000	3,517	1,567	44.6
2006	3,517	1,261	35.9

Nishikwa sees endogenous development as of increasing significance in the context of regionalism as a counter force to globalization.[36] Governance at the community level becomes more significant as the role of the nation-state as provider of economic goods and services or co-ordinator of economic development dwindles. The importance of endogenous development is derived from the increased significance of 'community-based' policies and initiatives globally, especially in the context of a weakened late capitalist welfare state.[37] In this sense, the idea of endogenous or sustainable development exemplified by Yomitan, in principle, fits the state's neo-liberal economic policy with an emphasis on local

autonomy.

However, political opposition to the state is not necessarily part of the package. There is a problem with attributing endogenous development in Okinawa to base removal. The contrast with Nago creates the impression that Yomitan's endogenous development, especially economic, gave rise to successful campaign against military bases. Yet endogenous development does not in itself promise resistance to the dependent economic structure predicated on US military bases. There is no inherent reason why base-generated subsidies could not be utilized to promote strategic marketing of local production and employment, while maintaining ownership and control vis-à-vis external capital and the environment, through public non-profit local companies.

Yomitan is a unique case of market-oriented economic development combined with political opposition. Not only has the village substantially reduced the US military presence, it has also, relatively successfully, outgrown base-dependence. What is it that has given Yomitan the resilience in the face of the political economy of base-related compensation? Endogenous development and sustainable development provide only a partial explanation of this highly political aspect of Yomitan's community development.

### The trajectory of war, US military occupation and Yomitan's 'resilient' community

The political consensus in Yomitan around non-reliance on military bases as a means to economic development is rare among base-hosting municipalities in Okinawa. Most local governments with a heavy military presence accept military bases as key to economic survival. The concept of 'community resilience' helps explain this resistance. The locally-specific history of collective suffering and trauma related to war and US occupation, specific to Yomitan, is crucial.



The idea of resilience, originally developed in the study of ecology, refers to the ability of an ecological system to adjust to disturbances (such as environmental hazards), and to 'spring back' to a state of equilibrium.[38] Adger defines 'social resilience' as 'the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change'. [39] This definition captures the most basic meaning of the concept of 'resilience' used here.

Nevertheless, social resilience is not limited to the ability to 'spring back' to a basic unchanging social structure. In the face of environmental and social change, an ability to fundamentally transform its social structure and infrastructure in order to adjust to external changes is also important. In defining resilience, therefore, consideration of at least three aspects is necessary:

1. The amount of disturbance a system can absorb and still remain within the same state or domain of attraction;
2. The degree to which the system is capable of self-organisation;
3. The degree to which the system can build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation. [40]

The concept of resilience thus allows explanations of a range of collective responses a community or a group may make to stresses and shocks.

In the formation of community resilience and in the process of collective decision-making, different views and interests are represented. A community's resilience is heavily related to aspects of governance, or how power is shared in the community. Examining a community's

governance requires looking into 'laws, regulations, discursive debates, negotiation, mediation, conflict resolution, elections, public consultations, protests and other decision-making processes.[41] The question then becomes: 'resilience of what, to what' and 'for whom?' [42] (Lebel et al., 2006, p. 20) What are the values, principles and social structure that Yomitan village has chosen to preserve?

As noted above, Yomitan's basic social unit is the *aza*. 22 out of Yomitan's 23 *aza* survived the radical disruption to their communal lives caused by the Battle of Okinawa, a remarkable fact considering that the war destroyed most of the central and southern regions of Okinawa Main Island, and that US forces occupied most of the land immediately after the war.

In April 1945, after 180,000 US soldiers landed on the coast of Yomitan, 3,840 residents died, reducing the population of the village to 14,611 in September 1946.[43] The US military moved all residents to internment camps.[44] In November 1946, when the people of two *aza*, Namihira and Takashiho, were allowed to re-settle, 95% of the Village's total area was under US military enclosure, secured for base construction.[45]

When the villagers eventually returned, most *aza* residents had to re-settle far from their old homes, now taken by the US military. Many were separated from their *aza*. However, they maintained interpersonal ties based on kinship and traditional neighbourhoods. They desired to preserve the *aza* community structure, for which successive mayors persistently appealed to the US military government. *Aza* was the most basic and important social structure of pre-war Yomitan, and its preservation and revival were given high priority.

The survival of the *aza* system indicates social resilience, in particular, the first type of resilience outlined above: the capacity to spring back from chaos to restore an earlier social structure. The Battle of Okinawa and the

ensuing US military occupation in Yomitan are primarily remembered as displacement, deprivation, fear and humiliation: disruption to communal life. The history of *aza* restoration informs an understanding of the US military presence primarily as a temporary disturbance that should be – and *can* be – eventually removed. It also explains the consensus among villagers on the importance of resurrecting features inherited from the past prior to the disruption of war.

In the post-reversion period, US forces continued training in Yomitan for the Vietnam and later wars. Among others, the parachute ‘drop’ training of the Army First Special Group (Green Berets) released soldiers and military equipment from aircrafts flying 4,000 meters above ground, occasionally landing on residential areas and farms. Yamauchi recalls that all kinds of things fell on their living spaces:

a piece of timber penetrated a roof of a resident’s home; a few oil drums fell from the sky into the village; soldiers shocked farmers by landing on their fields. In particular, the death of a 10-year-old girl, squashed underneath a trailer dropped during the training, was tragic.... These incidents continued until last year.[46]

The villagers and mayor succeeded in stopping the construction of an anti-P3C antenna base within the Yomitan Auxiliary Airfield. After three years of villagers’ demonstrations and sit-ins, as well as the mayor’s persistent negotiations with a US Marine commander and an open letter to then US president Jimmy Carter, the construction was cancelled in 1979. Following a similar struggle, the village regained a site used for to dispose of unexploded bombs, which threatened nearby residents’ safety with stray shrapnel. In 1978, a new Yomitan-specific cultural industry was built on this recovered site, with an old-style pottery kiln and 50

workshops.[47] This land formerly occupied by the US military became a cultural and economic point, the Yomitan Home of Pottery. These workshops have trained and employed young artists, and further contributed to tourism, providing an example of ‘endogenous’ development notable for taking place on former US military sites.



**Kiln (above) and products (below) sold at the Yomitan Home of Pottery**

The Yomitan struggle to reclaim land from US military bases and to preserve its pre-war *aza* structure, Hara Tomoaki explains,[48] closely reflects contemporary village governance. Specifically, the third aspect of Yomitan’s community development, positive re-evaluation of traditional local knowledge, is manifested in the authoritative position given to geomancy, commonly known as *fengshui* (*huu-sui* in Japanese or *hun-shi* in Ryukyuan). A simplified

definition of *Fengshui* is ‘an ancient science that has its roots in the Chinese way of viewing the Universe, where all things on Earth...take on implications of positive or negative energy (*chi*)’.[49] It is known to have been introduced to the Ryukyu kingdom from southern China 400-500 years ago, and has become embodied in Ryukyuan major architecture (e.g. Shuri Castle) and urban planning. Today, the influence of *fengshui* is seen in people’s housing features such as the placement of lion-dog decorations throughout Okinawa and the location and shapes of tombstones.[50] *Fengshui* is alive in the private realm of daily life in Yomitan and elsewhere in Okinawa, but rarely appears in the public context of community development. This is because local-specific knowledge is usually devalued in favour of standardised, top-down professional guidelines.[51]



**A Lion-dog statue, or ‘Shee sah’**

Yomitan Village’s re-evaluation of local knowledge as a principle of community development is closely associated with political opposition to US forces and the Japanese government. The introduction was organic: in the 1980s when *aza* and the Yomitan Village government cooperated to create ‘ethnological maps’ in order to reproduce pre-war topography of *aza* before the US military occupation, both *aza* and village officials re-discovered and re-evaluated *fengshui* as vehicle for understanding how Yomitan residents related to the natural environment. The map of Yomitan Village, drawn by a *fengshui* specialist for the City Master Plan issued in 1997, shows the energy (*qi*) of the place flowing into the central part (see below).





### Fengshui Map of Yomitan

This central part corresponds to the location of the US Air Force's Yomitan Auxiliary Airfield. Under Mayor Yamauchi, Yomitan Village demanded of US forces and the US-Japan Joint Committee the right to build a multi-purpose sports stadium and a 'Villagers' District' [52] in the vicinity of the Airfield. The former became the venue of the National Athletic Meet held in Okinawa in 1987. The latter eventuated in 1997, with the completion of the Yomitan Village Office inside the US Airfield. A Yomitan Village official explains that this *fengshui* drawing provided a philosophical basis for arguing that these public facilities needed to be built at this location; solid ground from which to make demands to the US forces (Interview, November 2007). Surrounding the Village Office inside the US Airfield, other public facilities for the villagers were built, collectively constituting a 'Villagers' District'. [53] These facilities were located right next to the parachute and other US military training sites, potentially endangering residents. Yet the choice of this site within the Airfield sent a clear message that the Villagers' needs and preferences came first, and that foreign bases would have to adjust to them.

*Fengshui* is an antithesis to the logistical and strategic priorities of military bases, which tend to neglect, and destroy, local particularities.[54] This antithesis is well-grounded in local knowledge. Unlike abstract political ideologies, it is something that the villagers can easily relate to. The entire village, both conservative and progressive political party supporters, following the mayor's lead, joined the protest against the US military bases and training. The whole village – the mayor and village officials, public service unions, farmers and fishers co-ops, teachers unions, women's organizations, youth groups, and senior citizens groups – staged protests against US military training, accidents and expansion of military facilities.[55] The proximity between living spaces and military training sites, which directly threatened villagers' lives, also explains why solidarity has been possible. Yomitan's political consensus contrasts with the political divisions in Nago City, for instance, where a majority of the population does not live in close proximity to the planned Futenma Replacement Facility site.



### Yomitan festival

In order to fully grasp the nature of Yomitan Village's resilience in the face of Tokyo's economic pressures, the way villagers dealt with wartime trauma must also be taken into account. During the Battle of Okinawa, mainland Japanese soldiers threatened villagers' lives more immediately than the US soldiers. Japanese soldiers, at the time already without sufficient resources to fight, deprived civilians of



food, and killed many, accusing them of being ‘spies’. In *Chibichirigama*, a natural limestone cave in Yomitan where residents escaped following the US landing in April 1945, 82 villagers (including 47 children) died of a ‘compulsory group suicide’. Many were obliged to kill their family members under pressure from the Japanese military. Self-sacrifice was forced upon civilians as an imperial virtue. For nearly 40 years the survivors’ experience was never told or discussed in the village. In the mid-1980s, however, supermarket owner Chibana Shōichi and others interviewed the survivors and recorded their experience. Some villagers condemned this breaking of silence, for hurting the survivors again, revisiting their scar while others saw it as a vehicle for reconstituting the community.



### Chibichirigama cave entrance

Norma Field [56] records how a flag-burning incident at the National Athletic Meet in Yomitan – carried out by Chibana – evoked the wartime trauma, stirring an internal debate over the war experience and what it meant to Yomitan residents. The *chibichirigama* story reveals the inseparability of ‘the civilian atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese army and the collective suicide committed by the Okinawan civilians’.[57] Field notes, ‘The paradoxical phrase “compulsory suicide” is meant to suggest the dark inmixing of coercion and

consent, of aggression and victimisation at work in the story of the caves’.[58] That is, the villagers’ engagement in an act glorified by mainland Japanese needs to be understood in light of the obsession with ‘proving themselves more loyal subjects than other Japanese’.[59] The trauma of war experience, collectively shared by the Yomitan residents, especially, ‘what happened in the cave’, is remembered as ‘in part retribution for the Okinawan role in Japanese aggression in Asia’.[60] Prior to the National Athletic Meet, many in Yomitan opposed the flag-raising ceremony, which the state insisted on, seeing the Rising Sun flag as symbol of Japanese imperialism and of Okinawan catastrophe. Mayor Yamauchi was forced to yield to pressure, to avoid spoiling the important occasion held at the baseball stadium built within the US Airfield, a result of Yomitan’s long struggle. But Chibana felt driven to burn the Rising Sun flag out of ‘his sensitivity to the ways in which inattention to the present overlaps with oblivion of the past’.[61]

The present that overlaps with the past refers to the conformity to the economic ‘models of success throughout Japan, the mainland as well as Okinawa, and increasingly, throughout the world in relentlessly familiar though deceptively various forms’.[62] Twenty years later, Chibana is a respected, elected member of the Village Assembly with responsibility for Yomitan’s community development.

The collective reflection on the scar of ‘compulsory group suicide’ in part explains the Yomitan residents’ resilience in the face of the base-oriented economy. Yomitan has resisted the general trend in the post-reversion years of achieving ‘parity with mainland Japan’. Most communities adopted that as their predominant goal, resulting in the imposition of mainland Japanese economic models and standards as well as base-oriented subsidies.

Yomitan village is recognized as an exceptionally successful case of ‘sustainable’ or

'endogenous' economic development that overcame economic dependence on the US military. The success is attributed to programs of local control over the external tourist capital, in regulating pollution, in successful marketing of local agricultural products, and effective co-ordination among various sectors of the local community that enhance employment and further economic activities. Ideological and philosophical aspects are also recognized as conducive to success, and Yomitan Village promotes itself as a 'cultural village'. Recovery of land from US military bases is also counted as crucial. Such accounts are accurate but not sufficient. What is missing is an understanding of political processes underlying the solidarity that enabled successful protest against the US military. The political consensus is partly explained by the immediate threat of military training and operations to which villagers had been daily exposed, but most important are the wartime trauma and major disruption of *aza* life. Yomitan's resistance to state-imposed base dependent economic policy has such roots. This consensus emerged in the course of debate over the meaning of the war experience at the village level. Yomitan's resilience is explained not only by the ability to 'spring back' but also to learn and adapt to new events and stimulation.

The *aza* structure provided stability, continuity and distinctive identity to Yomitan village life. This made it possible to resist pressure to achieve development according to mainland Japanese standards and to accommodate to the US military needs. At the same time, conceptually framing Yomitan's case as a 'sustainable development' or 'endogenous development' model may neglect the political dynamics of its community development.

Okinawa is a diverse community of protest and accommodation, made of many different local identities, each with its own history and legacies, yet also each identifying with, and representing Okinawan-ness. In this sense, each

local struggle contributes to the fabric of an 'Okinawan Struggle' against the continuing US military occupation, and other kinds of marginalisation that Okinawans have been historically subjected to.[63] Yomitan offers one important story, not only to Okinawans but also to other small island economies hosting US military bases, such as Puerto Rico and Guam. Yomitan's experience reveals that that economic dependence on bases and base-related subsidies and aid from the government can be overcome at the community level.

*Miyume Tanji is a Research Fellow at the Human Rights Education Centre for Advanced Studies in [Australia](#), Asia and the Pacific (CASAAP), Curtin University of Technology, Australia and the author of [Myth, Protest and Struggles in Okinawa](#).*

*Miyume Tanji wrote this article for The Asia-Pacific Journal. Posted on February 25, 2009.*

*Recommended citation: Miyume Tanji, Community, Resistance and Sustainability in an Okinawan Village. The Asia-Pacific Journal: 9-1-09.*

#### **On related topics see**

*Hideki Yoshikawa, [Dugong Swimming in Uncharted Waters: US Judicial Intervention to Protect Okinawa's "Natural Monument" and Halt Base Construction](#)*

*Sakurai Kunitoshi, [Okinawan Bases, the United States and Environmental Destruction](#)*

#### **Notes:**

1. Johnson, Chalmers. (2006) *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*. New York, Metropolitan Books. P.1

2. Johnson criticizes the privileges given to the US forces that disadvantage and humiliate the local population. These are guaranteed by the Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) between the US and allies that host its foreign military bases. The SOFA essentially warrants special privileges for US forces, exempting them from rights and obligations normally required under the host state's laws and regulations.
3. Jim Ife, & Frank Tesoriero. (2006) *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation*. French Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia. p.96-98.
4. Ibid. p.15.
5. *Okinawa Taimusu*, 31 December 2008.
6. Ibid.
7. Sasaki Masayuki. (1999) 'Sustainable development in Okinawa for the 21st century'. In Chalmers Johnson (ed.), *Okinawa: Cold War Island* (p. 247-260). Cardiff, CA: Japan Policy Research Institute. P.55-57
8. Ibid. p. 265-267
9. Sasaki Masayuki. (2000) 'Toshi to Nouson no Jizokuteki Naihatsuteki Hatten' [Sustainable endogenous development in urban and rural regions]. In Miyamoto Ken'ichi & Sasaki Masayuki (eds.), *Okinawa 21 Seiki e no Chousen* [Okinawa's Challenges in the 21st Century] p. 151-173. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. P. 158-159
10. Takara Sachika. (2006) 'Kichi no nai mirai o mezashite: chiiki no tokusei o ikashita machizukuri to jiritsu' [Aiming for a future without military bases: town development and independence relying on local characteristics] In Hatakeyama Dai & Kumamoto Hiroyuki (eds.), *Okinawa no datsu gunjika to chiikiteki shutaisei: hukkigo sedai no 'Okinawa'* [De-militarisation and local autonomy in Okinawa for the post-reversion generation]. Tokyo: Nishida Shoten. p.180
11. In 1962, 94.5% of Yomitan's households were engaged in farming. Yomitan Sonshi Henshu linkai. (1995). *Yomitan Sonshi* [Yomitan Village History] Vol.4 No. 3 Part 1. Namihira, Yomitan Son: Yomitan Son Yakuba. P.341
12. T. Yamauchi. (2007) *Okinawa Yomitan Son Kenpouryoku ga tsukuridasu Heiwa to Jichi* [The Constitutional Power of Okinawa's Yomitan Village Creates Peace and Autonomy]. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten. p.108-109
13. Sean Banasick. (2005). 'U.S. Military Bases and Sustainable Development in Okinawa'. *International Journal of Environmental Cultural Social and Economic Sustainability*, 1(1), p.143-150. p.143, 147.
14. Japanese social scientist Tsurumi Kazuko originally developed this notion, inspired by intellectuals in the Meiji period (1868-1912) such as Yanagita Kunio and Minakata Kumagusu. See Tsurumi Kazuko. (1996) *Naihatsuteki Hatten Ron no Tenkai* [The evolution of the endogenous development theory]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo.
15. Sasaki, 'Sustainable development in Okinawa for the 21st century'. See note 7 above.
16. Miyamoto Ken'ichi (2000) 'Okinawa no Iji Kanou na Hatten no tame ni' [For Okinawa's Sustainable Development]. In Miyamoto Ken'ichi & Sasaki Masayuki

- (eds.), *Okinawa 21 Seiki e no Chousen* [Okinawa's Challenges in the 21st Century p.1-30]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. p.25
17. Gavan McCormack (1998) *Okinawan Dilemmas: Coral Islands or Concrete Islands. JPRI Working Paper, 45*, April.
  18. Kohno Masaru. (2003) A Changing Ministry of International Trade and Industry In Jennifer Amyx & Peter Drysdale (eds.), *Japan's Governance: Beyond Japan Inc.* London and New York: Routledge.
  19. The decision to close Futenma Air Station followed the surge of anti-base protest in Okinawa caused by the 1995 kidnapping and gang-raping of a 12-year-old school girl by U.S. soldiers.
  20. See Banasick, 'U.S. Military Bases and Sustainable Development in Okinawa'. See note 12 above; Masamichi Inoue. (2007) *Okinawa and the U.S. Military: Identity Making in the Age of Globalization*; Miyagi Yasuhiro & Miyume Tanji. (2007) '[Okinawa and the Paradox of Public Opinion: Base Politics and Protest in Nago City, 1997-2007](#)'. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, (3 August, 2007).
  21. Banasick, 'U.S. Military Bases and Sustainable Development in Okinawa'. See note 13 above; Sasaki, 'Toshi to Nouson no Jizokuteki Naihatsuteki Hatten'. See note 9 above.
  22. Gavan McCormack. (2007) *Client State: Japan in the American Embrace*. London and New York: Verso. p. 163
  23. Nago shi chiiki koyou souzou kyougai kai [Nago City local employment creation committee] (2008) 'Kinyuu/jouhou Tokku'[The special financial and information technology zone]. Retrieved 20 December, 2008.
  24. Nago City. (2003) *Nago City International Information Technology and Financial Centre Nago City, Okinawa: Nago City Government*. Cited in Banasick, 'U.S. Military Bases and Sustainable Development in Okinawa', p. 145
  25. Ryukyu Shimpo, 11 November 2008.
  26. IT and Finance Special Zone Promotion Section, Nago City Office, Interview, November 2007.
  27. Miyagi Yasuhiro, & Miyume Tanji (2007) 'Okinawa and the Paradox of Public Opinion' See note 20 above.
  28. Ryukyu Shimpo, 11 November 2008.
  29. Ryukyu Shimpo, 12 November 2008.
  30. Miyagi Yasuhiro, & Miyume Tanji (2007) 'Okinawa and the Paradox of Public Opinion'. See note 20 above.
  31. Okinawa Ken Soumubu Zaisei-ka [Financial Planning Section] (2005) '[Shichouson Zaisei Hikaku Bunseki Hyo](#)' [Municipality public finance comparative chart],
  32. Okinawa Taimusu, 31 December 2008.
  33. Sasaki, 'Sustainable development in Okinawa for the 21st century'. p.253. See note 7 above.
  34. Miyamoto, 'Okinawa no Iji Kanou na Hatten no tame ni' p.25. See note 15 above.
  35. [Yomitan Son](#). (2008) 'Yomitan son no jinkou to toukei' [Population and Statistics of Yomitan Village]. Retrieved



31 October, 2008.

36. Nishikawa Jun (2004) *Naihatsuteki Hatten no Riron to Seisaku* [The theory and policy of endogenous development]. *Waseda Seiji Keizai Gaku Zasshi*, 354, 36-43.
37. Ife & Tesoriero, *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation*. p. 2-13. See note 3 above.
38. Holling, C. S. (1986) 'The resilience of terrestrial ecosystems: local surprise and global change'. In William C. Clark & R. E. Munn (eds.), *Sustainable Development of the Biosphere* p. 292-320. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
39. W. Neil Adger. (2000) 'Social and ecological resilience: are they related?' *Progress in Human Geography*, 24(3), 347-364. p.347
40. Richard Klein, J. T., Nicholls, Robert. J., & Thomalla, Frank. (2003). 'Resilience to natural hazards: How useful is this concept?' *Environmental Hazards*, 5, 35-45. p.38
41. Lebel, Louis. et al. (2006). '[Governance and the Capacity to Manage Resilience in Regional Social-Ecological Systems.](#)' *Ecology and Society*, 11(1) Retrieved 23 February 2009.
42. Ibid.
43. Yomitan Sonshi Henshu linkai. (2002b). *Yomitan Sonshi (Yomitan Village History) Vol.5 Part 1*. Zakimi, Yomitan Son: Yomitan Son Yakuba. p.86. 90.
44. Among the estimated 6,390 villagers who evacuated or escaped to the forests in the mountainous northern region of Okinawa, many starved to death or were killed by malaria. Ibid., p.35
45. Yomitan Village. (2008) [Yomitan Vaacharu Shiryoukan](#) [Virtual Archive] Retrieved 25 February.
46. T. Yamauchi & A. Mizushima. (1997). *Okinawa Yomitan Son no Chousen* [The Ventures of Yomitan Village, Okinawa]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. p. 8-10
47. Kinjo Jiro, the most prominent pottery artist in this style, migrated from Naha in 1972 and contributed to the establishment of a distinctively Yomitan pottery industry.
48. T. Hara. (2003). 'Okinawa, Yomitan-son no Toshi Keikaku Masta puran to "huu-sui"' [The City Planning Master Plan of Yomitan, Okinawa and 'Fengshui']. *Toshi Keikaku*, 52(4), p.21-24. p.22-23
49. L. Too. (1997). *Basic Fengshui*. Kuala Lumpur: Konsep Books. p.1
50. R. Warai. (2003). *Shiawase o yobu Ryukyu Huu sui (Ryukyuan fengshui for your happiness)*. Naha, Okinawa: Bohda-inku. p.1
51. Ife & Tesoriero, *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation*. p. 124. See note 3 above.
52. US-Japan Joint Committee is a key decision-making actor under the US-Japan Mutual Security Pact
53. The facilities include, among others, a concert hall where cultural events are held, the Yomitan Weaving Centre, the Yomitan Welfare Centre, a Democracy Forum, an Agricultural Forum and large parking areas.

54. Hara, 'Okinawa, Yomitan-son no Toshi Keikaku Masta puran to "huu-sui". p.23. See note 48 above.
55. Apart from the examples cited here, related struggles included demonstrations and picketing against the expansion of Sobe Beach (exclusively used by the US military), deployment of the Army First Special Group, and the runway reconstruction training in the Yomitan Auxiliery Airfield. Yamauchi & Mizushima, *Okinawa Yomitan Son no Chousen* p.15 See note 46 above.
56. N. Field. (1993) *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End*. (3rd ed.). New York: VIntage Books. p.33-104
57. Ibid, p.66.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid, p.80.
60. Ibid, p.87
61. Ibid, p.66.
62. Ibid, p.67.
63. M. Tanji, (2006). *Myth, Protest and Struggle in Okinawa*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.