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Shame and Silencing of Amejo in Okinawa: Examining Gendered and Militarized Violence

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by

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Abstract

Off the southern part of Japan is the small archipelago of Okinawa. Of Japan's total land mass, Okinawa makes up only 0.6% of the country, yet it hosts over 70% of the land occupied by U.S. military bases. Since the end of World War II, Okinawa has existed under dual-subjugation by Japan and the U.S., which has created the grounds for systemic gendered and militarized violence. Rape and sexual violence perpetrated by U.S. military servicemen continue to be the primary concern of Okinawan feminists pushing for the demilitarization of Okinawa. However, these concerns often get lost within heteronormative and male-masculinist national agendas seemingly disconnected from the gendered experience of militarized spaces. From these sites emerges the stereotype of the Amejo. Amejo is a derogatory term used against Okinawan women with sexual or romantic relationships with U.S. service members. It translates to "an Okinawan woman with a sexual appetite for American men." Despite being among the groups with the most intimate connections to U.S. military service members, making them vulnerable to sexual violence, they are notably absent from the discourse about peoples' safety and security in Okinawa and even face exclusion from the anti-base movement. This study illuminates the Amejo stereotype as a versatile weapon to shame and silence victims of gendered and militarized violence. Through a mixed methods approach of critical discourse analysis and autoethnography, I utilize a transnational feminist lens to reexamine current anti-base discourse through Amejo in Okinawa.

Keywords: Militarization, Gender-Based Violence, Imperialism, Transnational Feminisms, Okinawan Studies

Shame is a versatile tool to silence all people. Since this project is, in part, an auto-ethnographic account, I begin by offering my reflection on how trauma from the war and militarism has permeated my ancestral history.

For a long time, I felt ashamed for wanting to be Japanese rather than Okinawan; I first carried this shame in elementary school. I grew up in Hawai'i, where it was commonly asked, "What are you?" regarding ethnicity. I would respond, "Japanese," parroting my parents even though they are both Okinawans. I did not understand the difference between the two as a kid because it would require me to understand complicated concepts of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, and the ethnic genocide of the Ryukyuan people[1]. But even then, I understood I was asked, "What am I?" because I did not look stereotypically Japanese. I grew up hearing from classmates (and a teacher in high school) that Okinawans are not "real Japanese" because we have darker skin, hairy bodies, and broader shoulders. Instead of mentioning our culture or genealogy that existed centuries before, we were reduced to stereotypical physical traits that segregated us to be deemed less desirable.

My introduction to Okinawan history happened to be through militarized and gendered violence because, at that time, I was prematurely or unknowingly trying to understand my trauma from sexual abuse. Toward the beginning of my research, I struggled to get through passages of rape and sexual assault because it triggered memories I had kept to myself. I carried shame in knowing that what was over and done with could still haunt me to this day and immobilize me at times from moving forward. While reading about militarized and gendered violence was triggering, it also helped me understand how violence is systemic, and shame has a way of silencing all of us.

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[1] Reference to the indigenous poples living in the Ryūkyū archipelago ruled by the Ryūkyū Kingdom until the 14th century when it was “formally” annexed by Japan in 1609. (*Ryukyuans (Okinawans),* 2021)

My dad, I think, feels shame or hurt in his daughter critiquing the military, a career he had proudly dedicated 24 years of his life to. His stories about the military were always told with reflection and gratitude as it led him to meet my mom and later have my brother and me. For him, joining the military was a lifeline from poverty and loneliness. That is why I aim to critique the military as a system and not on an individual level. When we speak about military personnel, we must consider the systemic pipeline of the military - how the recruitment process, for example, targets poor or working-class men of color, particularly in the Pacific Islands, as a means of "seeing the world," while offering financial security, and lifelong benefits. *Who is in the position to say no to that?*

My mom, like my dad and other parents of older asian generations, talk about shame in coded ways - like through physical pain, as its tangibility might make it easier for them to understand. When I interviewed my mom for this project, there was a point where she talked about introducing Dad to Oji and Oba. Her eyes started to water, remembering the feelings of wanting to "disappear or quickly leave"; it was only the second time I had ever seen her cry. I used to think of my mom as stone-cold for this, but I have come to understand that for her, withholding tears was a way of staying strong - a sentiment of survival that got her through hard times. Even though Okinawa held memories of pain for her, she had always expressed a longing to return. Sometimes she lets herself entertain the idea of moving back but quickly dismisses these thoughts because she believes she has changed too much from living in America. My mom has now lived in the U.S. longer than she has been in Okinawa, so she does not see herself fitting-in anymore; her sisters affirm that by saying she "doesn't sound Okinawan." I wonder if my mom experiences shame in not feeling Okinawan or American enough and if this dysphoric feeling of being caught between two worlds makes her feel alone.

Then there are the family members in Okinawa with whom I have not shared my project yet. One of my aunties had been divorced twice, both to former military servicemen. From what she shared, the first was abusive; my dad says “he’s not worth remembering.” I am unsure why the second marriage ended, but I will not probe. Once, when I asked her about her opinion on the militarization of Okinawa, she mentioned her hatred toward Americans but quickly laughed it off.

My Oki Oba passed away last year at 105. She was alive and pregnant during the Battle of Okinawa, and from family stories, I learned that she had other children who died during the war. But we do not talk about them. When I asked my mom about what she knew, she did not know much either because she never asked Oki-Oba about the war since it never came up - "it was probably too painful for her to talk about," she said. So instead, we reminisced on the way Oki-Oba always made sure we ate and how she magically brought out an infinite amount of snacks until her picky grandchildren found one that we liked. We remembered how every time we would get up to leave after visiting her home, she would stuff yen into our pockets and demanded that we buy ourselves ice cream. "Oki Oba, ice cream doesn't cost this much!" we would tell her. Oki Oba was always generous; my mom says it is because there was nothing to eat during and after the war, so she made sure that we did not feel hungry like she had.

I share these reflections on myself and my family as a way of processing how militarism and imperialism have permeated our lives. We might think of the war as a single spectacle in the past, but trauma travels across time and space and comes up in strange ways, or as Cho might describe it, as a "haunting of the diaspora" (2008). While the war may have ended, the descendants are here, trying to make sense of the chaos around us - like the family member we

never met and the stories that are not shared - we try to make sense of the distance that was created through our collective shame and silence.

This study is deeply personal, just as it is political. A shared trauma is what brought me to theory as a means of understanding the silences within my family. I set out to understand how the militarization of Okinawa had produced gendered and militarized violence through the stereotype of the *Amejo*. In short, Amejo is a derogatory term used to describe Okinawan women who have relationships with members of the U.S. military. It breaks down into two parts: "*Ame*" is derived from "American," and "*jo*" is derived from the *jo-guu,* the Uchinaaguchi term that means hungry for' or '...lover of.' Jo-guu typically refers to one's food preference, but when the term refers to people, it carries a strong sexual connotation. Therefore, 'Ame-jo' describes an Okinawan woman with a sexual appetite for American men (Broudy, D., Simpson, P., & Arakaki, M., 2013, p.42). The Amejo stereotype is born out of the complex entanglement of Okinawa, Japan, and the U.S. It is an identity that has taken on multiple forms from “slut” or “traitor” to, more recently, an “international woman” which contrastingly, holds a positive connotation. The constant shifting of her identity renders the Amejo an elusive figure. I argue that the elusive nature of the Amejo stereotype makes it a versatile weapon to shame and silence victims of gendered and militarized violence. I offer this study as a tracing of Amejo through a transnational feminist lens to reexamine systemic militarized and gendered violence within the current anti-base discourse in Okinawa. Given the nature of this topic, I will be going into some detail about rape and sexual violence.

Chronology of Militarized and Gendered-Based Violence in Okinawa from World War II

Despite making up only 0.6% of Japan's total land mass, Okinawa currently hosts approximately 70% of the land occupied by U.S. military bases since World War II, which is a 58.8% increase since Okinawa reverted to Japan after U.S. control in 1971 (*Base-related data: Okinawa Prefectural Government Washington D.C. office - official site*). The disproportionate burden of U.S. military bases on Okinawa Prefecture, compared to that of the rest of Japan, makes visible Okinawa's dual subjugation left by a legacy of colonial violence by two dominant world powers.

The Battle of Okinawa - also known as one of the bloodiest land battles in the Pacific - killed up to an estimated 150,000 Okinawa citizens caught in the crossfire between the U.S. and Japan (*Battle of okinawa: The National WWII Museum: New Orleans,* 1970). This number does not even account for the Okinawan men forced to take up arms with the Japanese Imperial Army[2], the Himeyuri nurses[3], or those forced to serve as comfort women[4] alongside trafficked women from Korea and China, mainland Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Việt Nam, Thailand, East Timor, and the Dutch East Indies. The battle had utterly destroyed the island, clearing everything that existed before. As a prize for winning the war, the U.S. claimed Okinawa as a territory and viewed the land as a blank slate in an ideal location for military strategy. The islands would later become known as a "Keystone of the Pacific," where it also served as a pit stop for G.I.s turning from and going into combat for future wars (Shimabuku,

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[2] See Landrove, J. (2018). *Military Tactics in the Battle of Okinawa*. Narratives of World War II in the Pacific. https://www.tamucc.edu/library/exhibits/s/hist4350/page/tactics#:~:text=The%20Okinawan%20men%20were%20forced,was%20Lieutenant%20Colonel%20Hiromichi%20Yahara.

[3] See Himeyuri Peace Museum. (2001). Testimonials--Himeyuri Student Nurses. Manoa (Honolulu, Hawaii. 1989), 13(1), 142–151. https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2001.0011

[4] See Young, V. (2020). Inciting the past: Okinawan literature and the decolonising turn. Japan Forum (Oxford, England), 32(4), 577–600. https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1807582

2010). Contrastingly, the indigenous people who survived were deemed dispensable and a liability. Most people do not know that in 1945-1946, the entire population of surviving Okinawans was imprisoned in 16 internment camps (Suliman, 2022). Rape and sexual violence by military servicemembers were rampant within and around these camps[5].

> Stories of [GIs] sneaking into civilian dwellings and raping women were told on a daily basis… For American G.I.s, occupied Okinawa was an area of extraterritoriality. Women could not go outside with ease. Even if they stayed in their dwellings, they did not know when a G.I. would find their way inside (Shima and Committee for Editing Shima Masu's Memoirs 1986, as cited in Shimabuku, 2010).

For the next 27 years, Okinawa would remain under U.S. rule. During U.S. occupation, Okinawa was run by the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR), a sham neocolonial democracy in which Okinawans were neither Japanese nor American citizens and thus denied constitutional rights. The lack of citizenship and rights rendered the people vulnerable to crimes by military servicemembers because there were no actual repercussions. Furthermore, the U.S. servicemembers were protected by a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)[6] that "essentially allowed the military to police itself" (Cerretti, 2016 p. 802). Okinawan feminist Nobuko Karimata explains, "What angered us Okinawan(s) the most was that the GIs used to get away with a lot of the crimes…Everything from a traffic violation to rape resulted in the same verdict: innocent" (Keyso, 2000, p.87). In Okinawan history, 1955 remains significant because it marked the infamous "Yumiko-chan Incident." Yumiko was a 6-year-old girl whose body was found in a pile of landfill; she was raped and murdered by Sergeant Isaac J. Hurt (Serrano &

[5] See Takazato, S. (2000). Report from Okinawa: Long-term U.S. Military Presence and Violence Against Women. *Canadian Woman Studies* , *19* (4). Retrieved from https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/7929

[6] An agreement made between Japan (country hosting military presence in Okinawa) and U.S. (country deploying military servicemembers). See III Marine Expeditionary Force/Marine Corps Installations Pacific. (n.d.). How SOFA works (Off-Duty Incidents).

Mitchell, 2021). Rapes and sexual assault happened so often that at one point, Commanding General, General Wallace had threatened the use of the death penalty for rape in an effort to mitigate the occurrences; however the effort was unsuccessful (Cited in Shiambuku, 2010, p.360).

Far from the "island paradise" that Okinawa is marketed as today, the island was a hot and barren landscape that no one wanted to be deployed to. Okinawa became a "dumping ground for Army misfits," and soldiers soon became bored and miserable. To boost soldier morale and to protect the chastity of mainland Japanese children and women, Japan and the U.S. had institutionalized prostitution through the implementation of bars and brothels. An estimated 100+ "'G.I. bars' flourished n the small village of Henoko during this period (Vietnam War), with many also functioning as second-floor brothels…" (Rabson, 2017, p.601).

In the fall of 1995 - almost 40 years to the exact date of the Yumiko-chan Incident - an estimated 85,000 Okinawans rallied together to protest the U.S. military base presence (Lee, 1995), amounting to the most prominent political demonstration on the island. The protests were ignited by the gang-rape of a 12-year-old girl by three U.S. military servicemen in a small town called Kin - the host of the marine corps Camp Hansen. The girl (who remains unnamed) was walking home from school, stopping at a stationary store. Upon leaving, she was ambushed at knifepoint by three American military servicemembers who kidnapped her in a car they had rented for the Labor Day weekend. They grabbed her, threw her in the backseat, then beat and raped her in an isolated field. After the assault, they dumped the girl from the car - bleeding and unconscious - then threw her schoolbooks and their underwear in the trash. The girl managed to get to a nearby house for help, and unlike many cases of rape and sexual assault, this one caught the attention and support of the public (Johnson, 2019).

Kendrick Ledet, Rodrico Harp, and Marcus Gill were all found guilty of rape ("Americans Charged," 1995). Gill and Harp were convicted of seven years of imprisonment, while Ledet spent six and a half (Pollack, 1996); all three men were released in 2003. During the trial, when recounting their reasoning, Gill explained that the three had no money to pay for a sex worker, so he proposed, "Let's go rape a girl...It was just for fun" (Johnson, 2019).

Exacerbating the pain and anger felt by the victim and the community, Admiral Richard Macke - the then commander of the U.S. military forces in the Pacific - commented to reporters, "I think it was absolutely stupid, I've said several times. For the price they (the U.S. Servicemen) paid to rent the car, they could have had a girl (i.e., prostitute)" (Pine, 1995). This comment made by Macke is echoed across many rape charges that occur in and around bases. Rape is often justified by whether or not a payment was made, hence the commodification of women's and girls' bodies. For example, in 1968, "a woman in Henoko filed rape charges against a soldier at the ordinance depot, but he (the perpetrator) avoided a court martial by testifying that he had 'paid her money,' as the company's first sergeant announced triumphantly..." (Rabson, 2017 as cited in Rabson, 2012) In both cases, Macke and the perpetrator of the 1968 case justify and excuse rape by ignoring the fact that consent cannot be bought.

The commodification and degradation of women's bodies are especially true the more significant the economic gap is between the country deploying military presence and the country receiving military presence (Takazato, 2000, p.43). While the 1995 rape case was notorious for its violence, the tragedy did not end there. Three years after release, Ledet sexually assaulted and strangled a 22-year-old woman to death before committing suicide (Allen, 2006). During the 1995 protest, Suzuyo Takazato, a prominent Okinawan feminist and peace activist, proclaimed,

"The past 50 years Okinawa has been sacrificed. There have been crimes committed, human rights violations, and all-around suffering. We don't want it anymore." (Lee, 1995).

The rape and murder of Yumiko and the 1995 rape case are by no means markers of the start or end of violence perpetrated against women and children in Okinawa; these were but two in a long string. The last major anti-base protest was in 2016, instigated by another violent case. This time it was 20-year-old Rina Shimabukuro who was raped and murdered by Kenneth Franklin Gadson, an ex-marine working as a civilian contractor on Kadena Airbase (Aritza, 2016). Tens of thousands rallied together once again to protest the presence of the U.S. military bases; signs at these demonstrations read NO RAPE, NO BASE (2016, June 19).

The consequences of the war have and continue to impact Okinawans today. The Japanese Imperial Army's institutionalization of sexual slavery through the "comfort women" system during the war laid the grounds for U.S. militarized sex work in Okinawa. The lack of opportunity and economic power forced displaced Okinawan women into militarized sex work to provide for their families. These women were viewed as both the "sacrificed women" of patriarchal families *and* Japan - who deemed Okinawan women's bodies dispensable. Okinawan feminist scholar Linda Isako Angst critiqued the patriarchal use of the term "sacrifice" used at first by protests primarily led by women concerning human rights to the appropriated use seen later by dominating protests led by (male) landowners. Angst examined the language used on multiple sides of protest in response to the rape of the unnamed 12-year-old girl in the 1995 rape case who was referred to as the "sacrifice of the schoolgirl." Angst critiques the use of "sacrifice" to describe rape and the coerced sexual labor that colored the post-war era as it glorifies and distracts from the reality that these women were trapped in the sexual economy of militarization (Angst, 2001 & 2009). That said, the dual subjugation of Okinawa through colonization and

imperialism is intimately linked to the systemic gendered and militarized violence in Okinawa today. I also want to be careful with speaking about these women in overly metaphorical terms. Too often, women's bodies are objectified as bodies of land - a narrative we often associate with hetero-patriarchal conquest from settler colonial imaginations. I will return to this critique of patriarchal language and the appropriation of rape cases later in the study to examine the ways in which patriarchal language used in anti-base activism contributes to the silencing of Amejo.

Introduction to the *Amejo* stereotype: Shame and Silence

While the public mourned the loss of Rina Shimabukuro, there were also rumors[7] circulating that Rina had a secret affair with Gadson, which would make her an Amejo (Johnson, pp. 10-11). But Rina was just raped and murdered; why did it matter whether or not she was an Amejo?

The Okinawan public's fixation on Rina's relationship with Gadson stems partly from a culture of victim blaming and slut-shamming, which is both complex and insidious in the discussion of Amejo, particularly because it works to disempower and silence victims of violence while upholding patriarchal hegemony and justifying the militarization of Okinawa. Notable from Johnson's observation of these rumors is what was said *and by whom*. Those who told or believed the rumors about Rina's secret affair with Gadsen tended to support base presence while "Anti-base activists, on the other hand, blamed the U.S. military for stating any rumors about a romance" (Johnson, p.15). If Amejo are blamed for the violence perpetrated against them, then conveniently, the U.S. military and Japan are absolved from responsibility for

[7] "When I traveled to Okinawa the next year, people were still talking about the murder…In the absence of facts and closure, rumors spread. Rina Shimabukuro and Kenneth Gadson were secretly dating, some locals told me; it wasn't a random crime. She was pregnant with his child. She was pregnant with his child, and his wife had found out, and his wife was the one who killed her, Gadson had just disposed of the body, then taken the hit for his wife," (p. 10-11).

creating the grounds for systemic violence; thus, Amejo are utilized as a scapegoat in international conflict.

But Okinawans may have called Rina an Amejo for its other use, *hikokumin*, the Japanese term that means an "unpatriotic individual" or traitors to the Okinawan anti-base/military movement. When looking into the militarization of Okinawa and the numerous unchecked crimes committed by the U.S. military, it becomes clear why many Okinawans, especially those of older generations, have a disdain toward Americans and, thus, why they would view Okinawan women forming intimate relationships with military service members as traitorous. However, this banishment is painful and arguably regressive to the galvanizing base reduction/removal activism as there are Amejo who cannot seem to find a place in the anti-base movement.

> "Okinawan' war bride' normalized by international marriage has difficulty finding a comfortable space in the Okinawan feminist movement against militarized violence that speaks on behalf of women violated, exploited, or brainwashed by the U.S. military. Furthermore, few Amerasians in Okinawa would be caught dead in the visual act of protest. Yet, Okinawan activism has come to the point where individuals who experience the most impact by the U.S. military are precisely the ones who find difficulty in participating in 'the movement…." (Shimabuku, 2010, p.371)

Many Amejo have echoed the same sentiments from Shimabuku's analysis, sharing their seemingly conflicting positionalities as a barrier to part-take in anti-base activism. In a book chapter from Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific, 20-year-old Nari Maeshiro shares:

> "Some of my girlfriends who go out with American men are treated quite badly by their parents. When the mother of one of my good friends discovered that her daughter had a military boyfriend, her mom started washing her clothes separately from her daughter's. In fact, she saw to it that the entire family's laundry was effectively separated at wash time from my friend's. Of course, the message was that my friend was now filthy and obviously contaminated by some unpleasant foreign infestation." (p.42)

In another instance, Mariko Higa, an Okinawan woman married to a U.S. military servicemember, shared her experience when she first started working on the base.

> "When I took the job, I was afraid I might feel some discrimination from other Okinawans for working on base. There are plenty of people here on the island who think it's wrong to work there. In fact, I have a friend who works on base, and one day she found a piece of paper taped to her car windshield that read, "hikokumin" (traitor). Our cars are really visible because we have stickers on them identifying us as base workers" (Keyso, 2000, p.100).

In Maeshiro and Higa's stories, we see how Amejo - whether used in place of slut or hikokumin - experience exclusion and banishment from their families and nations, which may explain why Amejo are invisible in anti-base discourse and gate kept from the anti-base movement. However, Amejo cannot represent themselves if they are shamed into silence. The gate-keeping of anti-base activism and the selective visibility of violent cases also speak to more complicated questions like - Who can claim innocence? Who is excluded or missing from the anti-base movement?

Problematic idealization of the victim narrative in the nationalistic discourse

Even after her death, the public prodded Rina's privacy and questioned her innocence; however, in cases of sexual violence, there is no such thing as a "perfect" or "ideal" victim in reality. The fallacy of a "perfect" victim is pervasive in sensational national media so that it works to shame, silence, and erase victims of gendered and militarized violence by creating an exclusionary ideal that determines one's innocence. Rina, Yumikochan, and the unnamed girl in 1995 are the three most well-known cases that garnered massive political action among Okinawans, but they are not the only cases. This leads me to wonder - what separates Rina's case from Yumiko and the unnamed girl of 1995? Moreover, what separates these cases from the normalized violence in Rest & Recuperation zones[8], the red light district, and even further back to the "sacrificed" women and girls of the post-war era who rarely appear in current discourse? By public perception, the difference between Rina and Yumiko-chan, as well as the unnamed schoolgirl, was a matter of innocence. The seemingly incongruent notions of sexuality and violence to the presumed innocence of youth girls may make the severity of militarized and gendered violence in Okinawa more visible. Notably, mentions of these cases within anti-base rhetoric always point to their ages concerning their gender and sexuality; Yumiko was 6, and the unnamed schoolgirl was 12 (schoolgirls are another prominent symbol of innocence in Japan); therefore, they are easily transformed into symbols of purity and innocence that are then used to represent Okinawa's subjugated positionality in international conflict.

This narrative carries some truth; "If history is written by the victorious, then Okinawans, who only know defeat, have no history" (Shimabuku, 2019, p. 355). The genealogies of Okinawa

[8] See Ginoza, A. (2016). R&R at the Intersection of US and Japanese Dual Empire: Okinawan Women and Decolonizing Militarized Heterosexuality. *American Quarterly, 68*(3), 583-591,856. http://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=http://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/r-amp-at-intersection-us-japanese-dual-empire/docview/1829748033/se-2?accountid=13265

are rooted within a long history of marginalization seen by its long struggle for state sovereignty. In the article, "Petitioning subjects: Miscegenation in Okinawa from 1945 to 1952 and the crisis of sovereignty," Shimabuku writes, "...Okinawans actively negotiated the relationship between their bodies (i.e., sexuality) and a new spatial arrangement of an island entirely engulfed by the U.S. military" (p. 356). In many ways, Okinawa and its people are yet another victim of Japanese and U.S. imperialism. As a result, anti-base activists have been pushed into a corner that has consistently called for the negotiation of their agenda, which includes "the everyday violence of environmental damage, aeronautical noise, accidents caused by aircraft and military vehicles, together with sexual violence" (Kimura, 2016).

One might assume the visibility of these rape cases to be a step in the right direction for the goals of Okinawan feminists and activists. However, when enlisted by the state's agenda, this narrative often appropriates cases of rape by utilizing them to garner public attention, only to swiftly overgeneralize the discourse to sovereignty and environmental pollution and not to the specific safety issues for marginalized genders. Moreover, while these cases temporarily unite Okinawans, it is exclusionary and incomplete as it lends themselves to the fragile ideal of a "pure victim" determined by virginity.

I return to Angst's critique on the patriarchal use of the term "sacrifice" and the appropriation of rape. Nationalist discourse in Okinawa is marked by patriarchal and heteronormative language, "In their rhetoric, the violation of the girl's virginal body is equated with the violation of the Okinawan body politic, and thus Japan's discrimination toward Okinawa" (Angst, 2001, p.252). In short, metaphorical language can be a powerful tool for activism and organizing, but it can also lend itself to overgeneralizing oppression to the point where the original victim is overlooked. The visibility of oppressed subjects is always changing

to the needs of the state, hence the use of the word appropriation to describe this phenomenon. In this way, the inclusion of rape victims is selective; their traumas are used as hooks and igniters for protests but ultimately fade into the background. Nationalist agendas oppose feminist agendas in that they do not recognize or prioritize gendered safety as a concern. The repeated justification for the U.S. presence in Okinawa is that they are there to protect the security of the people, but ongoing gendered and systemic violence puts this into question. Okinawan feminists put on the anti-base agenda *and* international agenda that women's security should be included in discussing security for all.

The appropriation of rape cases in Okinawa is intimately linked to the Amejo stereotype attached to Rina, for instance. The Amejo stereotype conflicts with the heteronormative and male-masculinist ideals of a "pure victim" and the victimhood narrative of Okinawa. A victim's perceived innocence by the public determines whether she is met with care, support, and alliance or invalidated, as seen in the rumors about Rina. While the military is inherently a violent system that impacts all people, I am explicitly referring to instances of sexual violence perpetrated by U.S. military servicemembers against women who are deemed Amejo. These Amejo are not only dismissed but they are also blamed for the sexual violence perpetrated against them. This is because their sexuality and desires exist beyond the boundaries set for them by military and capitalistic use. Amejo do not seem to be considered prostitutes since it seems to focus on dating or marriage between military service members as opposed to a direct exchange of sex for money. However, there are similarities in the way these women are shamed and utilized by the nation-state. In the book *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*, Moon studies the lives of Korean prostitutes in the 1970s and illuminates their invisible but evident presence in US-Korea military politics. Like the prostitutes in Korea's camptowns, Amejo are

also arguably "used to facilitate relations among men and "soften" the harsh and impersonal political environment in which men perform their public duties." (Moon, 1997, p.85) In this way, rape and sexual violence threaten the image of positive relations between Japan and the U.S. by deflecting the accountability for systemic violence back onto the victim.

Who and Where are Amejo?

Amejo are among the groups with the most intimate connections to U.S. military service members, alongside the women who work as hostesses in redlight districts. Since the reversion in 1972, most women working in bars and clubs around the bases are Filipino migrants who replaced Okinawans and are there on entertainment visas[9]. These women suffer from bad working conditions, coerced labor, and normalized sexual violence. They, too, are vulnerable to militarized and gendered violence yet are notably absent from dominant nationalist discourse about peoples' safety and security in Okinawa. While more research could be done on the connections between Amejo to Filipino women in Okinawa, for the sake of congruency, the rest of this essay will focus on connections between Amejo and U.S. service members.

Amejo, who is born from the imperialization and militarization of Okinawa, currently exists in militourist spaces. Coined by Teresia K. Teaiwa, militourism describes a convergence of militarism, tourism, and U.S. imperialism (2016). Ginoza identifies and analyzes Rest and Recuperation (R&R) zones as examples of militourist spaces in Okinawa as they are underpinned by a sexual economy of power (Ginoza, 2016). These spaces are anti-historical in that it aims to erase colonial violence through the seductive image of hypervisible and sexualized

[9] There are many sources that touch on the trafficking of Filipina migrants on entertainment visas, one place to start is here: Johnson, A. (2020). Daisy's Story: Filipina Migrants and Other Women in the Shadow of the U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa. *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, *12*(21), 1–9. https://apjjf.org/2020/21/Johnson.html

indigenous women who are exotified through tourism. I focus on the Amejo stereotype because her existence challenges the "pure victim" ideology and makes visible the complex gendered experience of militarization in Okinawa today while challenging our notions of solidarity with women who are victims of gendered and militarized violence.

Part of what makes the stereotype a powerful weapon to shame and silence victims of violence is its ambiguity, and interviews with various women in Okinawa suggest that there is also a vital visual component. As one woman puts it, "You know one when you see that kind of girl" (Crissey & Rabson, 2017). In Vice Asia's mini-documentary "*Japan's Stereotypes Against Amejo in Okinawa*" (2021), the news host Hanako Montgomery asks Nanoki - an Okinawan woman and self-proclaimed Amejo - "How would you explain the style of an Amejo?" Nanoki responds: "There is no real universal style, but if I'd have to put my finger on it, I'd say straight black hair." When asked why that is, she explains, "I think American men have that image of Asian women having straight black hair. The color is not common in other areas of the world; they just think our hair is cute and beautiful. That's why we leave our hair that way." She adds that the Amejo style consists of crop tops, tight skirts, and "wearing things that show your body lines…" The visual component of the stereotype is important because, as previously mentioned, Amejo is used synonymously to "slut". Slut, by definition, "is now commonly used on both sides of the Atlantic to refer to promiscuous women in a derogatory fashion," (Westcott, 2011) this definition is starkly similar to the weaponization of the Amejo stereotype. How many times have society nitpicked victims of rape and sexual violence and dismissed their cases based on details like what they were wearing, who they were with, and what time they were out?

Also visible is the race of the man Amejo are with, which has produced subsets of the stereotype. *Hakujo* refers to Amejo, who date white men, *spajo* to Latino men, and the most

common: *kokujo,* who dates black men. These distinctions come from the racial segregation that occurs within the nightclub culture of militourist spaces. Like Nanoki, “Women transformed their appearances, mannerisms, and speech to some approximation of the race and the culture of the men they wanted to date. With deep tans, gold jewelry, and slang, they tried to creep toward a foreign world” (Johnson, 2016, p. 20). While stereotypes of Asian women as submissive and hyper-sexual are more known, little is said about the stereotyping that occurs on the other end by Amejo. The racialized subsets of the stereotype demonstrate a fetishization that can occur both ways as they are based on sexist and racist stereotypical imaginations. The conversations around desire, race, and gender lead to a much more complicated topic that this study will not cover as it deserves its own focus to capture all the nuances. That said, interestingly, there is no version of Amejo who date Asian Americans, which may reflect Okinawan imaginations of "American" masculinity based on stereotypes that exclude Asian-American men. Applied to the context of my family, the racialization of Amejo may explain the different relations my mom and aunty have to the Amejo stereotype. My dad has been a citizen of America since he was born and raised in the U.S., but he is ethnically Okinawan-Japanese. Since citizenship is not visible, but race and ethnic identities are, my dad blended in with Okinawan civilians until he wore his U.S. military uniform. This may explain why my mom has never directly been called Amejo (although she speculates people have called her this behind her back) while my aunty, who was married to a Mexican man, has been. The ambiguity and fluidity around my mom and aunty's identity as Amejo adds nuance to the stereotype, even if it remains ambiguous. My aim of tracing the amejo in all the ambiguity is not to pinpoint a definition of Amejo. Rather, I am arguing that the elusiveness of the Amejo shakes the foundations of the "pure victim narrative" in that it does not exist and is a harmful construct that shames and silences victims of gendered and militarized

violence who do not fit the restrictive and vague image of “innocence”. The long-term militarization of Okinawa have pushed women to see their bodies as sites of negotiations or resistance. Some women date military service members for the opportunity, whether in employment, a way to the U.S., or an escape; whatever it may be, negotiations and sacrifices have always been made. For example, Nanoki intentionally keeps her straight black hair because she knows it attracts service members. But if Nanoki were to become a victim of rape or sexual assault, would the state and the public meet her in solidarity?

Reclaiming Amejo and its complications

The stigma of the Amejo stereotype persists today, but in recent years, there appears to be a growing reclamation of the derogatory term.

> "Nowadays, our society strongly values ‘internationalism.’ So, going out with an American man is often viewed as a positive, especially by other young women. As such, the expression 'Ame-jo' has new meanings, more positive feelings connected to it. Some girls respect 'Ame-jo'" (Broudy et al,. 2013).

Maeshiro's observation of Okinawan society's subtle and slow shift in the view of Amejo from a stance of shame to respect for their internationalism is one of the main messages of the Vice documentary -"*Japan's Stereotypes Against Amejo in Okinawa*" - that I previously mentioned. How does reclaiming Amejo interact with the U.S.'s desired image as democratic, modern, and market-oriented? How might the image of Amejo as an international woman play into international politics regarding militarism? The praise Amejo may receive for her internationalism is reminiscent of the transformations of the Yanggongju in Korea. In the *Haunting of the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and The Forgotten War*, Grace M. Cho

analyzes the figure of the yanggongju as an elusive and thus adaptive figure that reflects the geopolitics of Korea and its generational hauntings on the Korean Diaspora. According to Cho, the Yanggongju endured several imposed identity transformations from "Camptown prostitute" to "Yankee whore" to "Western Princess," amongst others; notably, the Yanggongju once existed as the "U.N. lady."

> "During this period, the South Korean government began to recognize the role that camptown prostitutes played in building the nation and attempted to socialize camptown sex workers into a new identity - not as a struggling woman negotiating the poverty of postwar Korea but as "diplomat" fulfilling her duties to the nation by keeping U.S. interests engaged…It was during this era that the official discourse of military prostitution framed the Yanggongju as a symbol of Korea's national security whose body became a site of control as well as a playing field for negotiating international relations" (pp.107-108).

Cho's approach to tracing the Yanggongju as an elusive figure that exists now as a diasporic haunting was a primary inspiration for my approach to Amejo. Amejo, in a sense, are also elusive figures subject to gendered and militarized violenc; what is more, like the Yanggongju, they are excluded from the push for genuine safety and security. The Yanngongju was constantly reconfigured for the nation's needs, and the Amejo, who was once hidden away to preserve the nationalist rhetoric of purity and innocence, has become visible as a model of modernity and internationalism. Like the Yanggongju, the visibility of Amejo is constantly fluctuating but never for her own accord or benefit. For these reasons, I meet the reclamation of the Amejo stereotype with skepticism, but I also recognize that the reclamation of Amejo gets far more complicated.

Complications in reclaiming the Amejo continued

In this final section, my study sheds light on the complexity of reclaiming the Amejo through the close reading of Vice Asia's mini-documentary "*Japan's Stereotypes Against Amejo in Okinawa*" (2021) because it offers a relatively recent perspective of Amejo through the U.S. perspective. Additionally, the documentary demonstrates the power of the media to construct a narrative. The documentary follows Nanoki, an aspiring R&B artist born and raised in Okinawa and a self-proclaimed Amejo. The scene opens up with hip-hop music playing in the background; it appears to be Nanoki rapping in Japanese. The camera pans over a youth girls' hip-hop dance group dancing in the American Village to an audience of Americans, Japanese, and Okinawa locals. Some girls wear do-rags, cornrows, and crop tops (which are uncommon for Japanese women due to the conservative culture). While the girls are dancing, the reporter, Hanako Montgomery, says, "Nanoki said that she used to suffer from low self-esteem, but adopting aspects of American culture helped her regain confidence." The scene cuts to Montgomery and Nanoki watching the dance performance.

> "Why did you have such low self-esteem?" asks Montgomery
>
> "I just didn't like myself and my look. And I was quite fat back then. But thanks to finding this kind of straightforward (U.S.) culture, I was able to get my confidence back. I think self-confidence is a tool to improve your appearance as a whole. This sort of confidence has a big impact on how I look and who I am today…." Nanoki responds.

For Nanoki, the dancers, and other Amejo, U.S. values of individualism - and what they believe to be a generally less conservative culture - appear to be a source of liberation for them. Experimenting with varying forms of expression, such as clothing, dance, hair, and makeup, may offer other avenues to exist beyond Okinawans' marginalization in relation to Japanese societal

norms. However, the documentary seems to glide by the blatant stereotyping and appropriation of Black culture by Amejo. Many scholars have noted that *kokujo* are among the most common type of Amejo, which leads to complicated topics of fetishization that happen on both ends[10]. This critique assesses the factors leading to Amejo seeking liberation through Americans and critically examines whether it is as liberating as U.S. media portrays.

The documentary aims to reclaim the Amejo stereotype as a form of feminist empowerment through resistance to Japan's conservative culture. While, again, parts of this may be true for some Amejos, this documentary subscribes to the narrative that assumes the U.S. is the leader of the free world and modernity while encouraging internationalism without social justice. This curated image has traveled globally and is built upon a romanticization of America through overinvestment in the American Dream while politically numbing the indigenous population. Long-term militarization has colonized and governed our physical, psychological, and emotional spaces in the form of normalized trauma.

A crucial factor that grants the U.S. agency over the locals' perceptions of the bases is the colonization of space and place epitomized by selective access to militarized spaces through creating physical boundaries. The bases cover about 20% of Okinawa's main island and are physically separated from civilian accessibility through barbed wire and gates; these spaces serve as a constant reminder to Okinawans that these parts of their land are inaccessible. However, on certain days, like the Fourth of July, the gates open, allowing Okinawans a brief look into these spaces to take part in stereotypical parts of American culture - like eating hot dogs, and pizza at the Fourth of July carnival. Meanwhile, places like American Village [11]- a former military base

[10] See Prasso, S. (2006). Who's Playing Whom. In *The Asian mystique: Dragon ladies, geisha girls, & our fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (1st ed., pp. 296–307). essay, PublicAffairs. https://search.library.pdx.edu/permalink/f/p82vj0/CP71129862620001451

[11] Setting of the hip-hop dance scene in the Vice documentary

turned into an entertainment and tourist destination with themes of American nostalgia - are always accessible and serve as a hub for military servicemen, locals, and tourists. But these selective spaces play with U.S. visibility in the memories of Okinawans. They exist to normaliz militarization using distractions that instill a false sense of positive cultural exchange between U.S. military servicemembers and Okinawans despite occurring on grounds only made possible through colonial and imperial violence.

The bases, while always present, exist as an enigma in the psyche of Okinawans due to their curated and selective accessibility. On top of that, Okinawans are constantly told that U.S. service members must stay in Okinawa for their safety in case of war, but the long record of gendered and militarized violence in Okinawa puts the justification of "safety" into question - *safety for who?* We ask. These conditions create the grounds for fantasization as a means to fill in knowledge gaps and an overinvestment in idealized American masculinity for liberation. This could explain why some women in Okinawa may project their sense of security and liberation on American men, and aspects of this may be true to some extent given the conditions of Okinawa that Amejo is bounded by. For these reasons, I approach the reclaiming of the Amejo stereotype, which is pushed by the U.S., with skepticism. While Amejo, like Nanoki, might find liberation from Japanese-societal norms as an Okinawan woman, this is again only made possible by the normalized militarization of Okinawa. Furthermore, these interactions are colored by fetishization, appropriation, and stereotyping by U.S. military servicemembers *and* Amejo.

Conclusion

The militarization and imperialization of Okinawa by the U.S. and Japan are directly linked to the systemic gendered and militarized violence in Okinawa today. This violence has led

to the economy of militourism, which has created grounds that foster relationships between U.S. military servicemembers and Okinawan women - known as Amejo. While Amejo are amongst the women with the most frequent and intimate relationships with U.S. military service members, they experience exclusion on multiple levels. Amejo are constantly moving in and out of visibility from being viewed as "sluts" or traitors to the anti-base movement to, more recently, an "international woman" - a potentially premature reclaiming of the Amejo. It suffices to say that Amejo do not experience much autonomy over their visibility. Their exclusion is especially insidious when Amejo are victims of direct sexual violence and are denied innocence and solidarity amongst the Okinawan community - especially anti-base activists. Again, Amejo experience intimate and frequent interactions with U.S. military service members, which should be reason enough for them to have space and voice within the anti-base movement. All of these complex issues I discuss in this study lead to my main point that the Amejo stereotype has become a versatile weapon to shame and silence victims of gendered and militarized violence, counterintuitive to galvanizing demilitarization support amongst Okinawans.

The U.S. influence over Okinawans' perceptions of the bases is a complex and nuanced issue that this paper cannot fully address. While this study focused specifically on Okinawan women - as they are the only ones called Amejo (as far as I know) - I also briefly mentioned the shifts occurring within militourist spaces. Filipino women on entertainment visas are still among the predominant group that work in the red-light district since the reversion. They, too, are notably absent from anti-base discourse despite being among the most vulnerable groups to sexual violence by military servicemembers. The connections between Amejo and Filipino women lead me to wonder how and if Filipino women in Okinawa are active in the movements

for demilitarization. If not, I wonder how citizenship might play into one's "right-of-way" in participating in the anti-base or, specifically, feminist-led anti-base movements.

I offer this study as a tracing of Amejo through a transnational feminist lens to practice an anti-imperialist feminist studies framework that "decenter the United States as a nation-state formation and recenter first people…" (Teaiwa, 2019, p. 852) - the first people being the indigenous women of Okinawa. Through this study, I aimed to shift the frame of focus in anti-base discourse to the women who are the most directly impacted by militarized and gendered violence.

Furthermore, examining the Amejo stereotype opens other doors of future exploration for other scholars interested in the demilitarization of Okinawa. One of these avenues is exploring race, gender, sexuality, and desire. The racialization of U.S. military service members through their relationships with Amejo (hakujo, kokujo, spajo) are deeply problematic and point to a fetishization that happens on both sides. I am not reducing all relationships between U.S. service members and Amejo to fetishization. Instead, I am referring to the performativity Amejo engages in for the Western-heterosexual male gaze that Nanoki from the Vice documentary describes (having straight black hair, for example). I wonder what could be learned from the complicated connections between race, gender, sexuality, and desire in militourist spaces.

Along the topic of race, many of the perpetrators of the most high-profile rape cases in Okinawa are disproportionately black men. In an article, Cerretti noted that "...black soldiers are charged with sex crimes disproportionately more often than whites…Again, the extensive focus on men of color's violence against women served to obscure the overall system of militarized and sexualized violence that privileges white men most of all" (2016, p.805). The weaponization of visibility and media by the military is undermined by white supremacy and anti-blackness. The

use of a transnational feminist lens allows us to see how the U.S.'s anti-black agenda through incarceration has been ingrained into the military system and travels across the globe.

I want to bring our attention to the impacts of militarization and imperialism that are often overlooked. The shaming, excluding, fetishizing, appropriating, and so on are all just some of the obscure ways in which we are silenced from speaking out about gendered and militarized violence. As I have been exploring briefly in these final sections, gender is but one of the identities that shape the way one experiences militarized violence. Hence we should also consider the intersections of race, nationality, and citizenship - to name of few. In the broad scope, I hope that continued exploration of Amejo in Okinawa can contribute to recentering women within anti-base discourse. Even if we are shamed into silence, our collective stories and traumas from militarization and imperialism critique the notion of safety and security that the military supposedly brings. Gendered and militarized violence within militourist spaces are but few that critically ask: Safety for who?

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