

Emperor's Visit to Okinawa Raises Unsettling Memories

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Emperor's Visit to Okinawa Raises Unsettling Memories Rejoined With Japan 15 Years Ago, Island Prefecture Is Still Ambivalent

By KARL SCHOENBERGER

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NAHA, Japan—Four decades after two armies clashed and turned the remote, tropical Okinawa islands into a slaughterhouse, the battle lingers for the hearts and minds of Okinawans.

One-quarter of Okinawa's civilians—an estimated 100,000 people—died in 1945 when U.S. troops took the islands toward the end of World War II. Many of those Okinawans died at the hands of Imperial Japanese troops; some were forced to commit suicide, others were executed as spies because they spoke a dialect incomprehensible to soldiers from mainland Japan.

After 27 years of American military occupation, Okinawa and the rest of the Ryukyu archipelago reverted to Japan in 1972. But bitter memories of atrocities by Japanese soldiers during the war persist among native Okinawans, who today number 1.2 million.

The Okinawans also seem to have settled into an often irritable but relatively peaceful coexistence with the 34,000 U.S. troops, and their 12,000 dependents, who continue to defend Japan and U.S. interests in the region from bases that cover one-fifth of the main island of Okinawa.

Okinawan ambivalence about mainland Japan will be tested in October when 86-year-old Emperor Hirohito is to visit the islands to open Japan's annual National Athletic Meet. It will be the first time the

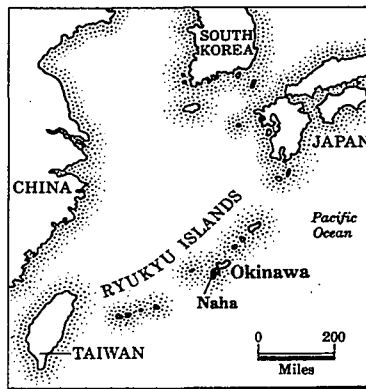
sporting event has been held in Okinawa and the first visit to the islands by a Japanese emperor (Hirohito's last visit here, when he was crown prince, was 66 years ago).

Left-wing politicians and labor leaders in Okinawa are denouncing the visit because of the emperor's role in Japan's militaristic past. Radicals in mainland Japan have joined the protest, going so far, Tokyo police say, as to have fired five homemade rockets at the Imperial Palace last week. The rockets fell short, and no one was hurt.

But the imperial visit, many here say, could also symbolize the climax of a long process of acclimatization for Okinawa to the political and social ethos of postwar Japan. Radicals hint they may demonstrate during the emperor's visit, but their influence has waned since the days when they led the agitation for reunion with Japan in the 1960s.

"The reformists don't have the courage to stage a demonstration against the emperor," says Norio Ikemiyagi, a lawyer in Naha, the prefectural capital. "Criticizing him is still taboo, even in Okinawa."

For Tetsuji Nagado, a 52-year-old oil company employee, the visit is cause for jubilation. "Our culture and history are different from the main islands, but he's our emperor too," says Mr. Nagado as he hoists a few cups of the potent local rice wine at a local Naha pub. "When he comes, I'm going to yell 'banzai' to the emperor. Banzai! Banzai!"



Indeed, many ordinary Okinawans appear receptive to the emperor's visit, though they usually profess an emotional distance from the imperial tradition. Okinawa, a group of about 60 small and tiny islands halfway between Taiwan and the main Japanese island of Kyushu, was nominally an independent kingdom until annexed by Japan in 1879.

Okinawans "can't understand the emperor system," says mainlander Shunichi Wakabayashi, a senior bureaucrat with Tokyo's Ministry of International Trade and Industry who has been posted to Naha. "They know the emperor is the head of state, but they don't feel it in their hearts like we do. Okinawans have only half-identity as Japanese."

Yet, despite pride in Okinawa's distinctive heritage, local observers say a submissive and conservative mood is overtaking Japan's poorest prefecture. Since 1972 the central government has pumped 2.2 trillion yen (\$15.5 billion) into Okinawa for public-works projects, bringing unprecedented affluence—and loyalty toward Tokyo.

Okinawa's governor, Junji Nishime, a member of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, was re-elected in November to his third four-year term with a campaign that centered on controversial themes of nationhood. He advocated hoisting Japan's rising-sun flag at school ceremonies and singing Kimigayo, the national anthem that lionizes the emperor. And he declared that the sovereign's visit would "bring an end to the postwar period in Okinawa," meaning that life would finally return to normal after the trauma of war and occupation.

"It will bring an end to the war for both sides, for Okinawans and for the emperor," Mr. Nishime says. "The bitterness is slowly disappearing with time. There's a whole generation that doesn't know the war. People have changed. We've become part of Japan, not just in name but in substance."

Mr. Nishime's sentiments aren't shared by everyone. A few Okinawans feel strongly about the rising-sun flag, which they associate with Japanese militarism. Until last year, radical teachers' unions had all but banned the flag from schools.

"The war memories are strong here," says Tsugioki Toma, proprietor of the Tsuyoshi Flag Shop in Naha. "You see the flag and you shrink inside. People waved flags and said banzai to the emperor when our men went off to fight the war, and they never came back. Forty years have gone by and we'd like to hear an apology from that same emperor."

But Mr. Toma is the first to admit that there has been a boom in flag sales prior to the emperor's visit. Flags haven't sold this well since the period before reversion more than 15 years ago.

Indeed, officials are preparing more for trouble from mainland radicals than they are for Okinawans who might threaten the emperor's security. The governor plans to import 3,000 police from Kyushu to help the local force of 2,500 keep order. Thousands more officers are being mobilized in Tokyo to prevent disturbances before the emperor leaves for Okinawa. Prior to the rocket incident, Tokyo police said they had uncovered a plan by the extremist Middle Core Faction to use an ultra-light plane for a bomb attack on the Imperial Palace in hopes of thwarting the Okinawa visit.

No precaution is being spared on Okinawa. The emperor will stay in a room with bulletproof windows in a hotel that will be closed to ordinary guests.

While many Okinawans, especially younger ones, appear more willing to be absorbed into mainstream Japan, some continue to fight what they call the suppression of Okinawan culture and language by the mainlanders. "Japan is a culture that thrives on control," says Masuo Arime, a labor leader in Okinawa who contends that the Americans, when they were running the place, were much more tolerant of Okinawan cultural differences than the mainland Japanese. He says the Okinawan dialect is rarely used today by young people under the overwhelming influence of Japanese administration, education and mass media.

"We're warning that things are going to take a rapid turn to that old atmosphere of control once the emperor has come and gone," he says.

Indeed, many Japanese still perceive their Okinawan cousins as backward and primitive. Discrimination persists against Okinawans on the mainland. A recent newspaper report described a bar in the mainland city of Yokohama that banned Okinawans.

"We have a tendency to get drunk, sing and speak in our dialect," says Masao Higa, a professor of social anthropology at the University of the Ryukyus. "That offends the Japanese."