

# We're Not So Good at Running ... But We Still Know How to Sit: On The Political Culture of Okinawa's Anti-Base Sit-In

C. Douglas Lummis

## Abstract

A vivid close up view from the front lines of the protest by Okinawans and their supporters against construction of a new US Marine Base at Henoko, Okinawa.

Awa, Okinawa. We had spent the morning milling around in the crosswalk at the gate to Ryukyu Cement's docking area, trying to block, or at least to slow down, the long parade of dump trucks carrying dirt into the site. Once in the site the trucks dump their dirt on the ground, where it is shoveled onto a huge conveyer belt that delivers it to a waiting ship. When filled, the ship will carry it around to the other side of Okinawa Island and pour it into the sea off Cape Henoko, where the Japanese Government is preparing to build a new super airbase for the US Marines on reclaimed land. Okinawans opposed to this project carry out daily sit-ins and mill-ins at various points of entry, where the action can be effective, and also use sea kayaks to obstruct operations at the construction site itself. (Today as I write this (11 October, 2019), the sit-in at Henoko's Camp Schwab, where the airstrip is to be built, is in its 1845th day.)



Anti-base protest at Henoko

It was at the end of the lunch break. I and the Okinawan woman sitting next to me were talking about how the food at the restaurant across the street wasn't very good. When I suggested that maybe we should pack a box lunch (*bento*) she answered in a matter-of-fact voice, "I lost both parents in the war, so without a mother I never learned about the culture of *obento*." That's how it is with this generation of Okinawans: their lives begin with the Battle of Okinawa, and everything since then, including the simple things that make up daily life, takes on its meaning in reference to that. Mention something as everyday, as friendly, as a box lunch, and you learn that it exists in the consciousness of this person as part of the trauma of the war.

This is different from self-pity. It is a commonplace of psychology that our experiences in childhood affect our way of understanding the world for the rest of our lives. This is the generation who were infants,

or toddlers, during the Battle of Okinawa (when one in four Okinawans were killed). One woman told me that the Japanese military ordered her family to kill themselves, and when her parents began actually to do that, she became frightened (in “family suicides” little children don’t kill themselves but have to be killed by their parents), ran away, and so survived. She told me that she didn’t think about this for many years, until recently, when it began to come up in her dreams (it’s not just soldiers that suffer from PTSD). Another woman described – not to me but to an interviewer in a documentary I recently saw – how she and her siblings survived by hiding in a dark forest. They found a place where people were sleeping and so, feeling safe, lay down among them and slept themselves. But when morning came, they found they had been sleeping among corpses.

I have been talking about “this generation”; I must explain that the great majority of the people who carry out these marches, sit-ins, mill-ins, vigils – the people who protest with their bodies, and are sometimes politely asked to stand aside, but at other times are shoved, dragged, and carried out of the way – are over sixty, with many in their seventies and eighties. Of course there are good practical reasons for this. The times that the trucks need to be blocked are working hours for the middle-aged and classroom hours for the school-aged. Moreover, while younger people, for good reason, fear that participating in political actions like these may make it difficult for them to get jobs or get them fired if they have jobs, people living on retirement incomes have no such worry. Right-wingers like to claim that the protesters are paid by China, but in fact their main economic base is Japan’s reasonably generous retirement system. And they are spending their retirement time blocking trucks. In this sense they have, in the past twenty years or so, constituted themselves as a new sort of political class – as people used to say in the ‘60s and ‘70s, an “agent of social change”.

But the reasons they are able to carry out these actions are different from their motivation for doing so. They are the last witnesses, the last bearers of the memory of the Steel Typhoon that struck Okinawa in 1945, leaving hardly a structure standing or patch of soil unturned in the central and southern part of the island. And this is their last chance to pass on to later generations a legacy not only in words but also in concrete deeds, deeds that affect political reality. They are determined to deliver to Okinawa – to their children and grandchildren – a victory: they are going to prevent this new base from being built.

Most of the people I know who watch this battle from a distance see it as an unfolding tragedy. On television you see the riot police clearing the gate and the dump trucks rolling in (on Okinawan television that is; on Japanese or American television you see nothing at all). And who could be so naively optimistic as to imagine that tiny Okinawa, with one percent of Japan’s population, could win out against the combined power of Japan and the US? Okinawa has lost every one of its battles in the past; isn’t its destiny to lose this one too? The only people who, as a group, don’t see it this way, are the grass-roots activists themselves. We are not, they say repeatedly, interested in carrying out a losing battle. We are in this to win. And how, they are – also repeatedly – asked, can you possibly expect to win? Their answer is simple: Because we won’t quit until we do.

For most people, especially younger people, political action of this sort is interference in their daily routine, and can be kept up only for so long. To strike means not to work, and at some point workers will need to get back on the job. Public demonstrations other than strikes need to be scheduled for evenings or weekends if you want a lot of people to attend. For these sit-ins the scheduling is the opposite. They take place on the days the trucks are rolling: every day *except* Sundays, holidays and typhoon days. For the protesters the days spent

at one of the gates are not interferences in their daily lives; rather they have organized them so that they play a central role in their daily lives. For some it's one, two, or three days a week, for a smaller number, six days a week.

This time should also not be understood as a time of heroic self-sacrifice. Over the years, the protesters have developed among themselves a political sub-culture. From early on, the protest at Henoko has been called Henoko University. Some of the professional politicians, union leaders and pacifist organizers who tend to monopolize the microphone at the gate may think it deserves this name because of the quality of the talks they give there, but this is only part of it. Certainly the rallies at the gate that fill the time when there are no trucks do sometimes resemble university lecture classes, with about the same mix of useful information and less useful platitudes. (Useful information; Twenty-three years after the project was first proposed, only 1.1% of the necessary landfill has actually been dumped into the bay; the Government has still not explained how it means to firm up the sea bottom with 90 meter sand pillars when there are no drills longer than 70 meters in existence.) The culture that has developed on the buses is interesting in a different way.

The bus from Naha takes 90 minutes to get to Henoko – about the same as a typical college class. They are tour buses, supplied with microphones front and back. On most days there will be some 20-30 people on board, with usually none of the movement's official leaders or talking heads among them. In the early days when the mic was handed around, many would pass it on without saying anything, or give their name and maybe one sentence of self-introduction. Many had never had the experience of speaking before a group of this size, most of whose members (especially at the beginning) were strangers. But little by little the subject matter got more complicated and mic time got longer. The bus ride developed

into a kind of seminar, a training ground for *speaking publicly about issues that matter*. In the process they discovered that while they agreed on the main goals of the movement, still there were differences that needed to be talked about.

Especially when visitors from mainland Japan, some of whom feel that their former status as colonial masters places them in the position of teachers, deliver lectures on how Okinawans ought to think and act. This provides some protesters with what might be their first experience at talking back to a mainlander – certainly the first time to do it through a microphone. I remember once when a mainlander made an especially officious statement, a fellow in the back, who up to then hadn't said much, blew him away with a concentrated summary of Okinawan history, beginning with the conquest by the Shimazu clan in 1609. The message: before Japan invaded, we were an independent kingdom. Don't talk to us like that.

In addition to the pleasure that accompanies this kind of empowerment, the protesters also experience the special kind of happiness (as Hannah Arendt called it) that comes with participating in political action – action that has real effect. The mood in the bus is usually upbeat, with lots of singing and joking mixed with expressions of anger. There is increasing use of *uchinaaguchi*, the Okinawan language. This had been said to have been almost entirely eradicated under the Japanese dominated school system, but it turns out the obituary was premature. For this generation it is the language of their childhood, and speaking it in this semi-public space – for some of them one suspects, speaking it for the first time in years – seems to bring a sense of liberation. Even when someone is joking in Japanese, it's when they put the punch line in *uchinaaguchi* that they get the biggest laughs.

And they sing. Several of them have taken to

writing songs, some serious, some comic, mocking the Abe Government and its pretensions, usually set to the melodies of well-known popular songs. The women formed a singing group and named it The Dry Flowers. It has become a regular performer at the gate; some of its members have fine voices, others are bravely and stubbornly off key. One of their songs is about Henoko University itself. I hope my translation successfully communicates its doggerel style:

Henoko, Henoko  
Today again that's where we'll go.  
We've not forgotten how to laugh  
And speak out what we know.  
  
Our heads still think,  
Our feet still walk,  
Our hands know what to hold  
At Henoko University  
Nobody grows old.  
  
Our teeth may be removable,  
Our hair it may be white.  
Even if we're getting bald  
We won't give up the fight.  
  
The riot police, they guard the gate  
But that's no call to quit.

We're not so good at running  
But we still know how to sit.

There was a second part on the boredom and emptiness of a life spent sitting at home and watching TV, but that was criticized as unkind to the people who live that way, so they quit singing it.

Of course, the sit-inners are not the only people urgently opposing the construction of the new base, nor are they a fringe movement within it. The umbrella organization opposing construction is named, with just a little exaggeration, the All-Okinawa Movement. This is an alliance between a number of progressive parties and NGOs, and a breakaway section of the conservative camp who, while remaining conservative, oppose the new base. Okinawan opposition to the US bases goes back to the immediate post-war period when many villagers lost their land to accommodate new bases, but it entered a new phase in 1995, when three American GIs gang-raped an elementary schoolgirl. There had been many events like this since 1945, but there was something about this one that triggered an explosion of outrage. An all-Prefectural rally was called for September 21<sup>st</sup> which was attended by progressives and conservatives alike, numbering 58,000 (police estimate) to 85,000 (organizers' estimate) – in either case a massive gathering on an island whose population was just over one million – massive enough to be news around the world.

The US and Japanese governments decided they needed to do something to pacify Okinawan public opinion. In 1996 they announced that they would close down the United States Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma, dangerously located smack in the middle of crowded Ginowan City. Okinawans rejoiced until they noticed the fine print: the units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Wing presently



housed in the Futenma base would be moved to a new base to be built at Henoko, in northern Okinawa. It became clear that moving the Air Wing to some place in mainland Japan was out of the question, unthinkable, whereas leaving it in Okinawa was considered perfectly ordinary. Increasingly Okinawans became aware that while Okinawa had legally become a prefecture, it was still being treated as a colony.



**Anti-Base protest in Okinawan Capital.  
Stop the land-fill.**

These incidents contributed much to the long-term shift in the way Okinawans frame their anti-base movement: from a left-right issue to a more complex set of issues that includes Okinawan ethnic pride. There's nothing to prevent a conservative from being appalled by crimes like the 1995 incident, or feeling insulted by the fact that while Okinawa makes up 0.6% of Japanese territory, it bears over 70% of all US bases in the country. Conservative politicians had been winning elections not by glorifying the bases, but by arguing that opposing them is futile, and that the smart thing to do is to make some money off them. But after 1995 this politics of futility fit less and less well with the mood of the Okinawan public.

Then in 2010 Okinawa's conservative Governor Nakaima Hirokazu was advised by the conservative Mayor of Naha, Onaga Takeshi, that the electorate had changed, and that he would lose the upcoming election unless he responded to that change and supported moving US Marine Corps Air Station, Futenma "out of the Prefecture/ out of the country". He did so, and was re-elected. In the following three years he put on a marvelous performance as the grouchy old man giving short shrift to delegate after delegate from the Abe Cabinet sent to persuade him to give his approval for construction of the proposed new base (under Japanese law, ocean reclamation projects require a permit signed by the Prefectural Governor). Typically he would say something like, "Well, I think you have a lot more space for this over on the main island. Now, if you will excuse me . . . " and walk out on them. Then in December, 2013, just before the next election, he signed the permit. Among the people stunned by this betrayal was Mayor Onaga, who had been serious about opposing the base project. Onaga announced that he would run against Nakaima in the coming election on an anti-base platform, and he brought with him a number of conservative politicians and businessmen. With that plus progressive party support, he defeated Nakaima by a landslide in the 2014 election. That was the beginning of the All-Okinawa Movement, a fragile alliance, but hanging together to this day.

Since then the Okinawa anti-base movement has used every strategy imaginable (except violence, to which they are stubbornly averse). The Governor's office has cancelled permits and refused to issue new ones, fought court battles; the Governor has appealed to the Tokyo Government, to the US Government, to the UN Human Rights Committee, and to the annual Governor's Convention. Local cities have refused to allow builders to use roads, rivers and land areas under their jurisdiction. People have organized rallies, demonstrations,

human chains, candlelight ceremonies, concerts. It has become impossible for any candidate who positively supports base construction to be elected to office – though a few have got themselves elected by avoiding the issue. All the national Diet members elected from Okinawa are opposed to the new base. On 24 February this year, a Prefectural referendum was held on the issue, in which 72% of people who voted declared themselves opposed to the base, 19% in favor and 9% neither. Yet the trucks roll on.

The trucks roll on, but so does the Okinawa Defense Bureau's nightmare. Obstacles put in the way by everything from the Governor's office in Naha to the tent village across the road from Camp Schwab's main gate have got the project years behind schedule, but now it seems as though Okinawa's land and sea have themselves joined the resistance, and begun putting up obstacles of their own. Early last year it was revealed that the Standard Penetration Tests carried out on the sea bottom by the Defense Bureau had revealed areas with an N-value of zero. N-value means the number of blows from a 140 lb. hammer needed to drive a drilling tube 6 inches into the soil; a value of 30 to 50 is considered "dense". A value of zero means that no blows were required, as the tube sank of its own weight. This is what is now known popularly in Okinawa as the mayonnaise sea bottom. The report in which these tests are written up is dated 2015, but it was kept from the Okinawan Prefectural government and public for three years, until an engineer unaffiliated with the project managed to get a copy. It's hard to prove, but it seems that the information was kept from the US government as well.

To begin reclamation work, the Defense Bureau needs first to build a sea wall surrounding the area, to form a huge container for the dirt they dump. The part of the construction area that extends into Oura Bay is very deep, and they had planned to build the sea wall by piling up

giant concrete caissons. But this is where the mayonnaise is, which means the caissons would simply sink out of sight. So first of all, if they are going to continue with this project, they need to firm up the sea bottom. The preferred way to do this is by implanting sand piles (pillars) in the slime. You drive a huge hollow tube deep into the soil, fill it with sand, open the trap door at the bottom, and raise the tube slowly, pounding the sand as you go so as to spread it laterally thus compressing the slime into something a little firmer, and adding more sand from the top until the pile reaches the surface of the sea bottom. To firm up the bottom of this part of the construction area will, it is said, require this operation to be repeated 77,000 times, and is expected to add an additional 5 years to construction time.

That is, assuming it all goes without a hitch. But there is a hitch. In some areas the unstable slime extends to a depth of 90 meters below sea level. In Japan the largest drilling barges that can be used for this operation are able to reach only to 70 meters. Opinion differs as to whether barges with the capacity to reach to 90 meters exist anywhere in the world. The Defense Bureau has not made clear how they are going to deal with this. On the contrary, they have put out a call for bids, apparently in the hope that some construction company will come up with a good idea. (One government official in Tokyo was quoted as saying he thought 70 meters ought to be "good enough".)

Why all this engineering talk in an article that's supposed to be about politics? Because it's an interesting case of politics distorting engineering judgment. Any cool-headed business person, anyone using simple cost-benefits analysis, would have given up this project long ago. (Among the many other Murphy's law factors: there are two active earthquake faults directly beneath the site, and because of the hills near by there are many buildings and transmission towers that violate DOD height regulations). But to the present

Japanese Government, this would mean giving in to the Okinawans, a formerly colonized people who are supposed to behave as subalterns, and over whom it is Japan's proper role to prevail. For the Okinawans to win this one would be, for them, a violation of the natural order of things. And so they push on, against reason and common sense.

Consider: On 23 February, 2016 Admiral Harry Harris, then Commander US Forces Pacific, testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee as follows:

"The challenge we have is to get the build done on the Futenma Replacement Facility, which is Japan's responsibility, that's their obligation to us. And right now it's slowed, it's about two years, a little over two years, late. It was going to be done by 2023, now we're looking at 2025 before that's done."

Clearly Admiral Harris did not know about the mayonnaise sea bottom. The date he projected for the completion of the airbase is now the date projected for the completion of the sand piles. After that is done they can begin building the sea wall, upon completion of which they can begin reclamation, and then when they have laid down dirt sufficient to provide a platform the projected 10 meters above sea level, they can begin to build the base itself. Estimates range from 20 or 25 more years, to "never". Henoko was peddled as the quickest way to get Futenma Airbase closed down. Now the most optimistic estimates have it completed just under half a century from when it was first proposed.

Interestingly, the day following Admiral Harris' testimony, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide stated at a press conference, not that the Admiral was mistaken (Suga is too smart to say that), but that "it's too early to say" - in other words, that the Admiral's statement was baseless. I wish I could have seen Harris's face when he read that in the newspaper. Suga presumably did know about

the mayonnaise but was not about to spill the secret.

And the trucks roll on, filling a small, shallow area with a solid rock sea bottom at the other end of the construction site. The sit-inners call this "performance construction" (*misekake kouji*), and are convinced that its main purpose is to persuade the US, the general public, and especially the sit-inners that construction is on schedule. From the Defense Bureau's standpoint, if they can convince the environmentalists that it's too late to save the bay, the geologists that the earthquake fault is an illusion, the US Marines that height limit regulations don't matter, the conservative wing of All-Okinawa that it's better after all to take the money and run, and the sit-inners that they have lost and should all go home, maybe they will be able to get down to work without interruption. But even if they achieve all those things (not likely) they still need to solve a difficult engineering puzzle: how to implant 77,000 90 meter sand piles using 70 meter drills.

The trucks roll on, but so do the buses. It remains true that the Defense Bureau can't get dirt into the construction site without massive aid from the Riot Police at the gate and from the Coast Guard on the Bay, which adds wildly to the costs (the riot police, for example, are housed not in dormitories but in a resort hotel). In during this very hot summer (2019) the average number of sit-inners went gone down slightly, but as Fall came on it has gone up again. In the same period the number of dump trucks has gone down - and many of the ones that do enter are carrying something besides dirt. It seems they are running out of places to dump it.

On the bus, spirits run high as usual - maybe higher than a few years ago, as the people's conviction that they are going to win has deepened. But this is a mixed emotion - as each day at the gate is an experience both of

winning and losing. Each day they must suffer the humiliation of being clumsily hauled away by these awkward young men (there are no female riot police to carry the women). And each day, the gate is cleared and the trucks get in. Each day a little more of the shallow part of the sea around Cape Henoko is killed by the dirt dumped into it. I heard one woman say, "I never cry until after I get home and close the front door," to which another testily responded, "What? I never cry!" Both, I'm sure, are true. The case against building this new base, laid out time and time again in pamphlet, leaflet, book, film and speech, is powerful and important, but it doesn't by itself account for

the weight the movement has for this generation of Okinawans. For them, the experience of the Battle of Okinawa is not "a story from which we can learn" or "a story which if we don't learn from it we are doomed to repeat." That is, it is those things, but with a difference. It's not an earlier story remembered from the vantage point of the story we are in now. For them, it's the same story. It's their story, which began in 1945 and to which they are now acting out the ending as they are determined to live it. It's here that one can understand the poignancy of their simple slogan: "Of course we will win. We won't quit until we do."

**Douglas Lummis** is Visiting Professor in the Okinawa International University Graduate School. An editor of the Asia-Pacific Journal, he is the author of *Radical Democracy* ([Cornell](#)) and [in Japanese translation] [Iwanami](#).