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Memory, nostalgia and the creation of “home”: a returnee woman’s journey | Johanna Zulueta[†]

Abstract

Migrants return “home” for various reasons that may not be necessarily linked to economic factors but rather to notions of identity and belongingness – “home is where the heart is” as that popular adage states. But when the “home” was once ravaged by war and conflict, how does one’s memory of years past define a returnee’s identity, when he/she returns at an advanced age? This paper looks at how older women migrants create their notions of “home” in relation to memory and nostalgia, as well as gender, by looking at a particular case of an elderly woman who returned to her place of birth, after spending several decades in her husband’s country.

Keywords: migration; return; home; memory; gender.

An Okinawan Woman’s Journey

“*Watashi no takaramono*”¹ – words that evoked nostalgia and smiles from Katsuko as she spoke about the time when she saw again her old, tattered *monpe*² neatly folded inside her kimono in a drawer of her bureau in the family’s old house in Naha when she returned there in the 1980s for a short visit. She told me how she sewed her own name on it so that if ever something happened to her during the War, the *monpe* would help identify who she was. Smiling, she told me how seeing her old *monpe* brought back memories of the war and the hardship that she encountered then. This was her “*takaramono* (treasure)”, along with the umbilical cords of each of her eleven children which she still keeps to this day – one that binds a mother to her children and continues to evoke nostalgic memories of her life as a mother and as an Okinawan woman in the Philippines.

Katsuko’s³ story is one of the many stories that Okinawan women migrants to the Philippines – both those who settled and continue to live there, as well as those

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¹ My treasure. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² Work trousers worn by women.

³ All names appearing here are pseudonyms.



who decided to return to Okinawa – share. Migrating to the Philippines in the immediate post-war years, these women experienced moving to a country at a time when local sentiments against the Japanese were intense, with Okinawans considered to be no different from the Japanese. For most of them, assimilation was one of the ways to hide their identities as well as a strategy for them to be able to survive in a country that was culturally, linguistically, and socially alien to them. Assimilation was a given choice; albeit the only option for these women who were geographically dispersed from each other in their host country.

Located between the southern island of Kyushu in Japan and the northern islands of the Philippine archipelago, the Kingdom of the Ryukyus was an independent kingdom before it was subjugated by the Satsuma fief of Kyushu in Southern Japan, and eventually became a prefecture, now known as Okinawa in 1879. It has had an ambivalent relationship with Japan due to its distinct cultural identity, which the mainland Japanese consider as inferior to their culture. During World War II, it was one of the places that had the most civilian casualties that numbered up to around 200,000 (during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945) and is the only place in Japan that was occupied by the American military for 20 more years after the mainland’s independence in 1952. Okinawa currently hosts around 75 percent of the U.S. bases on Japanese soil and this issue has sparked debates within and outside the prefecture.

This study looks at memories of war, life during the Occupation, and the migration experiences of Okinawan women who lived in the Philippines for several decades. Historical memory is usually re/produced from a masculine perspective and women’s experiences have been “entombed in men’s accounts of the past” (Haaken, 1998: 5). This study, however, seeks to explore – through one woman’s story – how migration and memory came to define these women’s identities as migrants in an Okinawa that saw the ravages of war and continues to negotiate its place vis-à-vis the Japanese mainland and looks at how these older migrants create notions of home in relation to these. This paper will also attempt to locate the issue within a transnational framework.

For several years, I have been in contact with these women when I was doing research on Okinawan post-war and contemporary migration to the Philippines. I became acquainted with them at Oroku Catholic Church in Naha, the Okinawan capital, where I did my ethnographic research and engaged in participant observation. Several of these returnees attend Sunday mass here as well as meet up with their fellow returnees.⁴ These women shared with me their migration

⁴ Many of these women have converted to Catholicism when they married their Filipino husbands. There are of course Okinawan women who are Protestants, but my study is at the moment limited to those who are Catholics due to the fact that most of these women are converts to Catholicism. At the time of my research, many of these women returnees do not attend mass due to health reasons, while others are already in facilities for the elderly, hence my contact with Okinawan women



experiences – moving to the Philippines and back, as well as their lives as wives of Filipinos and their roles in bringing up children of “mixed blood” as well as being cultural conduits of both Okinawan and Filipino culture in these Okinawan-Filipino households. This was where I first met Katsuko who shared to me her story of migration one afternoon in September 2009 in Naha. I again talked to her in October 2012 at Oroku Church, where she shared to me more of her life story, including her life during the Battle of Okinawa.⁵ Katsuko was among the six women who I interviewed. I also spoke to five more women at Oroku Catholic Church in Naha while doing participant observation. For purposes of this paper, however, I focus on Katsuko’s story as hers was one of the few voices who chose to speak about their War experiences.⁶

These women, however, kept silent when asked about their early years in Okinawa; telling me that they forgot most of what happened in their childhood, or politely refusing to talk to me about their life in general. Indeed, the pain of remembering one’s life during the War, as well as experiencing the Battle of Okinawa is enough for many of these women to be tight-lipped about their earlier years. I managed to talk to some of their children about this, but they told me that their mothers were never open to them about their lives during the War. For many of these women, remembering past traumatic events only reminded them of painful memories that are better left in the past, especially for those who had to experience the War and live through war-torn Okinawa and then move to another country to endure a different culture and society.⁷

Gender, Memory, and Transnational Migration

There is still a dearth of scholarship that primarily focuses on gender in transnational processes and migration (Mahler and Pessar, 2001: 441). Those that do however, tend to focus on the “typical” female spaces such as the family and the household (Ibid, 445; Mugge, 2013: 66). Transnational experiences are gendered; and in looking at process/es and experience/s of migration, home and return, it is also necessary for us to locate these within a framework that considers the role that gender plays. How does gender influence decisions to migrate and return? Are perceptions of what and where home is, gendered as well? In these migrations, it is usually the woman who moves with her husband; as wife, mother,

returnees in Okinawa is limited to those who go to Oroku Catholic Church, since this is where most of them converge and attend mass services.

⁵ During this day of the interview, I was supposed to hold a focus-group discussion with five other women, but in the end, it was only Katsuko who showed up. She told me that the other women agreed to join, but eventually, they decided not to as they did not want to talk about their earlier experiences in Okinawa.

⁶ All my interviews and conversations with these women were conducted in Japanese.

⁷ Maehara (2001) states that these women rarely spoke of their past even to the other members of the *Firipin-Okinawa Kenjinkai* (Philippine Okinawan Society) due to the pain of reliving these past experiences and hardships.

or daughter, she is expected to carry out obligations befitting her role. For migrant women, "home" may mean belongingness that is tied to one's social relations.

Meanwhile, it can be said that memory/ies are selected and transformed in migration. What one remembers and thus conveys to another, is not only tantamount to what one's memory allows us to remember, but memory and the act of remembering is a social act, and thus are (carefully) chosen and transmitted. Movement does not only produce, but also shapes the concept of memory (Zangl, 2014: 53). Those that are remembered are influenced by experiences that are not only socially constructed, but also gendered. McDowell states that "what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (McDowell quoting Hirsch and Smith, in McDowell, 2004: 703). Thus, it can be said that remembering (as an act, as compared to memory as a noun) is itself a gendered activity and is a product of "gendered social locations and of those collectively organized fantasies and beliefs about gender that dynamically shape what aspects of the past are likely to be preserved" (Haaken, 1998: 12).

Memory as linked to movement is also tied to processes of return, and the act itself of returning presupposes a going back to a "home". Spending a long time in another place elicits specific memories along with the decision to return. With notions of "home" come feelings of belongingness, and this relationship of "home" to belongingness is also tied to identity and one's perception of the Self vis-à-vis the Other. Hence, "home" is also "something that is sought, imagined, and recreated" (Abdelhady, 2008: 63). It is a space of possibilities where the agency of the migrant subject actively creates and re-creates his/her "home". The perception of "home" especially in transnational migration can either be "here" or "there", "here and there", or even "nowhere".

Crossing the Seas to the Philippines

During the American Occupation of Okinawa (1945-1972), third country nationals were hired to work on the construction of U.S. bases, as well as to staff them (Tobaru, 1998: 31). Majority of them were Filipinos; an overwhelming number male and single (Ohno, 1991: 243; Tobaru, 1998: 31). These Filipinos – both semi-skilled and skilled – made up a significant number of civilian personnel working on these bases. They enjoyed higher pay than their Japanese and Okinawan counterparts, being second only to the Americans in the pay-scale hierarchy. The mainland Japanese and Okinawans came in third and fourth (Amemiya, 1996; Yoshida, 2001: 30; Sellek, in Hook and Siddle (eds.) 2003: 82; Yoshida, 2007: 82).

Quite a number of them married Okinawan women they met while working on base. These women worked a variety of jobs inside and around the bases as maids, waitresses, and laundry women, while others worked in occupations that called for more professional skills such as clerks and typists (USCAR labour cards; Zulueta, 2016). Katsuko herself worked at a laundry/cleaning shop as a clerk when she met



her Filipino husband who was the manager at that time. Other women met their husbands at serendipitous instances such as outside the bases, while walking on the street, etc. Up until 1954, it was estimated that there were around 1,004 of these marriages that were recorded (Sugii, 2009: 45).⁸

Upon marriage, most of them went with their husbands to the Philippines when their husbands' contracts were terminated (Ohno, 1991: 228). These women decided to migrate mainly for the sake of their children (Zulueta, 2014). Other reasons include resistance from the women's families to the point of being disowned by their families for marrying a foreigner, and that these women had much "pride" in themselves that they did not want to lose face in front of their families. The decision to migrate then is gendered; and for these women, moving to another country was a result of societal expectations of how a woman should be – as a mother and as a daughter. Migration was a way of fulfilling a mother's obligation, as well as a flight from pressures of being a dutiful daughter. Not a few of these women migrated with only a travel document issued by the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyus (USCAR) at hand, others left with a tourist visa, while some were already Filipino nationals upon their migration to the Philippines.⁹

Around two to three thousand Okinawans migrated with their husbands (Suzuki and Tamaki, 1996: 71). Those currently residing in the Philippines, particularly in Manila and its surrounding areas, are said to number more than a thousand (Ohno, 1991: 228). Recently though, their population has been decreasing due to death as well as the return of these women to Okinawa.¹⁰

Migrating was a great challenge especially that they had to face social and cultural adjustments in their husbands' own countries brought about by linguistic and cultural differences as well as different social conditions (Nakano Glenn, 1986: 59). Most of these women were isolated from each other and it was not rare for one of them to be the only Okinawan in the town they settled in. Quite a number of them still live in the Philippines with their families, and many of them live comfortable lives. On the other hand, there were also those who decided to return to Okinawa as early as the 1970s and resettle there (Zulueta, 2014).

Chosen Rememberings, Spoken Memories: Experiencing the Battle of Okinawa

Katsuko returned to Okinawa in 1989 after having lived in the Ilocos Region in the northern Philippines for around 30 years. Fluent in Ilocano¹¹, she told me that she

⁸ There were also several cases of cohabitation between these Okinawan women and Filipino men.

⁹ Information gathered through interviews with the Okinawan women themselves, as well as from conversations with their children.

¹⁰ On a recent visit (February 2012) to the Philippine Okinawan Society's office, I asked for an updated list of members to track the number of Okinawan women members of the organization, only to be told that the list has not been updated since my initial visit in 2003. As of the 2003 directory of members, there were around 1,000 Okinawan women listed as members, although there are other women living in other parts of the country but are not members.

¹¹ Ilocano is the language spoken in the northern part of the Philippines, mainly in the Ilocos Region.

only was able to learn Tagalog¹² when her grandchild stayed with her in Naha for several years. She spoke to me about her life – from her early childhood to her experience of the Battle of Okinawa, to her life in the Philippines.

Born on 15 August 1931 in Azabu Uebaru, Oroku-son (now Oroku in Naha), Katsuko is the eldest of eight siblings. Born during the time of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, her father was recruited into the Japanese Imperial Army and was sent to China, where he was wounded and hospitalized at Kumamoto Hospital. She was already in the second grade of elementary school when her father came back to Okinawa.

In 1941, quite a number of soldiers came to Okinawa from mainland Japan, and a battalion composed of twelve soldiers mostly from Hokkaido entered their home. Much like any other Japanese during this time, Katsuko believed that going to war was for the sake of the country and that they should contribute to ensure Japan's victory. Living through the War was obviously not an easy time for the family, but it was during the Battle of Okinawa that her family was divided – her father was recruited to the Okinawa defence corps, her mother and other siblings evacuated Uebaru and sought refuge in Nago in northern Okinawa, while she was left in Naha to take care of her 94-year old great grandmother. Nevertheless, she feels that she and her family were lucky to have survived the war.

Forced to move to different places, she witnessed the deaths of many people – women and soldiers among them. She remembers that the soldiers were calling out the names of their wives, mothers (in the case of young soldiers), and lovers before they breathed their last, but never did she hear "long live the emperor!"¹³ being called out. A young girl of thirteen during this time, she experienced seeing American war planes dropping bombs indiscriminately, witnessed people including close family members being killed and burned to death, how people around her thought of committing suicide, how the family in the cave next to where she was hiding was gassed by the Occupation forces and that nobody inside survived – everyday indeed was a fight for survival.

Katsuko's story and experience of the Battle of Okinawa is one of the many stories of ordinary people left unheard and unspoken; with many of these memories buried along with those who perished, and forever hidden with those who refuse to speak. Being the eldest in her family, she also talked about the sacrifices she did for the sake of her family during the Occupation, especially the times when she was asked by her kin to quit school in order to earn for her family's upkeep and take

¹² Tagalog is the language spoken in Manila and nearby regions. Tagalog is also the basis of the Filipino language, or the national language.

¹³ Japanese phrase: "*Tennou heika, banzai!*"



care of her mother who caught malaria: “At that time, really, I was crying, thinking that I should have died during the war, but it can’t be helped.”¹⁴

During the early years of the Occupation, she then told me that she was able to land a job at a laundry/cleaning shop on base. As she knew a little English, she was asked to do office work. It was also here that she met her future husband, a Filipino, who was the manager then. Work on base may have given her a better life compared to others who were not as lucky, but it was also the cause of envy among other people who envied her since she landed in a good job despite not finishing high school. Katsuko said she was “distressed” over all these – her traumatic experiences during the War as well as the treatment and envy she received while working on base – that probably other girls her age then would have committed suicide. Post-war conditions during the Occupation also put a strain on interpersonal relationships, where differing circumstances set a divide between the haves and have-nots.

For her part, Katsuko said that with her experiences during the War and during the immediate post-war years, “there were almost no pleasant memories”. On the contrary, many of the women I spoke to were very much open about their migration experiences and their lives in the Philippines, with several of them talking about how they found “home” there. It is as if their experiences in the Philippines are stories of “moving forward”, as many of them may have difficulty retelling their stories, particularly if they have to remember and re-articulate traumatic events (McDowell, 2004: 708).

Homecomings: Nostalgia and Mixed Memories of the Past

A homecoming may yield unfavourable experiences to the returnee himself/herself, especially when expectations of a welcome from what was/is perceived to be “home” may be in contradiction with reality. It is apparent that temporal factors are very much involved here as communities and societies are far from stagnant as they change over time. Also, for many of these return migrants, spending several years in another country has influenced their behaviour, thoughts, and practically most aspects of their lives, such that their “home” might not “feel like home” to them; and for the locals, these returnees become more like “strangers in the (ethnic) homeland” (Tsuda, 2003), and not the people who once were part of their daily lives.

For these women, Okinawa, the homeland that they knew, may not be the place where they have returned to; it was already a different one when they left for the Philippines. After spending long years living in the Philippines, these women returned to a much different Okinawa – one that has since reverted to Japan, and a much more developed place than the war-torn island it used to be. It goes

¹⁴ “*Ano toki wa mou, hontou, jibun wa sensou de shinda hou ga yokatta to omou gurai nakimashita, demo shikata ga nai.*”

without saying that the returnees had to re-adjust to life there after spending much of their lives in the Philippines. Katsuko said that while she still remembers speaking in Japanese and in Okinawan¹⁵, she found it hard to "let the words out" upon her return as she has not spoken these languages for quite some time. She even said that her younger sister and younger brother in Okinawa would tease her that the Japanese she was speaking sounded like the Japanese foreigners speak.

"The Philippines is a nice place. I really like the Philippines," Katsuko said, speaking nostalgically of the place she spent most of her life in, upon finding out that the Okinawa now is not the same Okinawa she once knew. She added that Japan may be a prosperous country economically but feels that interpersonal relationships have suffered as nowadays people have become "spiritually poor". "Whenever I think about that, [I think] the Philippines is much better [in terms of interpersonal relationships]". For those women who chose to remain in the Philippines, the presence of their children and friends is enough reason for them to decide to remain in the Philippines, as well as the fact that living there is much easier. "Home" then is not necessarily a place of return for these women, but is more of a space of "belonging", which is connected to notions of motherhood, family and kin. For those who took the journey back to their natal home like Katsuko, the decision was based mainly on their children's decision to work and start new lives in Okinawa (or in mainland Japan).

The perception of "home" can be said to also be the "site of everyday lived experience" (Brah, 1996: 4), as it is inextricably tied to one's experience of the everyday. "Home" here is the place where feelings are rooted in the "mundane", and connotes one's family, kin, and our networks (Ibid). It is not only tied to memories of one's childhood, but also with where one is, (i.e. one's "dwelling" (Urry, 2000)) and what or who one is (i.e. one's (self)-identification). It is the "lived experience of a locality... as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations" (Brah, 1996: 192). For these returnees, their homecoming does not necessarily dissociate themselves from a distant past, but rather enable them to choose to re-create their lives in an Okinawa that has recovered from its devastated past. In re-creating their lives, they in turn re-construct their "home", which is tied to their experiences as migrants and foreign wives. Memories of the War may be kept hidden still (even amongst themselves), but these returnees found amongst themselves a common experience and identity, which I witnessed after Sunday masses at Oroku Church where these women converge. These returnees never had the opportunity to know each other in the Philippines, and

¹⁵ The Okinawan language belongs to a distinct language group that has linguistic differences with Japanese or Nihongo. Most Okinawans refer to their language though as "*hougen*" which means "dialect" in Japanese. Due to the education policies imposed by the Japanese government upon the annexation of Okinawa, the Okinawan language is not being spoken anymore in the prefecture. Only a few speakers remain – mostly elderly people as well as those living in far flung islands of the prefecture. There are some people who push for its preservation, and some universities offer courses in Okinawan language.



only met each other at this church upon returning to Okinawa. Their “shared fates and shared faith” brought them together.

The notion of “home” then may also be dependent on memory and nostalgia, as they may be nostalgic for the Okinawa of the past, as well as for the lives they had in the Philippines. For the non-returnees, on the other hand, “home”, which is now the Philippines, is continually being re-created, and while memories of their lives in Okinawa still remain and are remembered in the several visits they have made (or continue to make). Choosing to forget or not to forget is a conscious act that they engage in as Okinawan women in a “home” away from “home”.

Conclusion

Women’s experiences of migration and memories of past traumatic events such as war and conflict illustrate the fact that transnational experiences are gendered. Having experienced the Battle of Okinawa and lived through the war-ravaged land, to the early years of the American Occupation, migration presented them with a chance to dissociate themselves from the trauma of the War, although paradoxically they were seen as the enemy rather than the victim in the place of migration. Migration was also a decision for them that was tied to one’s fulfilment of their roles as mothers, which was also reflected in their decision to return to Okinawa. Through Katsuko’s experience of the War, one can see how intertwined these were with expectations of her role as an eldest daughter. As memories are chosen, War memories that are conveyed do not only tell of traumatic events. One chooses to paint herself as either a victim or not. Katsuko clearly portrayed herself as the latter.

Memories are fluid and can even be transformed in transnational migration. For women like Katsuko, remembering traumatic experiences like the War does not only reflect gendered experiences, as the retelling itself speaks a lot about how women remember and convey what they remember. Transnational memories are in themselves gendered spaces where one can understand concepts of movement and migration, of “home” and return. The experiences of these women ought not to be considered monolithic, but should rather be seen to be diverse as the women themselves.

Memories of these women’s lives and experiences of war and migration may be kept hidden forever, or may live on in their children’s and grandchildren’s lives. For these women, perceptions of “home” – be it in the Philippines or in Okinawa – are linked with both the past and the future. These women’s perceptions of “home” are very much linked to memory and nostalgia, but more so, these perceptions are also a personal act of creating and re-creating, as well as forgetting and not forgetting.

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