

# How Aircraft Noise is *Heard* in Okinawa, Japan

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents how nearly meaningless aircraft noise is heard differently according to social/historical backgrounds, taking Okinawa, Japan, where the fierce ground battle was fought during WW2, as an example.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When more or less the same experience is commonly shared by individuals in a society and their memories are stirred up by certain sounds, the impression the individuals in the society have as they hear the sounds would be characterized by their life histories and/or the society's history. Even jet noises which are basically just meaningless noises heard as well in other parts of Japan have specific meanings in Okinawa different from the rest of the country because of the dreadful memories of the Battle of Okinawa, the largest scale of ground combat fought on Japan's soil, and the nightmarish post-war US military occupation as well as the still ongoing US military existence. What is not much known by the mainlanders of Japan is that ca. 34,000 civilians from Okinawa lived on Micronesia before the war and over half of them lost their lives in the fiercer battles fought by the US and Japanese forces during WWII. The survivors of the battles of Okinawa and Micronesia, the first generation with direct war memory in a sense, understandably had antiwar sentiment which resonated among and was shared by the second and the third generations in Okinawa through various channels.

## 2. GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AND U.S. BASES OF OKINAWA

### 2.1 Okinawa

From the southernmost of Japan's mainland to Taiwan in the Western Pacific, lie the Ryukyu Archipelago composed of a chain of small islands the biggest of which is Okinawa Island. In April 1945, the US attacked and conquered Okinawa, and took over the whole island after the fierce Battle of Okinawa. For geographical and historical reasons, there exist 31 facilities of the US Forces which account for about 70% in area of the US bases and facilities located in Japan and correspond to about 15% of Okinawa Island. This results in high population density and even the nearest vicinity of bases has to be made

available for residential uses. The Battle of Okinawa was an extremely tragic ground combat claiming about one-fourth of the civilians' lives. After the battle, the whole island was taken over by the US Forces, and all civilians were interned in concentration camps. When they were liberated some years after the war they found their own lands within the wire net of the US bases.

### 2.2 Kadena Air Base

Kadena Air Base is one of the bases provided to the US Forces as the "Facilities and Areas" in accordance with the Treaty [1] and the Agreement [2] between Japan and the US. During Korean War (1950-1953) it was used as a bomber unit base. In 1967 during Vietnam War, two 4,000m runways were constructed and the base was used for the bombers to make sorties and as a supply relay depot. In 1991, with the close of Clark Base in the Philippines and part of the base being moved to Kadena Air Base, it became the largest US air force base in the western Pacific.

## 3. AIRCRAFT NOISE

As could easily be imagined, aircraft noise exposure is a major issue among the negative impacts of military activities on surrounding communities. Noise exposure from the base is said to be one of the highest among US air bases in the world. Sound levels occasionally exceeding 110 dB are observed in the residential areas under the flight corridor and/or in the vicinity of the base. As a matter of course Kadena Air Base causes serious disturbance to local residents due to incessant jet aircraft and helicopter noises as well as frequent engine tunings. Though the aircraft noise around the base is so tremendous that the noise has often been expressed as "murderous" or "lethal" by the local media, only limited small-scale surveys had been conducted on the impact of the aircraft noise on local residents. Thus the Governor of Okinawa who was also a scholar of Okinawa's history decided in 1994 to carry out a full-scale survey and research about the aircraft noise around the US bases in the prefecture and an epidemiology study was conducted from 1995 to 1999 around Kadena Air Base and Futenma Air Station, in which the author was involved as the leader of the expert team. The results of the study report a variety of noise effects as had been predicted; interference with speech/conversation, sleep disturbance, class disruption,

TV/radio broadcasts jam, physical and mental strains such as loss of hearing, hypertension, lower birth weight, and neurosis [3]. The number of individuals residing in the eleven municipalities in Okinawa where aircraft noise exceeds the environmental standard for aircraft noise set by the Japanese Government is estimated to be about 480,000, 38% of the prefecture population. It would be safe to say that the soundscape of a large part of Okinawa is shadowed by the aircraft noise of the US military. Sunabe village used to be as it means ‘sand beach’ quiet and peaceful with birds’ songs and sounds of ripples and waves at the beach and had been famous for its beautiful white beach with green pine trees until the US troops attacked it and landed there in 1945. It could be as well today if there existed no base near the community. But on the contrary, the dominant sound of its soundscape is aircraft flyover/taxing noise from the base.

## **4. LIFE HISTORY**

### **4.1 A Woman in a Village Vicinal to the Base**

A group of residents living around Kadena Air Base brought a case calling for a prohibitory injunction of night flights and compensation for the damage caused by the aircraft noise in 1982. There was a woman, born in 1903 in Okinawa and named Kame Matsuda, among the 906 plaintiffs. She was a symbolic figure in the media appearance as an activist of the antiwar campaign. She passed in 1995 at the age of 91; was illiterate but very active in the campaign. What made her so active could be understood through her life history. The following account was written based on interviews with her conducted by the author eight times occasionally in a few years without any prior contact or reward for the interview. Despite her strong accent of the Okinawan language, which is difficult to understand by mainlanders, she spoke good common Japanese, having lived on the mainland in her youth. Her narrative was fact checked by means of the collation of narratives heard in different interviews. Her nephew read the first draft of the manuscript and corrected any mistaken memory about their family record. Documents of the histories of modern Okinawa and the Marianas, the narratives of scores of Okinawans during the WW2 to modern times were also consulted.

### **4.2 A History of Okinawa and Saipan Related to the Teller**

There was a tide in Okinawa in the early 20th century to go abroad to work and send home earnings. In the case of Kame, she went to Saipan Island, an island of the Northern Marianas that was put under Japanese trusteeship in 1920, together with her husband in 1929 to make money to build a tomb for their late mother. Building big tombs had become popular since the end of the 19th century in Okinawa. The couple worked very diligently and honestly there doing various jobs and finally achieved success

with the business of hog-raising. Kame said they lead a peaceful and happy life on the tropical island. But when they thought of going home with sufficient money in 1944, the Pacific War entered a crucial stage and Saipan became the target of the US forces. Saipan Island was the Pacific keystone in that nearly the whole mainland of Japan entered within the range of B-29 bombers from the island. Thus, the island was viewed strategically by the Japanese Imperial Headquarters of Marianas. After having narrowly evaded death in the shelling and firing with unbearable experiences on the battlefield, and nearly throwing stones at US soldiers to be shot dead out of sheer despair, the couple was captured by the soldiers together with some others including four children. Then they were sent to one of the camps on Saipan where they lived for one and half years until they returned to Okinawa in 1946. What they saw in their homeland on return to Okinawa was a devastated scene, and they learned their own land had been requisitioned by the US military government team. They had to wait for eight years living in a makeshift house and working for the US military on the bases. It was in 1954 when part of their land was released allowing them to move back to their homeland, Sunabe village.

For people who stayed on Okinawa Island during the war to be chased by the enemy on the run and survived the Battle of Okinawa, the jet noise brings back horrible memories of these experiences. For Kame who tasted the bitter experiences in the Battle of Saipan, aircraft noise stirred memories of the constant fear of shelling and naval bombardments she experienced on Saipan. Listening to their life histories makes one realize the fact that for many elderly people living near US Air Bases, aircraft noise is intolerable not only because it disrupts their activities and sleep but also because it brings back painful memories of war.

### **4.3 What the Noise Brings Back**

War memories are not the only thing that the aircraft noise brings back to Okinawan people. The area of today’s Okinawa prefecture, the Ryukyu Islands, used to be reigned over by the King of the Ryukyu Kingdom. After Japan abolished feudalism through so-called the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and started to be a nation-state, the king was taken to Tokyo under the threat of sword and the kingdom became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. As modernization progressed in Okinawa, the Okinawan people found their standard of living falling due to the introduction of the market economy. Moreover, the adaptation of the conscription ordinance to Okinawa in 1898 encouraged particularly young male Okinawans to go to foreign countries and emigrate to evade the call-up and make earnings, first to Hawaii in 1899 and thereafter to North and South American countries and Asian countries. The comparative number of emigrants of Okinawans in those days is the most among Japanese accounting for 10% of all Japanese emigrants in the 1930s. The Pacific islands, such as Saipan Island that Kame and her husband went to, were new destinations for the Japanese to emi-

grate to. The agreement to the Japanese trusteeship of the Pacific islands in the peace conference for the post-Great War held at Versailles allowed Japan to use the islands for non-military purposes. There was a Japanese company, Nanyo Kohatsu Kabushiki Kaisha, which had big success in sugar cane plantations and other businesses on Saipan Island and other islands in the region. Saipan Island saw great economic prosperity thanks to the enterprise attracting Japanese and Okinawan people to go work there and among those were Kame and her husband.

Taking over the Pacific islands, the US forces attacked Okinawa eight months later, in April 1945. The Battle of Okinawa is said to be one of the ugliest and bloodiest battles in the history of tragic wars: “The military strategy adopted by the Japanese army was to make the island into a sacrificial “fortress” in order to delay the American invasion and to protect the mainland and the Emperor system [...] Many local inhabitants were murdered by the Japanese forces. Some were direct murders...Others were indirect...” [4]. A series of books “An Outline History of Okinawa Prefecture” edited and published by Okinawa Prefecture states about the Battle of Okinawa as follows: “Roughly speaking, modern Okinawa has gone through the process of unification and assimilation into the Japanese imperialist system. It was subjected to a system of indoctrination in which local culture and people’s thinking were forcibly changed into an ideology based on loyalty to Emperor and the fatherland. The Battle of Okinawa was an extreme manifestation of KOMINKA (subjugation to the Emperor system). At the same time, attempts at assimilation brought about open prejudice and discrimination directed toward native Okinawans. More than 90 days of the heavy bombardment called ‘the iron storm’ looked as if they would completely annihilate Okinawa itself.” [4] The common understanding of Okinawans is Okinawa was utilized by the Japanese government as a shield to guard mainland Japan by means of delaying the American attempt of mainland invasion with the sacrifice of Okinawa. No doubt the reason why so many US bases and facilities exist on Okinawa and the locals suffer from intense aircraft noise derives from this history of Okinawa and Japan, as well as its geographical and militarily strategic reasons. The American oppressive ruling for 27 years until the reversion of the administrative authority to Japan in 1972 understandably made Okinawan people feel bitter against the US. But at the same time, their resentment also goes to Tokyo because it was, and still is, Tokyo that put Okinawa into such a situation.

In fact, Okinawa is the most Americanized region in Japan. Some residents have relatives in the US, even American family members in Okinawa. Scores of Okinawans confess they like Americans more than the mainlanders. Nonetheless, it is the Okinawan hope that the US bases disappear from the island. As to Kame, she tirelessly claimed the aircraft noise reminded her of the Battle of Saipan and that she hated war more than anything else. The aircraft noise in the community she lived in has been

more than tolerable. But Kame never thought of moving out, saying this was the house her husband built on his own when their land was released in 1954 and it is the airbase that should be relocated or closed down. Despite her active involvement in the antiwar campaign including the lawsuit in which the Court ordered the government only to pay compensation, neither improvement in the living environment nor the base closure was achieved. She feared the base’s existence could lead to involvement in another war and strongly desired the disappearance of all military bases from Okinawa.

#### **4.4 Sharing the Sentiments**

Such antiwar and antimilitary sentiments as Kame are naturally shared by the generation having direct war experiences in Okinawa. The memories have resonated among the next generations through the narratives of the elders, the articles and reportages of the local media and school education, etc. The following is one of the examples of sharing of the sentiment: a female antimilitary activist mentions her grandparents’ war experience as a key factor in her activism, naming the impact of the collective memory of World War II, which occurred more than thirty years before her birth. She mentions her worries that the noise from the new airbases being constructed in Okinawa will bring back painful memories for her grandparents. She exemplifies the salience of linked lives [5].

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The role of memory and life history is discussed in understanding soundscape taking an old woman as an example who lived in a tiny community vicinal to Kadena US Air Base in Okinawa. Her story and most Okinawans’ stories suggest military noises heard by local people have different meanings from those heard in other parts of mainland Japan.

### **6. REFERENCES**

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- [4] M. Arasaki (ed.): “*Profile of Okinawa: 100 Questions and Answers*,” (Techno Marketing Centre, Tokyo, 2000) p.73.
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