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"Tacit farmers" in U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa

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In this short article, I discuss tacit farming, based on interviews with fieldworkers in Okinawa, and present its significance and problems.[1]

Okinawa is a small island prefecture of Japan. Surprisingly, about 70% of the military bases of the U.S. forces in Japan are located here. There has been an unusual kind of cultivation, called "tacit farming (*Mokunin Kosaku*)"; locals till military lands tacitly. Though there are many restrictions, dangers, and inconveniences, they grow vegetables, fruits, sugarcane, and even raise livestock.

Due to WWII and the violent expropriation of land by the U.S. military, Okinawa suffered from a severe shortage of land and food. Under the U.S. sovereignty, an allotted-land system was implemented (Saito 2018). However, it did not provide enough land, so people started tacit farming. In 1959, tacit farming was officially stated in High Commissioner Ordinance No.20 "Acquisition of Leasehold Interest." It currently continues under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Nevertheless, it has been regarded as unauthorized cultivation or illegal occupation by the Japan Ministry of Defense. In some areas, the Ministry of Defense suspended cultivation due to base realignment or other causes, but the farmers received no compensation.

Previous Studies

Though there are few studies on tacit farming, they have revealed various aspects. Some studies considered tacit farming to be dependent on the base (Kurima 2012), while others considered it to be a peaceful use of military land (Koike 1986). Recent studies have focused on the nature of tacit farming as a way to connect with their ancestral land, helping to maintain the traditional communal space (Chibana 2018, Yamauchi 2019).

However, most of the previous studies tend to focus on land ownership, and regard tacit farmers as owner farmers. In Okinawa, land ownership has been historically superior to the right to till (Ishii 1984, 267). The struggle against land grabbing has taken place many times, but it eventually turned into a matter of compensation for land ownership, which was settled by the

[1] This article is based on my presentation at the IOHA Virtual conference in 2021. Due to the space limitation, some of the cases are omitted. Further discussions were later published as a paper (Fukuda 2021).

payment of expensive land rent each year. Even though the majority of farmers in post-war Okinawa didn't own farmland, the right to till was ignored and not secured.

My interviews in this short article took place between July and August 2018, in Yomitan Village, Iejima Island, Kadena Town and Okinawa City. All interviews were conducted in Japanese and excerpts have been translated into English by the author, with informants' names being pseudonyms. The following interviews will point out perspectives lacking in previous studies.

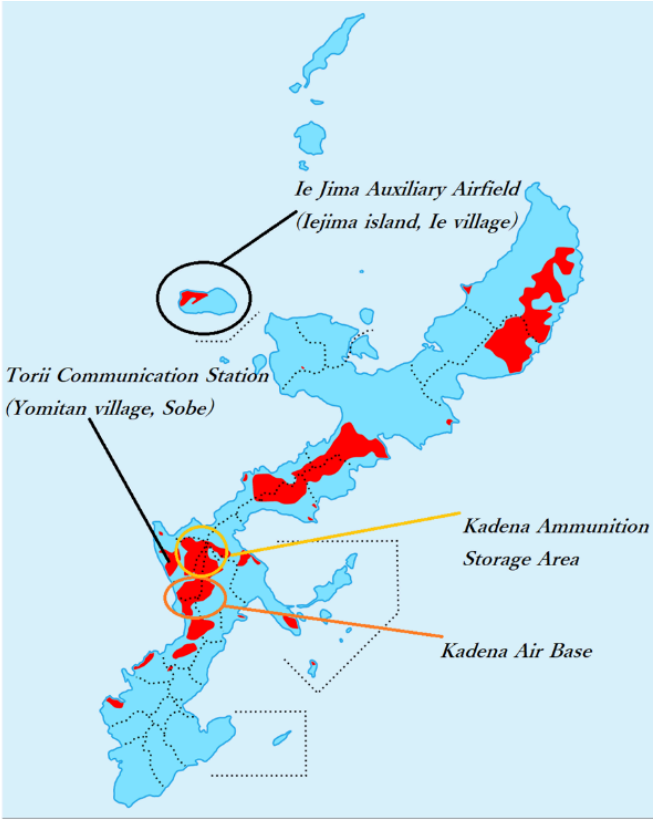

Figure 1: The U.S. military bases in Okinawa. *"US military bases in Okinawa." Wikimedia Commons, Accessed Feb 21 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_military_bases_in_Okinawa.svg, edited by author*

Case 1: Coexistence with the U.S. Military (Mr. Maeda, Yomitan)

A first case is from the Sobe area in Yomitan, where the Torii communication station is located. Mr. Maeda is a tacit farmer and a landowner, in his 70s.

> "Besides tacit farming, we enjoy the military's beach open to the public every summer. As an annual event, locals and the U.S. military jointly clean the *Utaki* (sacred sites for Okinawans) in military lands. It is important to cooperate with each other."
>
> "There have been no accidents recently. No one wants them to leave here. As neighbors, we are trying to coexist successfully."[2]

[2] From my interview on July 31, 2018.

He argued that the coexistence of the locals and the U.S. forces is important, and tacit farming is regarded as a means of coexistence.

Case 2: The double profits (Mr. Fukuhara, Iejima)

Iejima island was once the center of the land struggle in Okinawa. It is the hometown of Shoko Ahagon, a leader of the anti-base movement. He stated:

> "We don't think of our lands as tacitly cultivated lands, that the U.S. military allows us to cultivate. Conversely, we think of our lands as the lands that we allow the military to use tacitly."[3]

However, the situation has changed. Mr. Fukuhara is a sugarcane farmer in his 60s. His father was a core member of the land struggle, but later became a contract landowner.

> "Today, the land rent is about three times the income from sugarcane. We know that the U.S. military can take away the rights to till whenever they want. But since Iejima has become wealthy because of the double profits, we no longer protest the U.S. military."[4]

In Iejima, tacit farming is done by landowners. So, there has been the so-called double profits, thus the former island of resistance became dependent on the base.

Case 3: Ancestor's blood (Mr. Iramina, Kadena)

Mr. Iramina, a man about in his 80s, is a tacit farmer in Kadena Air Base, and one of the plaintiffs of a noise lawsuit against the base. He told me about his memories of the military land in the old days.

> "There used to be no fence and anyone could enter, so we [would] often steal the explosives that were piled up in the open and throw them into the river to catch fish. Near Kudokubashi Bridge, the U.S. military was conducting live ammunition exercises, but they were too lazy to shoot all, so they often dug holes and buried them without shooting. We picked them up and sold them to earn money… Ancestors of people around here are all farmers, so it's in our blood. We till our lands as ancestors do."[5]

Tacit farming is often seen as a right "permitted" by the base and is therefore thought to be associated with dependence on the base. In this case, however, there is no contradiction between the anti-base movement and tacit farming. They till the land because the land is their native land.

Case 4: "I'm against the base" (Mr. Oshiro, Okinawa City)

The last case shared here is from the Chibana area in Okinawa City, east of the Kadena

[3] Ahagon, *Beigun to Noumin*. p.161, translated by author.
[4] From my interview on July 24, 2018.
[5] From my interview on Aug 17, 2018.

ammunition storage area, where some farmers were evicted due to the relocation of the U.S. bases.

Mr. Oshiro is a man in his 70s who makes a living by tacit farming. He purchased the right to farm from the previous farmer about 10 years ago, but he doesn't know about the landowner at all.

> "Yes, the U.S. military did a lot of terrible things. Before Okinawa's return to Japan, the situation was even worse. Americans didn't treat Okinawans as human beings. But lately, I'm much angrier at the Japanese government than at the U.S. military. They just do what the U.S. tells them to do and never protects Okinawans."[6]

Farmers in the Chibana area are not all local residents, but some of them come from other areas. In some cases, farming rights were bought and sold by the farmers without any relation to the landowner. Besides Mr. Oshiro, many other farmers in this area said they were anti-base.

Conclusion

As in Case 2, the military land rent served as the factor to lead to acceptance of the base, and tacit farming itself does not have much influence on it (Case 3 and 4). Tacit farming itself was seen as a means of coexistence (as in Case 1) or as a way to reconnect with ancestral lands (as in Case 3 and in previous studies). Although in some areas (c.f. Case 4) tacit farming was done by the farmers who have no ancestral connection, the importance of farming on military lands can be recognized as an activity that restores the usufructuary rights of the land from the U.S. to Okinawans. The military lands have been maintained fertile through tacit farmers' continued cultivation.

Since Okinawa studies have focused on land ownership rather than land use, tacit farming itself has not been properly evaluated. The uncertainty of the right to till makes tacit farming a precarious situation, but its importance is significant. Moreover, tacit farming is a microcosm of the complex history of the Okinawan land.

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[6] From my interview on Aug 1, 2018.

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