Kokusai Dori: An Exploration of Food and Politics in Okinawa

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English 313 (Creative Writing)
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This poem was created in memory of my grandmother Tomi “Kachan” Nakanishi. A WWII Nurse and American Camp escapee, Kachan risked her life to protect men, women, and children from the horrors of foreign military abuses during the Battle of Okinawa. She was one of the last surviving nurses, receiving an award of recognition from President Barack Obama in 2016.

My grandmother woke up every day at the same time.
Prayed at the same alter.
Went about her same business,
for over 60 years.
She watched buildings rise and nations fall
in the streets of Kokusai Dori.

As a child, growing, I watched her hands
as they molded onigiri, dance in the wind,
and trace the walls, the ruins of the Ryukyuan Kingdom,
as we stepped off the monorail.
She could derail whole histories during our walks,
talked of magic and power of food,
the way it healed the wounds of war and famine.

I watched her body stand tall like a warrior,
as we walked through New Village,
a militarized weapon of dependence,
glowing white like the smile of a western sun.
Banners looked like fireworks shooting across glass,
the women, ivory mannequins, the ambrosia of McDonald’s
wet the air like rain, golden arches, like arms,
wanting to pull me in…
I tugged on Kachan’s pant leg, a child’s resistance,
as she dragged my young body forward.

Countless generations of bodies
she has had to carry through this street.*

The streets roar with sounds of horns,
yelling between foreigners, gaijin.
Bodies pour in like bucket of fish,
across the choppy waves of traffic,

*Kachan served as a WWII nurse and was a camp escapee, servicing men, women and children who had fallen during the Battle of Okinawa. She often told us stories of having to “drag bodies” out of the street to avoid American Military members running them over with their vehicles.

Ashley Nakanishi-Shankles is an Uchinna Poet, actress, playwright, educator and human rights activist. Steady reppin’ the Ryukyuan Kingdom of Okinawa. She is the author of Blood, Sweat, and Breastmilk and forthcoming prose, “She Crazy” and comic book series “The Last Sakura”. Currently she teaches English and Culinary Arts at Olomana Schools. When she is not scheming up ideas for education revolution, she is busy traveling the world with her daughters and dogs.
and on the chopping block of the island, chopsticks snap into work mode.

The snapping of my grandmother’s fingers wakes me from the lotus eating temptations. I, in my four-foot splendor leapt towards her as she gathered me before the hand of blood. I smelt its thickness and she told me, “You get used to it.”

As Kachan tapped her feet in a Morse code fashion, I remember trying to read the lyrics to her body of song, as she stared blankly into the open roads mumbling a prayer —I think I heard her mother’s name. We cross the street towards Old Village, her body becomes a willow tree, gently swaying to a melancholy melody. She points with her crooked finger and tells me, “Here, your ancestors stayed.” Then went back to humming folk songs, and in a sing-songy voice says, “we get ready for Obon today.”

I didn’t know what that really meant, except that we get to hear taiko and eisa all night long, watch Chondara and moai throw their hands and fans up in song, as we burn money at the alters, and spend over 10000 yen on cantaloupe and plums, watermelon and grapes, meats and noodles.

We gather, like witches, over fissured fish heads, pulpos pork bones, the bite of bittermelon, the skin of the East China Sea, a jade green, and pour our prayers into a stainless steel cauldron, as if to keep them forever; bones of sacrifice bask in baron beliefs.

She points out to me the oldest bento shop, says that during the war, she hid there. It’s the only shop that ever got up from its knees. “This is real Okinawa,” she confesses. I am only now beginning to see what she meant. Farmers, fishermen, seamstresses, and merchants all gather like an old world exchange, as if this is their warehouse sanction, as if this was still a wartime escape.

They reclaimed their culture here. Here, they rebelled against the state.

She became one of many smiles… As we glided through the riverbank of markets, I was reminded that she was a skipping stone, there and then not.

I remember skipping down Yatai Village, chasing the dancing lanterns cast out like a fishing line, being hooked on this sinking feeling of having left my grandmother behind. My only responsibility was to stay by her side.

Our family ghosts held my hand and led the way I saw my grandmother behind a thick cloud of smoke, her teeth staining the sky like the Eastern Sun, as if waiting for me, there, all along. She opens her arms like she was welcoming me home, and sang, “Come Ash-chan, iku yo…”

Lately, I trace my fingertips across the old Ryukyuan walls… My daughter, tracing my footsteps with her own, And I remember my grandmother.

I watch my daughter, swing her hands in the air, as if dancing in song or holding the hands of ghosts Decide to tell her the stories Kachan did, but with a twist. After we leave the plot, thickened with her bones, and we make our way down the same roads she did, to go home.

Glossary

Kokusai Dori—“International Road” or “Miracle Mile” (based on fast recovery post WWII); a shopping strip stretching 2 miles long in Naha, Okinawa.

Onigiri—is a rice ball formed (with meat or sweets) into a triangle wrapped in seaweed (nori).

Ryukyuan Kingdom—The Kingdom of Okinawa, which ruled from the 15th to late 19th century.

New Village—“American Village”; a shopping center on Kokusai Dori made up of American stores and eateries.

Kachan—Mother or maternal figure.

Gaijin—foreigner; primarily a person of European descent.

Old Village—a recreation of 17th–19th century communities, shopping, eateries on Kokusai Dori.

Taiko—Okinawan performance drum.

Eisa—Okinawan folk music.

Chondara—Okinawan clown.

Moai—a group of lifelong friends or a support group.

Yen—Japanese currency.

Yatai Village—A side street made up of food stalls in Old Village.

Iku yo—“Come here” or “let’s go”.

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