

Column 7. Ahagon Shoko

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(*In Japanese, the surname comes before the given name. This translation keeps the Japanese names in the original order.)

The man called the “Okinawan Gandhi” lived on Iejima, a small island close to the main island of Okinawa. Ahagon Shoko (1901 – 2002) was an incomparable seeker of peace, and his life and legacy embodies the principles of nonviolence and peace in Okinawa even now.

Before WWII, Ahagon was influenced by Kagawa Toyohiko, a Japanese Christian Pacifist. After spending several years as an immigrant farmer in Cuba and Peru, he returned back to Japan and purchased more than 24 acres of land in Iejima. He and his son teamed-up and worked hard together to build an Arcadia on the island. However, their dream was obliterated by the Battle of Okinawa (which some locals call the “Typhoon of Steel”), during which he lost his only son and their island was devastated by the battle. After the battle, his farmland and others’ was seized to be form a vast complex of US military bases on Iejima and Okinawa.

Ahagon had dreamed of building the ideal village when the war was over. However, his dream was completely shattered when the U.S. military forcibly requisitioned the farmers’ lands on the island. At that time the villagers of Iejima had barely survived the fierce attack by U.S. military during the “Typhoon of Steel”. However, in the eight years after the war, the military revealed their ferocious power in a more subtle, enduring and sinister way. When the villagers refused to give up their land, the soldiers set fire to their houses and advanced bulldozers to completely level them- a policy the Okinawans call Bayonets and Bulldozers.

Led by Ahagon Shoko, the villagers collectively decided to keep themselves completely nonviolent when they faced the American military. In their guideline drafted as “Petition regulations” we can see their decisions. Some of the regulations were as follows: “Always raise your hands above the level of your ears; Keep your voice not too loud; Do not hold any farm tools such as sickles in their hands when you go to meetings with American soldiers.”

Then they began the Beggars’ March. Young and Old, males and females, all kinds of villagers visited every section of the Okinawa Island and spread the words about the cruel activities of the U.S. military against the villagers. Arranging the well-known tune of the Okinawan folk songs they wrote “Petition Songs” and sang them accompanied with jabisen (*Sanshin*), the classic Okinawan musical instrument. The Beggars’ March gave impetus to the birth of Island-wide struggles for [the defense of their] land (*shima gurumi tochi toso*), which started in 1956, the next year of the Beggars’ March.

The Island-wide explosion (*shima gurumi no bakuhatu*) was defined as “non-resistance resistance” against the U.S. army. The villagers made it clear that their actions were “anti-military” but not “Anti-American.” Thus, they could avoid the militaristic oppression by the U.S. forces. This position became the essence and the core idea of the Okinawan land struggle and the nonviolence resistance was

unshakingly held during the coming Okinawa Reversion Movement. During the time of the Vietnam War Iejima was used as an aerial bombing range. Trainings for aerial atomic bomb dropping were practiced there. At that time Ahagon led the movement to stop the missile practices on his island. He also built the Solidarity Training Center (*Danketsu Dojo*) to make it as a ground zero for their struggles, despite the disruption by the U.S. Army.

The reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972 ended the era of the land confiscating with “bayonets and bulldozer” by the U.S. army. However, to the shock and disappointment of the Okinawan people, the Japanese government continued the forcible seizure and occupation of their lands on behalf of the US military.

Determined not to sign the contract to lease their land for any military use, Ahagon created the Anti-War Peace Museum and “Wabiai no sato (Village of Penitence)” in 1984, which was planned to be used as a site of communion for peace by the people from home and abroad. A lot of visitors had the opportunities to listen to Ahagon who talked with simple but deeply inspirational words. His peace-loving mind touched their heart and gave them the unforgettable impression.

I myself had an “Aha!” moment when I could feel that I reached the source of Ahagon’s peaceful mind. It was the time when I discovered his notes written on the margin of his Bible, which he was able to carry around miraculously even during the fierce battle on Iejima. Just before the U.S. military’s landing on Iejima the island experienced a furious bombardment. During a short break from the attack, he wrote as follows:

“I am alone under the shade of a tree in the cave of the North shore. I am enjoying reading a book. I feel like the world seems peaceful and tranquil.” However, in another note written while feeding his cattle, he revealed his amazing and almost superhuman state of mind:

“I wish my cattle would not fall on hard times. Aware that it’s human beings who engage the warfare, I feel sorry for cattle. This makes them more endearing to me. Spring has come. Grasses are grown and wait to be fed.”

Later after he was captured by the U.S. army and relocated to the Tokashiki Island concentration camp (one of the camps where most of Okinawans were detained for years after the war), he expressed his feelings in his note by writing that “The war. The human being is the most wicked demon on the earth. No other animals would ever kill each other so badly as humans.”

This was the time when Japanese army was slaughtering the civilians on Okinawa island and people were experiencing the hellish misery at the frontline in Southern Okinawa at the final stage of furious battle by Japanese army.

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