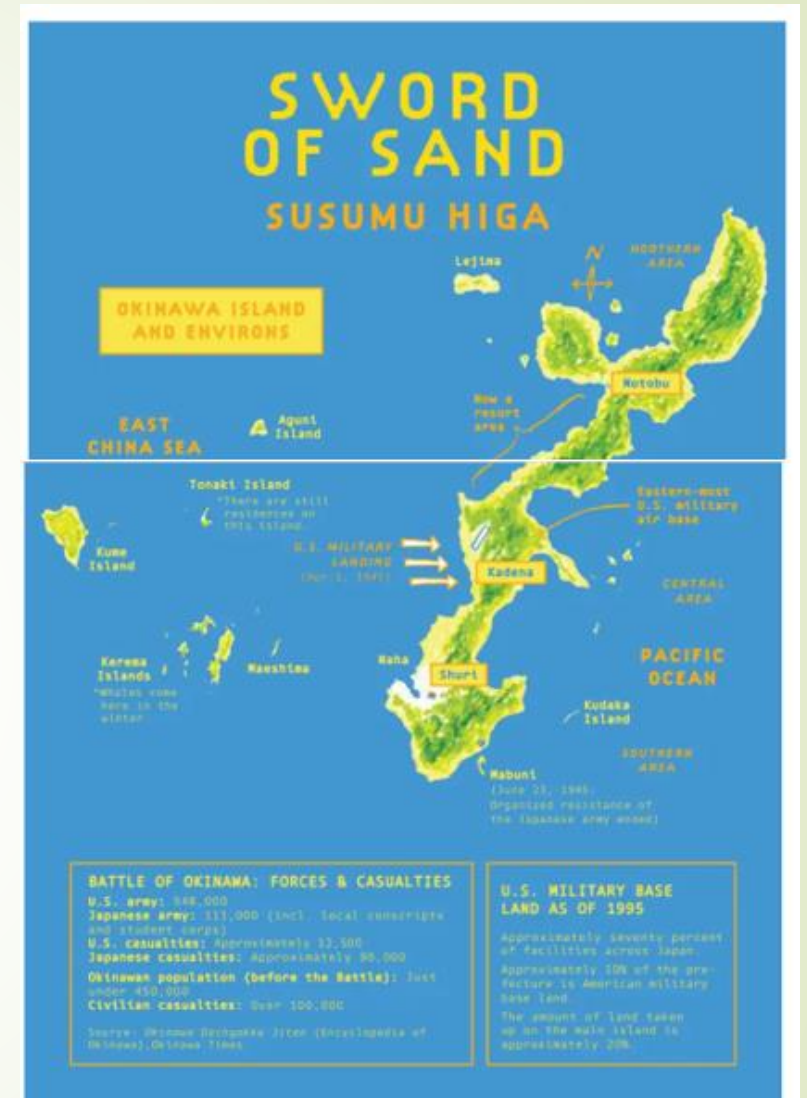


Okinawa by Susumu Higa

Graphic Novels, Comics, and More!

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Barbara Glaeser



BATTLE OF OKINAWA: FORCES & CASUALTIES

U.S. army: 548,000

Japanese army: 111,000 (incl. local conscripts and student corps)

U.S. casualties: Approximately 12,500

Japanese casualties: Approximately 90,000

Okinawan population (before the Battle): Just under 450,000

Civilian casualties: Over 100,000

Source: *Okinawa Daihyakka Jiten* (Encyclopedia of Okinawa), Okinawa Times

U.S. MILITARY BASE LAND AS OF 1995

Approximately seventy percent of facilities across Japan.

Approximately 10% of the prefecture is American military base land.

The amount of land taken up on the main island is approximately 20%.

- Susumu Higa's "Okinawa," a combination of the manga "Sword of Sand" and "Mabui," takes readers from the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 to the present. The 528-page tome through a series of vignettes portrays a variety of perspectives, from civilian war refugees to Japanese and American soldiers, local farmers, protesters and Okinawans working for the U.S. military.

Each story features new characters and situations that play out over a handful of pages. The diversity of perspectives presented in this collection is impressive. While it would be easy and justifiable to focus entirely on the horrors of WWII and the various atrocities, the stories aren't really interested in taking a side in that conflict. While largely told from the perspective of the residents of Okinawa, there are plenty of American characters that are portrayed simply as people doing their jobs without judgment being passed by the characters or author. The people of these stories are simply living their lives in extraordinary circumstances. That's not to say people's actions don't have consequences, though, and US military presence is a frequent source of tension and conflict between characters in both the stories set during the war and many years after.

- The first collection, *Sword of Sand*, is a ground level, unflinching look at the horrors of the Battle of Okinawa. Higa then turns an observant eye to the present-day in *Mabui* (Okinawan for "spirit"), where he explores how the American occupation has irreversibly changed the island prefecture, through the lens of the archipelago's indigenous spirituality and the central character of the yuta priestess.



Susumu Higa

“Each reader has a different background; everyone can think their own way, some may agree, and some might disagree,” Higa told Stars and Stripes on July 20 at the Hyatt Regency Naha. “I would like them to overlap and know about the history of Okinawa.”



- Higa, 70, started late, submitting his first manga for publication at 33, he said. Both his parents survived the Battle of Okinawa, and under U.S. administration of the island until 1972, his life was consumed by both the war's history and legacy. “War was a very close topic to me,” he said.
- At 40, he quit his office job at Ryukyu University to work on manga full-time. Higa has penned five books. “Sword of Sand” was serialized in the manga magazine “Big Comic” between 1992-1997, according to Japanese publisher Seirinkogeisha. “Mabui” was completed in 2010.
- Canadian freelance manga editor Christopher Woodrow-Butcher secured the publishing rights after first spotting the Japanese originals in 2010 and a later version in French. “For me it was a no brainer, it was like ‘Oh my God, this is already in French; it’s a huge success.”
- He said he approached Fantagraphics in 2016 and took over five years to adapt and edit the book, which was translated by Jocelyne Allen.



Okinawa was released in English August of 2023

- **MSX:** How do you think U.S. readers are going to react to the work?
- *(Higa had mentioned that he didn't get much response from Japanese readers until a short documentary was published, but in general, was not considered a player in the manga world).*
- **HIGA:** Once the French version came out, I started to get people from abroad coming all the way to Okinawa to see me. I was thinking that maybe readers in other countries have more of an awareness of the importance of these issues and are thinking more about it. Because for Okinawans, the stories I'm telling, they're just life here. It's just expected, obvious, natural life here. But I'm bringing different elements into the discussion of Japanese culture, and for people in other countries, that might be something new and interesting. For people here, they lived it. So I think they're not paying too much attention to it.
- Whether it's Okinawa or the U.S., I'd hope for that element of shared humanity, of empathy for one another. Okinawa's problems aren't just Okinawa's problems; they're connected to global issues. In fact, the situation on the main islands of Japan is totally different than here in Okinawa. You can see the parallels with Ukraine and Russia right now. The situation in Ukraine isn't just 'someone else's problem' for Okinawa; it's something we feel acutely, I think — the similarity of the situation. You can see Japan overlapped with Russia and Okinawa with Ukraine. If Okinawa went to the Japanese government and said, "we want to separate," they wouldn't let that happen. So there's this tension. And I think that global connection and that tension might actually come through more for foreign readers, readers in America, more so than in Japan.
- *Okinawa* has been nominated for the 2024 [Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in NonFiction](#), an incredibly prestigious award administered by the American Library Association.



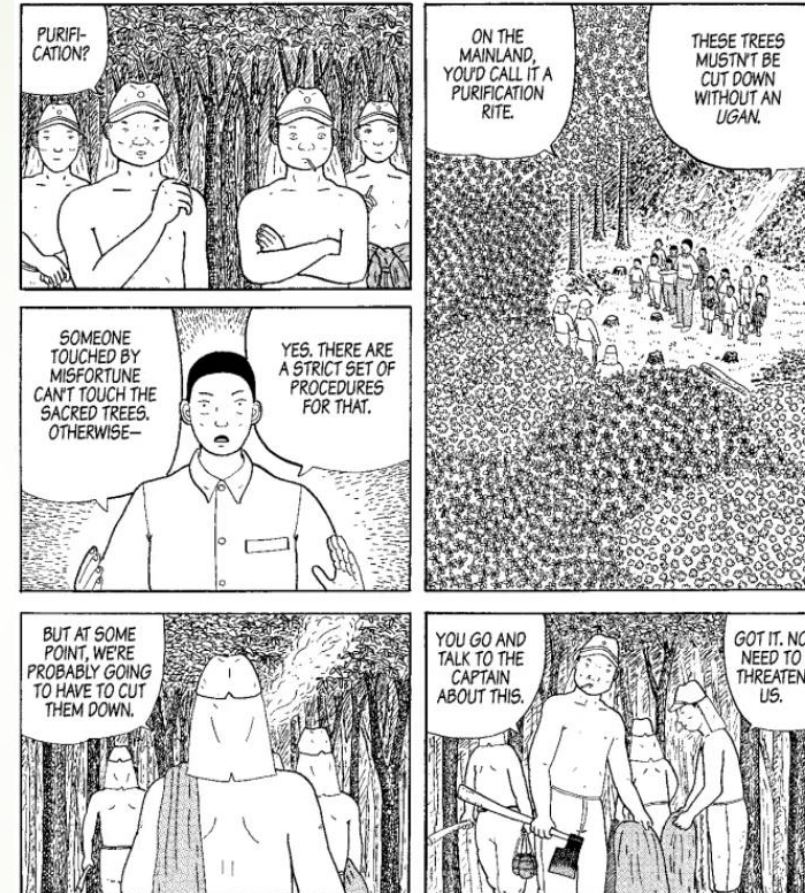


Spirituality

- ▶ Okinawans have traditionally followed Ryukyuan religious beliefs. This is characterized by worshipping ancestors and respecting the relationships between the living, dead and the gods and spirits of the natural world.
- ▶ Characteristics include a female priestess (Noro) and the worship of the spirit of things such as fire, rice, water, boats and ancestors. Spirits are called “kami”, or God, and worship takes the form of rituals to ask for protection and good fortune. Often, in the center of a grove of trees for instance, you may observe a small grouping of stones near a larger natural stone known as an “ibe”, or sacred stone.
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Artwork in Okinawa by Timothy O'Neil

- Higa is more of a cartoonist than one typically imagines compared to mainstream manga.
- His clean art is strictly black and white with cross-hatching or pointalism to provide shading.
- It's tempting to think this is more "simple" than the work of other mangaka, but the diversity present in crowd shots and the meticulously rendered foliage of Okinawa proves otherwise.
- Hand-lettered onomatopoeia is applied with restraint and is left intact in this English localization and is accompanied by tasteful, small transcriptions/translations in the gutter under the panels in which they appear.
- This is nice because it leaves the art completely unaltered but still allows the corresponding sounds to be communicated to the non-Japanese-speaking reader.





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***Washington Post* Book World Editors' Staff Pick 2023**

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