MONDAY OCTOBER 8
12:30 - 2 PM / ROYCE 314
FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

PHANTOM OKINAWA
OKAMOTO TARO AND THE SPECTACLE
OF ACTION AND ABJECTION
PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER NELSON, UNC CHAPEL HILL

In 2011, the Okinawa Prefecture Museum held an exhibition to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Japanese artist and ethnomusicologist Okamoto Taro. A student of Mauss and Kojève as well as an active participant in the Collège de Sociologie, Okamoto was perhaps the most well-known Japanese artist of the postwar era. And yet, this exhibition, intended to celebrate his longstanding interest in Okinawan culture, brought allegations of his desecration of rural tombs, precipitating a caustic debate about colonial authority and the appropriation of Okinawan everyday life. In my paper, I will explore the concern with sacrifice that informed Okamoto’s work on Okinawa. I will focus on the complex interrelationship between his nativist valorization of organic totality, his commitment to transformative action, and his critical relationship to the annihilation of community that marked the end of the Pacific War.

CHRISTOPHER T. NELSON is a cultural anthropologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Since 1996, he has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Okinawa, Japan. Nelson’s broader research interests include the relationship between history and memory; the critical study of everyday life; storytelling, ritual and performance; value, exchange and sacrifice. His first book, Dancing with the Dead: Memory, Performance and Everyday Life in Postwar Okinawa (Duke University Press, 2008) considered the ways in which ordinary people come to grips with the burden of their past. He is currently at work on a project entitled, Dreaming of the Dragon King: Death, Sacrifice and Creative Action, an ethnography of laborers, artists, ethnologists, political activists, shamans and the dead in contemporary Japan. Nelson is a co-editor of the open access journal, Cultural Anthropology.

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