

*Okinawa: “The Land of Courtesy” in a Conflict of Linguistic Interests*

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**Abstract**

UNESCO has listed the languages of the ancient Ryukyu Kingdom, now Okinawa Prefecture of Japan, as severely endangered. That means that apart from grandparents, there are few if any young people who speak these as home languages. This is the result, not of a popular rejection of the old over the new, but of the determined effort of a conqueror to impose his language on the conquered. From Japan's assimilation of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1867 until now, the people of Okinawa Prefecture have endured the forced destruction of their language, and thus their culture, by successive Japanese governments in accordance with a policy of national unity and modernization, benefiting not the local people but the aims of the central government. This paper will deal with the Ryukyu people's determination to preserve their language by teaching it outside the state educational system through social interaction (dance, music, festivals, traditional sports etc.) linked to their cultural identity and focused on their young people.

Keywords: Okinawa, Ryukyu, minority language

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## **Introduction**

Before we discuss the attempt to revitalize the Ryukyu languages, we must first understand a bit about the history of the area that is the present day Okinawa Prefecture of Japan, reaching from Okinawa Island in the north to Yaeyama and its surrounding islands in the southwest.

These islands, plus the islands north of Okinawa from Yoron to Amami Oshima, were formerly the Ryukyu Kingdom. The people of all these islands spoke various dialects of the Ryukyu language, a language related to but distinct from Japanese, and now falling into disuse. In this paper, the term Ryukyuan will be used to cover the five major dialects of the Ryukyu Islands: Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni.

### **A short history of Okinawa**

The center of the Ryukyu Kingdom was the Island of Okinawa. By the eleventh century, the island was divided into three kingdoms ruled from “gusuku” or stone castles in the north, center and south. Hashi (1371–1439), king of the central kingdom, took control over the whole island as well as the islands to the north and south and built his capital at Shuri (Fujii, 1994, p.77).

In 1421, his rule was recognized by China. A firm tributary relationship was established between the two countries, giving the Ryukyu Kingdom the right to conduct foreign sea-trade for China. The Chinese emperor Huang De gave Hashi the dynastic title of Sho and bestowed on him the “Chuzan Plaque” with the inscription “Shu Rei” meaning “Courtesy Safeguarded” which the now Sho Hashi proudly displayed at “Shu Rei no Mon”, the gate of his castle at Shuri (Kerr, 1970, p. 90-91). Merchant ships from the Ryukyu Kingdom carried Chinese goods all over Southeast Asia and through the Malacca Straits to the coast of India, where they traded them for European goods with Portuguese, Spanish and Arab merchants (Kerr, 1970, p. 90-91).

Unable to do business with China directly and jealous of the lucrative trade position of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the Satsuma clan of southern Japan invaded Okinawa in 1609 (Arashiro, 1998, p.82). Satsuma collected exorbitant taxes on all the China trade, leaving Ryukyu impoverished, but keeping the Ryukyu king as a puppet to maintain the fiction that nothing had changed in the relations between Ryukyu and China.

However, the Ryukyu court managed to keep a share of the general taxation for use in separately entertaining the Chinese and Japanese emissaries. This led to a flourishing of the arts in Okinawa, especially pottery, music, dance, theater, and poetry. The standard language used in all of these was and continues to be the Ryukyu dialect of Naha.

### **The decline in use of Ryukyuan**

Although both Chinese and Japanese were spoken as second languages by the king, some members of the court, and a few merchants, Ryukyuan remained the undisputed language of the people until the dissolution of the Ryukyu Kingdom by Meiji in 1879 (Kerr, G. 1970, p.383).

As a result of the Ryukyu Kingdom's integration into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture, all education and civil administration were carried out in Japanese. Japanese teachers and administrators were sent from the mainland (Oshiro, 1992, pp25-26) and only Japanese speaking Okinawans were hired for subordinate positions in these fields.

However, as Japan lurched toward World War II in the second quarter of the twentieth century, the government decided that in the name of national unity the Ryukyu language had to be eliminated. Place names and family names were changed to reflect Japanese Kanji readings. By 1940, just a year before Pearl Harbor, speaking the Ryukyu language had become a crime (Arashiro,1998, p.197), although it was the home language for most of Okinawa's population. During the invasion itself, the Japanese Army executed many Okinawans as spies for speaking their own language publicly (Ota, 1981, p.8).

At the beginning of the American occupation of Okinawa in 1945, the Americans envisioned independence for Okinawa and a revival of its language. However, political realities made the attempt short-lived (Fisch, 1988, p.101). One third of Okinawa's population had been wiped out in the war, the only remaining educators and administrators were Japanese speakers, and the huge influx of returning soldiers had been indoctrinated in Japanese language and culture. So, the U.S. puppet Government of the Ryukyus, continued to foster Japanese in education, government, and the marketplace, although the home language for most Okinawans remained Ryukyuan at the end of the war.

However, by the end of the American occupation and the return of Okinawa to Japanese control in 1973, a mere 28 years later, only those born before and a few of those born after the war could speak the Ryukyu language and, because of its perceived inferior status, a notion fostered during the pre-war era, they were often ashamed to admit it.

### **The present state of Ryukyuan**

At present, out of a population of 1.4 million Okinawans, only an estimated 95,000 are able to speak Ryukyuan and for most of them it is now a second, not a home, language. Probably the most important factor in its continued existence today is the extraordinary longevity of its pre-war speakers, who still make up the majority of its native speakers.

However, because of Japanese missteps in courting the loyalty of Okinawans, especially in forcing them to accept so many U.S. bases on Okinawan territory, there is a renewed sense of nationalism, especially among young people of the islands.

### **The resurgence of Ryukyuan**

At an elementary level, this has produced a kind of Nouveau Ryukyuan or Okinawan Japanese, the tacking of Ryukyu words onto a Japanese grammatical frame for use as a symbol of ethnic solidarity among young people. But others are seeking to reestablish Okinawa's traditional arts, culture, and language in a more authentic way.

Public schools in Okinawa, long bound by the Japanese Ministry of Education to refrain from deviating from its curriculum, have begun offering some education in the

history, culture and language of Okinawa. Some schools have even gone so far as to sponsor speech contests in the Ryukyu language. Okinawan Prefectural Arts University in Naha has long taught its classes in Okinawan dance, music, drama, etc. through the medium of the Ryukyu language. But now other universities, which once taught the language as a dead linguistic artifact, are fostering speaking clubs and circles. Several radio music and talk shows are conducted in the Ryukyu language. Local TV commercials aimed at the older generation, for instance those for funerals and cemetery plots, are often at least partly in Ryukyuan, as are those for Okinawan alcohol products such as local beers and *awamori* (a rice-based gin).

The arts have continued to be a bastion of the language. The teaching of Okinawan pottery, weaving, musical instruments like the *sanshin* (a three stringed banjo), dance, *karaji-yui* (classical hair-styling), cooking, and even sports, like Okinawan karate and dragon boat racing, are taught in Ryukyuan. Okinawa also has a vibrant theater movement, producing traditional and modern plays in Ryukyuan some of which are also broadcast weekly on local TV and performed in the open-air at festivals.

However, the real hope for the future of the language comes from efforts to get Okinawa's youth engaged in it. The young have very little interest in the folk and classical music of the past. But modern Okinawan music and singers are popular all over Japan and Ryukyuan is increasingly used in lyrics and performances. Groups like the Rinken Band use Ryukyuan exclusively in their lyrics and as the main language of their banter in concerts, often with a Japanese translation. Kina Shokichi's band Champuru mixes Japanese and Ryukyuan, and even Nene, a band known for catering to Japanese tourists, from time to time uses Ryukyuan lyrics. Moreover, festive dances called *eisa* are performed by troupes of young people accompanied by Ryukyuan lyrics sung in unison. Every junior and senior high school in Okinawa has its own *eisa* troupe and belonging to it is a matter of civic pride and a symbol of Okinawan identity.

Unique among the prefectures of Japan, Okinawa has not only a growing birth rate, the highest longevity, but also the highest return rate for young people who leave to seek education and jobs elsewhere.

In a bureaucratic slight-of-hand that illustrates the Okinawan sense of getting along while getting their own way, names of towns written in kanji (Japanese characters) on road signs have katakana (Japanese lettering) showing the mandated Japanese pronunciation for the name followed by Roman letters showing the traditional Ryukyuan name: Tamashiro in katakana followed by Tamagusuku in Roman letters.

Lately, however, even maps have daringly tended to Romanize the readings of town and city names to reflect their Ryukyuan pronunciation.

## **Conclusion**

These factors should be good news for the proponents of Ryukyuan, but there is also a refusal among many older Okinawans to admit that the language is in danger, an assumption that its continued existence is a given.

So, parents who can barely understand the language of their own parents, either cannot or are unwilling to bother to pass it on to their children. There is no equivalent of the Welsh *Wlpan* or Breton Diwan movements, so effective in the return of Welsh in Wales and Breton in Brittany, to educate children in Ryukyuan. In fact, there is no agreement on standardizing the dialects of the language or even its spelling, currently based haphazardly on the Roman alphabet or Japanese katakana, to facilitate education in it.

Thus Ryukyuan is at a turning point where only the determined and concerted effort of the Okinawan people can save it from extinction.

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