

On Reclaiming a Ryukyuan Culture

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Ryukyu people “on display” at the 1903 Osaka Exposition (photo: Kansai Okinawa Library)

The set of islands south of the Japanese archipelago was a self-ruled nation called the Ryukyu Kingdom up until 1879, when it was invaded by Japan and forced to become part of Japanese territory. This move, referred to on the mainland as the “Ryukyu Disposition,” placed the Ryukyu archipelago under the control of the Japanese government. As part of this measure, officials from the mainland were instated in political leadership roles in Okinawa, including the governor, all members of the prefectural government, as well as all schoolteachers and principals. It was forbidden for Ryukyuan to hold these posts. The occupation and assimilation policy continued until 1945, during which time the mainland Japanese government and its local representatives forcibly suppressed independent indigenous culture, language, and political and economic systems. Despite this assimilation policy, though, mainland Japanese people continued to see Ryukyu people as completely separate and different from themselves.

Before World War I, the Japanese called the Okinawans *Rikujin*, a discriminatory term for Ryukyu people. The incident most emblematic of this discrimination occurred in 1903, and is now referred to as the *Jinruikan Jiken* (Anthropological Hall Incident). At that time, an exposition was held in Osaka, and there, people from the Ryukyu were “displayed” in a show tent along with the

Ainu people, and indigenous people from Taiwan and other Asian countries. The Okinawan newspaper protested violently that they were being treated as a different and backward people, and forced the exhibit to end the display of Okinawans.

Assimilation policies were cast as a form of enlightening the “different and backward” people. During the Japanese occupation, these policies encroached on the most basic aspects of people’s daily lives. The traditional Okinawan hairstyle and dress were prohibited, and the Okinawan people were forced to dress in Japanese ways. Further, Okinawans historically have had different kinds of names from the Japanese, which the Japanese found difficult to read. In 1937, the Japanese government forced Okinawans, Koreans, and the indigenous Taiwanese to change their names into ones that would be more easily understood from a Japanese perspective, so that people from Japan could more easily refer to them. This order was given and enforced by the educational board of Okinawa, a group comprised of people entirely from the mainland. The same year, the Japanese government prohibited traditional music and dances in the educational system. In a similar move in 1942, the police, who were also all from the mainland, outlawed traditional music, dress, dance, religion, drama and opera performances. Any remaining



Students caught speaking the Ryukyuan language were forced to wear a wooden plate around their neck (photo: Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum guidebook)

artistic performances on the islands had to be conducted in Japanese.

The *Yuta* (Shamans) provide a particularly poignant example of these policies of assimilation. The *Yuta* are mostly women and are believed to be able to hear the gods. The Japanese government refused to recognize or tolerate the traditional Ryukyuan beliefs of shamanism and animism, and in 1939 arrested some 159 *Yuta*. At that time, Japan was in the grips of a fiercely nationalist form of Shintoism that revolved around the emperor system. Other belief systems were not acceptable.

Language was a particularly intense point of conflict regarding assimilation policies. Following several protests against the imposition of the Japanese language around 1940, the local administration unilaterally enacted an educational restriction in Okinawa prohibiting the instruction and the use of the Ryukyuan language. Up until that point, the educational system had long employed punishments for using the indigenous language, forcing students to wear wooden plates called *hogen-fuda* (dialect-

card) around the neck. There was such one wooden plate per class, and this plate was passed from student to student, to whoever used the indigenous language. Students were taught to police each other—no student wanted the shame of having to wear the plate, and would actively point out others students who used the Ryukyuan language, as a means of relieving oneself from that shame. The student who had the card at the end of the day got recorded. If a student was left with the card for three days in a week, he or she would be physically punished by the teacher. This method of punishment continued after the war, even into the US occupation. Before the war, the system included a morality aspect, where students had their “morals” ranked. If your “moral” points were low when you finished junior high and high school, you did not have a chance to go on to the next stage of education at all. Needless to say, “morality” corresponded with the correct enactment of ruling Japanese culture.

The language assimilation measures reached a high point of intensity immediately before the war. According to a record from the Japanese command center in 1944, “all language except for standard Japanese is to be strictly suppressed, and those who use their native language should be considered as spies, and disposed of.” The use of the Okinawan traditional language became illegal. The simple use of a language was considered traitorous and made punishable by death.

It is important to bear in mind here that during the war in Okinawa, the vast majority of Okinawans over 40 could only speak their native language. They could not speak nor understand Japanese. In turn, the Japanese army could not understand what these people were saying, and used this as an excuse for killing many Okinawan people, who did nothing other than speak their own native language. At that time, there were a variety of dialects across Japan, and these dialects were frequently mutually unintelligible. Standardized language was still in

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the process of being constructed. Even so, the Okinawan language, which was labeled as a dialect under Japanese law, was the only dialect that was rendered traitorous. Despite the years of conducting assimilation measures, Japanese mainlanders viewed Okinawans as a separate ethnic group liable to fight against mainlanders or to become spies at anytime.

This is only a handful of examples of the discrimination that Ryukyans have faced from the Japanese mainland across our history. Nowadays, we are trying to revive our specific history and culture.

After all these years, Okinawans are still not sure what the Okinawan identity is. Up until the end of World War II, Okinawans were forced to abandon their identity, because of Japan’s assimilation policies. During Meiji era (1868-1912), a very important scholar of Okinawa addressed his people, “We, the People of Ryukyu.” However, at the beginning of Showa era (1926-1989), the word Ryukyu could no longer be used; instead, we addressed ourselves as people of Okinawa, and then once the war started, we called ourselves “People of Japan, Residents of the Okinawan prefecture.” Just as we started to accept the idea of being “residents of the prefecture of Okinawa” rather than “People of Okinawa,” the war in Okinawa occurred and destroyed everything. Our allegiance to Japan was shattered; we did not know who we were anymore or who we were supposed to be.

Then, in stepped the US military, after the war, and they treated Okinawans as ethnically distinct from Japanese, in order to secure Okinawa as a US territory. Through the 1950s, leftist parties in Okinawa called for Okinawa’s independence from US rule. However, there

were those who felt a sense of crisis from this, especially the teachers, who faced the shift of language in textbooks.

Starting in the 1960s, the movement to rejoin Japan grew stronger and stronger. This movement demanded recognition of Okinawans as “people of Japan.” People here were convinced that Okinawan traditions were backwards, that they should not use the Okinawan language, and that they should regard themselves and be regarded as Japanese.

With the same beliefs, I “studied abroad” in a university in Shizuoka prefecture. During my time there, I could not tell anyone that I came from Okinawa. Eventually, through a dramatic change in my state of mind, I came to believe that I should not be ashamed of my homeland. For 20 years after being reinstated into Japan, the sense of inferiority continued, and young people were ashamed of their homeland. 1992, though, marked a change in popular perception of Okinawa. A famous historical site was rebuilt, an Okinawan baseball team won the second-prize at the national high-school championship, and Okinawan pop music suddenly became popular. Okinawa became a fashionable place. Now when I ask my students about their identity, many of them say, “My nationality is Japanese, but I am an Okinawan.”

As for how Okinawan history and culture are represented in textbooks, the Okinawan educational board, of which I am a member, edits supplementary materials on Okinawan history and culture, and distributes them for free. The materials that the national government provides either to us or to other parts of the country are seriously lacking. Relatedly, the national government has promised to build universities in Okinawa, to compensate for the burden of the military bases here. However, their proposal does not have any reserved quota for Okinawan students, and it should. Such education is essential to the future of our identity. 🗣️

*Translated and transcribed by Joseph Doyle Hankins.

Editor’s note: The writer, Ben Takara, is a high school chemistry teacher and devoted poet. Takara also works for a group that catalogues Ryukyuan history and is in charge of recording the history of the war on the Ryukyu Islands.