

Why Do I document Okinawan (Ryukyuan)?

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Within the last hundred and several years, the Okinawan language has been dramatically affected by political history. Until 1878, Okinawa was an independent country called the Kingdom of the Ryukyus. In 1879, Japan annexed Ryukyu as a Prefecture of Japan and the name of Ryukyu was abolished and it became Okinawan Prefecture.

In accordance with the modernization policy of the Japanese government, Okinawan people had to learn and speak Japanese in school and public places. Thus Ryukyuan language gradually faded out. In order to understand how the Okinawan language has survived, we must trace the historical development by looking back into the days of Kingdom of the Ryukyus and how the Ryukyuan language has transformed since then.

In the past, the Okinawan language encountered many obstacles in its development: the first and most important would be that the language has always been at the mercy of politics or the existing authority or ruler of the Japanese government or the U.S.A; the second is the mode of language succession from generation to generation. Therefore, it is also important to know the historical aspects of how Okinawan was mobilized by policy or politics and to understand the historical aspects in order to realize the need for documenting the language and passing it on to the next generation.

The Kingdom of the Ryukyus

In the 15th century, the King of Sho Hasshi established a centralized Kingdom of Ryukyu Islands in the city of Shuri. The official language of the court was the Shuri dialect, while those outside of Shuri spoke the same Okinawan language but with a little difference in pronunciation, intonation and or expression. The Ryukyu kingdom did not have sufficient resources for living, and the climate was so severe that typhoons hit the islands from time to time. Therefore, Ryukyu economy mainly depended upon foreign trade with South-eastern Asian Nations, China, Japan, Holland, and other countries. To maintain peace and order within the country and with outside powers the kingdom adopted unarmed policy, there were no weapons of any kind. It is said that the famous Italian traveler, Marco Polo, was surprised to hear about this unarmed kingdom. In these social conditions, the classic literature of the Ryukyu Kingdom, "Omorosoushi", was born.

Invasion by Satsuma Clan from Southern Japan

In 1609, over 3000 soldiers of the Satsuma Clan invaded Ryukyu. Without weapons to defend themselves, the kingdom had no choice but to surrender. Since then the Kingdom came under the strict control and constant surveillance of Satsuma. Satsuma permitted the Kingdom to continue its relation with China, by allowing the

Kingdom to pay respect and tribute to China. This policy made the Kingdom to appear as an independent nation as it used to be. This policy, however, was taken by Satsuma only because Satsuma wanted to exploit or to confiscate all the fruits and or profit gained from the trade between the Kingdom and other nations. The accumulation of the profits from the Kingdom contributed to Satsuma to gain its status of being as most powerful domain in Japan by early 19th century.

For the people in Ryukyu, education was not permitted by the Kingdom, so people could not learn to read and write. However, without letters, they orally passed their rich culture, arts, music, songs, and the language to the next generation.

Annexation by Japan

In 1879, Ryukyu was annexed by Japan. As a result, the kingdom of the Ryukyus was abolished, and it became Okinawa Prefecture. Ryukyuan language was not officially used anymore since Japanese became the official national language throughout the Ryukyu Islands as it was in other parts of Japan. Therefore, Ryukyuan language positioned as Okinawan or Okinawan dialect. Moreover, in promoting the modernization policy by the Japanese government, school education came to be mandatory in Japan, including Okinawa. The most important objectives for compulsory education were apparently to make people to understand or communicate in “Standard Japanese” and to establish among the people a “national identity,” pledging to serve and die for the Emperor. To share one standard national language by all the people in the nation hastened rapid industrialization and modernization. Through extreme anti-Okinawan language policy, local governments in Okinawa vigorously tried to spread standard Japanese language through a crusade against the Okinawan. Thus, since 1878, standard Japanese has been the official language in Okinawa.

In 1940, a dispute over the Okinawan language broke out. Okinawan people themselves were, more or less, involved in the movement of speaking standard Japanese. At the same time, as militarism grew in Japan, speaking the Okinawan language was strictly forbidden in schools and public places in order to have a unification of ideology among the people according to the Okinawan educational policy. This policy antagonized many intellectuals associated linguistic, folklores and social studies. They feared this policy may result of extinction of Okinawan language completely. In Okinawa, people spoke both Japanese and Okinawan. For example, while some people spoke Japanese officially; they might speak Okinawan at home; others spoke Japanese publicly and privately. Thus, due to this controlling of the language, Okinawan, the traditional mother tongue, rapidly faded out.

Under U.S. Occupation

*As soon as I stepped on the island of Okinawa,
I greeted an islander in Okinawan language, "Ganjyuuii?"
(How are you?)*

*"Hai Okagesamade Genki desu."
(Yes, I am very fine.)*

The Islander replied to me in Japanese,

My nostalgia for the island was disturbed,

*and I said, "Uchinaa guchi madin ikusa ni sattaru basui?"
(Was Okinawan language also dismissed by war?)*

The Islander smiled bitterly,

and said in Japanese,

*"Okinawa go jyouzudesune."
(You speak good Okinawan)*

(Translated by Author)

This poem was written by Yamanoguchi Baku, poet from Okinawa when he came back to his homeland. In the Battle of Okinawa, total of more than 200 thousands people were sacrificed, including native Okinawans, Japanese soldiers, and U.S soldiers. When he returned to Okinawa after the war, he mourned that the language itself was also stolen from Okinawa.

As a result of war, the U.S. Occupation of Okinawa began in 1945 ended in 1972. Although there was no Okinawan language regulation under U.S. rule, Okinawans themselves waged a campaign to speak standard Japanese language in educational institutions. In school, teachers encouraged students to speak standard Japanese. Those students who spoke Okinawan were given Hogenfuda, a dialect tag, to hang on their neck. Students were free to speak their own dialect at home with their family; however, Okinawan people gradually began to lose Okinawan. Also, the psychology of those people controlled by foreign power must be understood. Okinawa under U.S. rule did not enjoy "democracy" completely. People had no autonomy, and on some occasions, human rights were neglected by the ruler. This led to an anti-American movement as well as movement towards Japanese culture and language. Using of standard Japanese in school was a way to show Americans that Okinawans are Japanese just like those on the mainland Japan. After this reversion movement, Okinawa finally reverted to Japan in 1972. Finally, it cannot be dismissed the important role played by the mass communication system such as the radio, television and newspapers to communicate and entertain in our social life. With a few exceptions of musical and stage performances, the language used in this proper from the beginning up to present time is mostly Japanese.

Today

Sixty years have passed since the war, and the Okinawan language still exists to some extent and has transformed into something different from the days of the poet Baku. Okinawan has been revitalized through a cultural entertainment: Ryukyu classical dance, Okinawan stage plays, and Okinawan folk songs or tales. Also, traditional Okinawan culture, mixed with modern tastes, has become very popular among students, from preschool to college. However, young people today cannot speak Okinawan fluently and most of them cannot fully understand it either. Today, Okinawan young people speak Uchina-Yamato guchi, which is mixture of the Okinawan and Japanese languages. In addition, native speakers of Okinawan are getting older. With the exception of elderly people, activists promoting the Okinawan language are becoming much smaller in number. The speakers of Okinawan in younger generations are mostly stage entertainers, such as actors or singers. Other groups are those who are closely connected in linguistics and culture. Those excellent native speakers, entertainers, and scholars have voiced out their concerns in the future of Okinawa language. They say we are facing a challenge in successfully passing down our language to the next generation.

The method of utilizing musical and or theatrical performances might be one of the effective and easy ways to spread and popularize our language to younger generations. However, we should keep in mind that those people who are able to speak the Okinawan are getting older and the number decreasing. Therefore, we must immediately make a record of our language from fluent speakers of older generation. Moreover, we should make an effort to preserve the language in a public way. I believe that documenting Okinawan language will motivate people to pass on Okinawan to next generation.

Ipppei Niffee Debiru.
(Thank you very much.)

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