

# Uchinaaguchi (Okinawan Language) Community in Hawai‘i History and Current Developments

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In the past two decades, an image of Okinawa has emerged eliciting much curiosity. Unlike the “dark” coloring which predominated the islands in the 1960s and the years immediately following the return of Okinawa to Japan, today’s Okinawa foregrounds the power of *iyashi* (healing of heart) via the media and tourism because of its tropical environment far removed from the stresses of urban life in *hondo* (mainland) Japan (Shinjō 2000). This popular image of Okinawa can probably be traced back to the early 1990s, when NHK featured *Ryūkyū no Kaze* (Wind of Ryuukyuu), a year-long television drama project. From that point, Okinawa experienced a significant increase in tourists, and Okinawan foods and products began to be featured in stores and restaurants in Japan. Additionally, Okinawa-born celebrities and popular music singers have made their way into the mainstream of Japanese culture, enhancing the image of the islander lifestyles to the mainlanders. Finally, another made-for-television serial, *Churasan*, featured the experiences of Kohagura Eri, a girl from a small home village in Okinawa, who travels to Tokyo and ends up touching everyone’s heart with her island spirit.

The popularity of Okinawa was seen in the political arena as well. Prime Minister Mori Yoshio, who had followed in the wake of the former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo who had passed away suddenly in 2000 following a stroke, held the G8 Summit in Nago, the northern part of Okinawa island. The Japanese government had selected Okinawa as the site in light of its strategic location presumably as a place of exchange among different cultures as well as to promote growth and development of this area (Ross 2000).

The Okinawa *būmu* (Okinawa boom or fever), has also made academic endeavors possible. In 2000, the United States and Japan jointly created a new scholarship program named Obuchi-Clinton Scholarship and Fellowship Program to send Okinawan researchers and graduate students to the East-West Center in Honolulu. Each year Hawai'i has welcomed several researchers from institutions in Okinawa such as the University of the Ryukyus, Meio University, and Okinawa International University. One of the areas of interest of these scholars has been the Okinawan language, or what we will call Uchinaaguchi (Okinawan language). The agendas of those interested in the topic of Uchinaaguchi range from those merely interested in preserving the near-extinct language, to those who want to restore full usage of the language.

### **Uchinaaguchi Community**

The movement to revitalize Uchinaaguchi was not limited to the main island of Okinawa and its surrounding islands. Similar, but simultaneously unique, local efforts to promote the heritage language can be observed in the various Okinawan diasporic communities. This paper focuses on activities in one such diasporic site—Hawai'i—where the Okinawan community is sizable and consequently has a very strong presence. Okinawans here have been able to hold on to their distinctive cultural identity, and yet participate in the larger community of multi-ethnic Hawai'i. However, as Okinawan Issei pass away, one of the most distinguishing of cultural features, the Okinawan language, also passes with them (Miyasaki 1981).

Just as Okinawan communities in Japan have recognized the importance of their own language, Uchinaaguchi, to complete their identity construction, Okinawans in Hawai'i have begun to discuss the need to take back their own "voice." Many of the efforts to revitalize Uchinaaguchi in Hawai'i have been initiated, maintained, and developed further by local residents of Okinawan descent. Even those who are not themselves of Okinawan descent have been inspired by the community efforts and have joined in these endeavors. In order to distinguish this network from the larger diasporic Okinawan community in Hawai'i, we will hereafter use refer to this emerging network as the *Uchinaaguchi community*.

Before exploring the current activities of the *Uchinaaguchi community*, it is important to understand (1) the current status of the Okinawan language in Hawai'i, and (2) the historical transformations which the Okinawan language has undergone over the past century in Hawai'i. Understanding the life of a linguistic variation or "dialect" requires an examination of the directional events

of the past, as well as those of present-day Hawai'i. Moreover, it requires an examination of the experiences of Okinawan populations in Japan, since the trajectories taken by those diasporic Okinawans were influenced by different (but not unrelated) socio-historical processes. In other words, in both diasporic locations, the net result of the social dynamic was a shifting of language usage away from Uchinaaguchi, toward the mainstream language (the Standard Japanese in Japan, and English in Hawai'i), with very few native speakers of the Okinawan language remaining in either Japan and Hawai'i.

In the first half of this paper, we briefly describe five generations' worth of history of Okinawans in Hawai'i. We highlight the linguistic aspect of this history, paying attention to how Uchinaaguchi was treated in each generation (Ishihara 2001; Kinjō 2001). The second half of the paper brings us forward to the current events and activities in the Uchinaaguchi community which range from individual activities, structured classroom-based activities, to mass media broadcasts. These all reflect what is happening in contemporary Hawai'i and the perspectives of the members of the Okinawan community who have recognized the value that Uchinaaguchi plays in the continuance of their cultural heritage, identity and values.

### **Uchinaaguchi in a Hundred Years (or Five Generations of Okinawans in Hawai'i)**

#### ***First Generation: Immigrating to Hawai'i***

The first Okinawan immigrants arrived in 1900 and found employment in the sugar plantations of the Hawaiian Islands. Okinawans continued to immigrate to Hawai'i and the continental U. S. until the enactment of the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924 which put a stop to virtually all immigration to the U. S. from Asia. Immigration to South America, which had been pretty much a trickle, grew by leaps and bounds thereafter. In Hawai'i, most of the immigrants from Okinawa were laborers on the sugar (and later pineapple) plantations, and they lived in cane camps which were established by the planters in the first half of the twentieth century. Since occupations were often assigned by ethnic group, cane camps were often arranged by ethnic backgrounds, and it was in these camps that the Uchinaanchu from Okinawa first encountered large numbers of the Naichaa (people from mainland Japan), a contact which generated prejudice and discrimination. For the first quarter of the twentieth century, Okinawans resided in rural areas. In 1921, only 123 Okinawans were residents of Honolulu; however, by 1944, easily 3,000 had found suitable livelihood and residence in that city (Miyasaki 1981).

The Naichi immigrants (mainland Japanese) were heavily influenced by the emerging Meiji nationalism (1868–1912), and they did not view the Okinawans as part of the “Japanese race.” They refused to recognize them as equals (Miyasaki 1981). This prejudice was most intense among the early immigrants on the plantations, where the two groups were being thrown together at work and in the camp housing, which heightened the differences in customs as well as language (Wakukawa 2000). The forced education of Okinawans in Yamatuguchi (Yamato or Japanese language) had just begun a few years before the first Okinawan immigrants ventured to Hawai'i; therefore, very few of this generation were able to speak in standard Japanese language (Ishihara 2001). During this plantation era in Hawai'i, Okinawans reacted in one of two ways. The first was to hide their Okinawan identity and try to “pass” as Japanese by changing their surnames and speaking flawless Yamatuguchi. Another, more collective response, was to form a largely self-sufficient, thriving community of their own. As a by-product of this solidarity, the culture of the Okinawans, including Uchinaaguchi, was well-maintained and practiced by their own community members.

### *Second Generation: Multi-lingual Identity*

Nisei Okinawans' recognition of Uchinaaguchi as part of their cultural heritage was never emphasized because of the above-mentioned prejudice in Hawai'i. Instead, Issei Okinawan parents encouraged their children to study Yamatuguchi (the mainland Japanese language) and sent their Okinawan Nisei children to Japanese language schools in the same manner as other Issei Naichi parents.

Nisei Okinawan children's daily routine involved attending regular (mostly public) primary and secondary schools taught in the English language for most of the day, and then attending Japanese language school in the afternoon. As a result, they became speakers of Yamatuguchi rather than of Uchinaaguchi. However, since they spent more time at the regular schools, most of the Nisei children became English-dominant bilinguals.<sup>1</sup> Nisei Okinawan children's lives were indeed linguistically complex. They spoke to their teachers in English, to their Issei parents in standard Japanese, to their siblings and peers in English, or Japanese, or a variety of Hawai'i Creole English colloquially called “pidgin English.” Added to this mix, was the fact that Nisei Okinawans' parents often interacted between themselves and with other Issei Okinawans in Uchinaaguchi, so their children heard and understood, but were not supposed to respond except in Yamatuguchi.

The year 1941 was significant for all Nisei, including Okinawan Nisei in Hawai'i. The Japanese Imperial Military had launched a surprise air attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th. Martial law was declared and many Japanese community leaders were summarily detained and imprisoned. Even in the years before the attack, there was much anti-Japan sentiment which spilled over to the local Japanese Americans and Japanese Language Schools, an easy target, had been shut down. Although the scale of abridgement of their constitutional rights was smaller than the one experienced on the continental U. S., most Japanese Americans remained loyal to the country of their birth, the United States, and thousands Nisei fought (and died) in both the European and Pacific theaters. Their sacrifice, and those of the larger community, contributed to a better post-war treatment of individuals. But also meant the English dominance of the Nisei was passed on to the Sansei (third generation) Japanese (and Okinawan) Americans.

### ***Third Generation: "American" Identity***

Sansei Okinawans (the third generation) grew up in the aftermath of the Pacific War. Since the Nisei had experienced discrimination based on their cultural heritage, they were less likely than their parents to emphasize Japanese or Okinawan heritage, and certainly less likely to stress Japanese language instruction. Nisei wanted the Sansei to become "truly American" and, with few exceptions, and requiring that their children learn the Japanese language was not critical.

Additionally, by the 1950s, many of the Issei Okinawans who were the native speakers of Uchinaaguchi were beginning to pass away. This demographic pattern accelerated over the latter half of the twentieth century, so that reduced the both the numbers of native speakers and the occasions at which Uchinaaguchi could be spoken or heard. This also led to the shift and near disappearance of the Uchinaaguchi language.

### ***Fourth and Fifth Generations: Returning to the Roots***

In the latter half of the twentieth century, social movements such as the civil rights and feminist movements began to emerge. One repercussion of the emerging awareness of minority communities within the United States was the recognition that the traditional depiction of American society as a "melting pot" was flawed, and a new image of "salad bowl" came into vogue. As a result of this new rhetorical image, voices of those from diverse cultural backgrounds are now being featured in the foreground of American society.

*Yonsei* (fourth generation) and *Gosei* (fifth generation) Japanese Americans are now seeing their ethnicity very differently than their parents and grandparents. Rather than downplaying their ethnic heritage, they are seeking to explore and engage elements of their cultural heritage(s). This seems to be the case especially among *Yonsei* and *Gosei* Okinawans in Hawai'i.

In contemporary Hawai'i, it appears that the younger generations of Okinawan descent initiate their search for roots by first exploring what we can call "visual culture" or what anthropologists often call "material culture." They show great interest in and work conscientiously to improve their skills in learning Okinawan dance *Ryuubu* (classical/traditional dance) and *Eisaa* (folk and *Obon* or religious dance), or playing instruments like the *sanshin* (Okinawan three-stringed musical instrument with soundbox and neck), *taiko* (drums), and other performing arts associated with Okinawa. These are perhaps the most prototypically recognized as "Okinawan culture." As such, the study of those performing arts enables the *Yonsei* and *Gosei* Okinawans in Hawai'i to establish their social and ethnic identity as different from others (Kinjō 2001). In contrast to the social context in which earlier generations of Okinawans were embedded, "being different" from others is seen as a desirable quality in the contemporary society.

Language is another distinctive aspect of culture. The *Yonsei* and *Gosei* Okinawans have developed interests in their heritage language, Uchinaaguchi. Those living in the continental U. S., have little choice but to select Japanese as a language to access their cultural heritage because of the scarcity of language schools, courses or availability of instructors. However, Hawai'i is unique among the Okinawan diasporas in developing Uchinaaguchi language development opportunities. The significant presence of the University of Hawai'i's area studies programs, combined with the relative post-war economic advancement of local Uchinaanchu (a result of political and economic social justice movements) have made for a convergence of factors favorable for Uchinaaguchi language education.

## **Community-Based Uchinaaguchi Classes**

### *Uchinaaguchi Class at the Lanakila Senior Center*

In June of 1995, Takenobu Higa, with the assistance of Chiyoko Shiroma, initiated an Uchinaaguchi class at the Lanakila Senior Center. Higa conducted the class of twenty senior members for approximately ten years, until the beginning of 2004. No formal lectures were given in this particular

class; the class mostly spent their class time sharing each member's various experiences in Okinawa, on topics such as nenjuu gyooji (annual events) or other festive activities in Okinawa. Discussions of festive events like Soogwachi (New Year's Day), Shiimii (*Seimei-sai* or Memorial Day), Eisaa (*Bon* dance) in August, etc., were opportunities for the class members to explore their own fond memories of food, customs, and various activities in their village lives. The class also learned Ryuuka (Okinawan poems), folk songs, and read articles from Okinawan newspaper clippings, as well as teacher-produced materials on health related terms, etc. While playing the karuta game (a card game), the classroom was full of words in Uchinaaguchi.

At Lanakila Senior Center, Thursdays have been designated as Okinawa Day. During the morning hours, Okinawan ethnic groups can participate in their ethnic cultural activities such as Okinawan dance, crafts, and *karaoke* songs. Higa's Uchinaaguchi class which ran from 11:00 a.m. to noon with 20 members, was regarded as one of the most popular and successful classes. However, the ninety-year old Higa experienced some health problems in 2004. He handed his baton over to Professor Zensei Oshiro of Doshisha University in Kyoto, who was spending his sabbatical year in Hawai'i. Professor Oshiro worked with the assistance of Chieko Miyazato for three months until his return to Japan in March 2004, after which Chieko Miyazato took over the teaching role.

The change of the instructor has brought some change in the participant population; people with no Uchinaaguchi background began to join the class. The diversity in the class meant that there were more varied interests and needs for instruction. Consequently, the class began to integrate more materials and activities produced by the instructor, rather than the previous mode of relying on the students as primary resource. The dominant medium of instruction also changed, and is now English and the so-called "common" Japanese language. Finally, in contrast to the time when participants actively shared their own stories in class, guest speakers are now invited to class to talk about their experiences in Okinawa (e.g., war memories).

### ***Uchinaaguchi Class at the Hawaii Okinawa Center***

In contrast to the abovementioned example of an individual initiative, the Uchinaaguchi class at the Hawaii Okinawa Center (HOC) began in 1996 based on the ideas and discussions generated in a program officers meeting. The idea to establish an Uchinaaguchi class began within the HOC and a

volunteer teacher was sought out through the effort of the Center's organization and its associated community.

Grant Murata, generally known by his nickname "Sandaa" (or rascal one), a sanshin teacher in the Afuso Ryu tradition, volunteered to be a teacher, assisted by Chieko Miyazato in 1996. Later, he took on the teaching himself by holding monthly meetings. The present members consist of various age groups—those in their thirties, fifties, or seventies. The majority of the members are senior citizens, those who still hold onto the fond memories of their ancestors.

Initially, *Shuri no Hibi* (Daily Life in Shuri), a book by Fumiko Ikari was used as the class material. The book was popular and used in the Uchinaaguchi News Hour via the Ryūkyū Radio Station in Okinawa. In subsequent monthly classes, Sandaa covered topics like family relations, numbers and counting, Kwatchi (food), and names for parts of the body; he used both English and Uchinaaguchi in his instruction. These bilingual materials are helpful to the English-speaking participants of the class. Finally, as an Afuso Ryu (Afuso School) sanshin teacher who has rich personal experiences of living in Okinawa, Sandaa's presence has been of great benefit to class members.

## Media-Oriented Community

### *Uchinaaguchi Lesson on Radio KZOO*

An AM radio station, Channel 1210, Radio KZOO, has developed a strong tie with the local Okinawan community. Keiko Ura, a native of Okinawa, has been a central figure in the promotion of Okinawa-related programming and activities such as the annual Okinawan Festival which features dance, *taiko*, sanshin, songs, food and other activities. KZOO offers Okinawa-related programming every Sunday afternoon, and between the hours of 3:00–7:00 p.m., listeners are treated to an Okinawan radio show with a variety of content. Additionally, the Sunday program is not only broadcast locally to the Hawai'i community, but also in Okinawa via Channel 22 FM Radio in Okinawa.

Throughout the year 2000, in commemoration of the centennial anniversary of Okinawan immigration to Hawai'i, Radio KZOO broadcast a language course entitled "Uchinaaguchi Kyooshitsu" (Okinawan language class). The Uchinaaguchi tapes, produced by Fumiko Ikari and James Tengan, aired from January through December of the year. According to Keiko Ura, the goal of Uchinaaguchi Kyooshitsu was to promote the heritage language,

targeting especially the younger generations of Okinawan descent. She received much feedback from the audience who remarked that it was a wonderful program because it provided opportunities for youth to communicate with their elders in their heritage language, and many wished for a repeat of this language programming.

Keiko Ura subsequently began a new program, "Introduction to Okinawan Music," arranging songs with their explanations in a dramatization format. These dramatizations are based on each of the songs she plays, and are narrated in Uchinaaguchi, with explanations in Yamatuguchi (standard Japanese language). In this way, Ura is targeting a general Japanese-speaking audience and helping them understand and appreciate both the Okinawa *minyo* (folk music) and its language.

### **Institutional-based Uchinaaguchi Class**

#### ***Uchinaaguchi Course at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa***

Local Okinawans and friends of Okinawa in Hawai'i have had to go it alone for many years to pass on Uchinaaguchi and the culture tied to it, while the primary academic institution in Hawai'i has focused on teaching "Japanese" language, culture, and literature. However, several new trends have emerged recently which permit academics to propose and develop courses pertaining to minority groups. In 2002, under the leadership of then chair, Dr. Ying-che Li, the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa approved its "Mission Statement" which included "to develop curricula in heritage languages and cultures related to Okinawa, Taiwan, etc." The department now holds an institutionally assigned responsibility to promote curricula developments in heritage languages and cultures, in addition to the studies of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese as foreign languages. Benefiting from the university's rich faculty resources, student interests, and community support, the department of East Asian Languages and Literatures provided course developers, Professors Kyoko Hijirida and Leon Serafim, with a two-year preparation period in 2002. In the implementation process, the course curriculum has faced various issues. These included decision-making in orthography, goals, and scope of the course content, teaching approaches, assessment tools, and so forth. In order to satisfy the institutional requirements such as grading, the Okinawan Language and Culture courses must have a clear set of course goals, content, instructional approaches, and

evaluation methods. For example, Japanese 471, which is the first sequence of the two courses proposed, set forth the following course objectives:

**The course goals/objectives:** Japanese 471 (3 credits) is one-semester course on Okinawan Language and Culture, designed for those who have Japanese-language speaking and reading ability at the level of completion of Japanese 302/308, to pursue the following goals:

1. To acquire basic skills in listening and speaking, and reading and writing, and through acquisition of these skills to develop an appreciation of the Okinawan ethnic language, including differences from and similarities to Japanese.
2. To understand, appreciate, and acquire the basic characteristics of Okinawan language and folk culture reflected in such areas as folk-sayings, folktales, songs, and traditional events.

Students are also encouraged and directed towards the guidelines suggested in the National Standards. The course is built on a sound foundation of the Japanese language (300-level, advanced skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing) as a pre-requisite, so that students are able to develop Uchinaaguchi with the basic communication ability in the following communicative modes:

- (a) **Interactive communication:** Students can engage in conversation, provide and obtain information including communicating feelings and emotions and exchanging opinions at the basic level.
- (b) **Interpretative communication:** Students understand and interpret written and spoken Okinawan language on limited topics at the beginning level.
- (c) **Presentational communication:** Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on certain topics.
- (d) With regard to the **Cultural Standards**, students are expected to demonstrate understanding of Okinawan cultural characteristics by studying traditions, customs, manners, events, products, and their relationships with perspectives and/or underlying value system through proverbs, songs, dance, festivals, annual events, cuisine, folklore, tea ceremony (*bukubuku-cha*), artifacts and so forth.

Adopted from National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999).

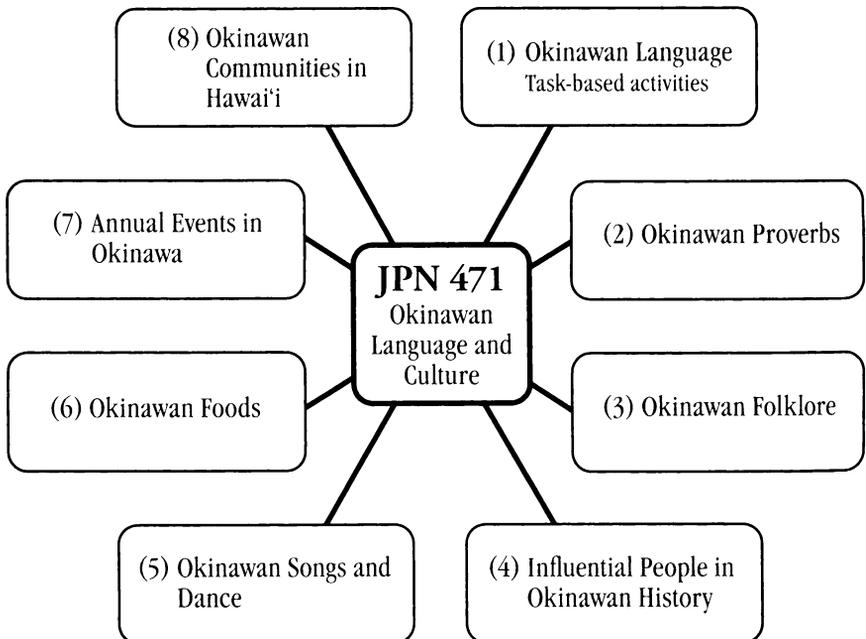
The following diagram illustrates the scope of the course contents. Additionally, the financial support provided by the UH–Japan Studies Endow-

ment Fund made it possible for the course developers to visit Okinawa for instructional material collection and networking with heritage linguists at the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa. The figure below illustrates the conceptual mapping of the above mentioned aspects.

Some challenges in the course development are how to revive Uchinaaguchi meaningfully for the college students via transformational goals (i.e., how do we assess the impact of these courses on these students?). That is, how can culturally grounded instructional content be developed that are more appealing and interesting to the learners; and how can choices on teaching strategies reflect the target cultural elements and values. Adopting the portfolio as assessment method may be most appropriate approach.

### Conclusion: Future Development of Uchinaaguchi Community in Hawai‘i

In this paper, we have explored the historical and current developments with respect to Uchinaaguchi promotion in Hawai‘i. Although the progress made so far in the local sites as we discussed here is highly valuable, we feel





*A lapel pin of the Uchinaaguchi Hukyuu Kyoogikai (Society for Okinawan Language Revival). The hiragana characters say, “fui-rumirana shimakutuba” which means “let’s revitalize the local languages.”*

that there needs to be a further step made in order to see the assured, positive growth of the Uchinaaguchi community. That is to establish a bi-directional network among the local sites within these communities—for instance between the locally founded classes and the institutionally organized classes which can then also communicate and exchange their resources with the media-oriented groups. This network among the local sites should be also extend to sites outside of Hawai‘i, to such locales as Uchinaaguchi Hukyuu Kyoogikai (Society for Okinawan Language Revival), another important partner. We believe that the Uchinaaguchi community of Hawai‘i can benefit from this kind of sharing, as can other communities in the other Okinawan diasporas. The people involved in the community are already eagerly headed in this direction and within a few years, we will probably find another milestone to place on the remarkable development of the community.❖

### Note

1. Hoffman (1991) discusses two types of bilinguals. The first type are simultaneous bilinguals who have equal level of linguistic ability in their two languages, while the second type of bilinguals have superior linguistic ability in one of the two languages. Ishihara’s (2001) report seems to indicate that the environment in which Nisei Okinawans were immersed led to the latter form of bilingualism.

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256 Social Process in Hawai‘i, Vol. 42, 2007

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