

# Language revitalization and liberation

Futenma Airbase, right in the middle of the city

I've recently come across [the story of Chibana Shoichi](#), who burnt the Japanese flag in 1987 to commemorate the Okinawan victims of WWII Japanese militarism. The story is intriguing not because of the flag-burning incident but because Shoichi also keeps another Japanese flag in his house, which he respects: it dates from the 1960s and for him is a symbol of the Okinawan struggle against US tyranny. In the process of researching Chibana Shoichi's story I learnt a lot about the double colonization of [the Ryukyu Islands – or Okinawa Prefecture](#) – by both Japan and the USA.

In the same way that the Japanese flag can be simultaneously a symbol of liberation and oppression for the same person, the use of Ryukyu languages similarly has dual, and seemingly mutually exclusive, meanings. Most of my knowledge about the Ryukyu languages comes from the admirable work of [Patrick Heinrich](#). Okinawa Prefecture is Japan's most southern prefecture and an archipelago of over 1,000 islands stretching between Kyushu and Taiwan. Also known as the Ryukyu Islands, the archipelago's five mutually unintelligible language varieties are considered a language in their own right by most linguists but have been treated as a dialect of Japanese by the Japanese state since the annexation of the Ryukyus in the 19th century.

When the Ryukyus became part of Japan, the Ryukyu language continuum suffered the same fate as many a minority language in modern nation building: public life and everything that was modern and advanced became the domain of Japanese and the "dialect" was relegated to the home. The full brutality of Japanese colonization became apparent in WWII with the Battle of Okinawa being one of the most disastrous campaigns of the Pacific War resulting not only in huge military casualties on both sides but also extremely high numbers of Okinawan civilian casualties, many of them forced into mass suicide by the Japanese army.

After the war, the USA separated Okinawa from Japan, put it under US "trusteeship" and, given its strategic location, installed a large number of military bases. Linguistically, however, that's when the most intriguing part of the story starts. The USA were keen to legitimize their presence in Okinawa by actually highlighting the fact that Okinawa was not a part of Japan. Therefore, they also supported the promotion of the Ryukyuan language. Consequently, one could expect that severance from Japan would have heralded a new era for the flourishing of the Ryukyu language or, at least, bring its decline to a halt. However, exactly the opposite happened: Ryukyuan did not only not make any headway in the public domain, it even stopped being transmitted in the private domain. Today, there are no proficient speakers of Ryukyuan born after 1950.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, speaking Japanese at the time became part of the Okinawan struggle against US imperialism. Okinawans wanted to be free of US domination and the only feasible way to liberation seemed to be to claim a Japanese identity and membership in the Japanese nation. That part of the struggle was successful in 1972 when Okinawa was returned to Japan.

Unfortunately, becoming a part of Japan did not mean demilitarization. Today, almost 20% of the territory of the archipelago is occupied by US military bases, accounting for about two-thirds of the US military presence in

Japan (despite the fact that Okinawa accounts for only 0.6% of Japanese territory). In a 2007 opinion poll, 85% of Okinawans expressed their opposition to the presence of the US military. The heavy US military presence in Okinawa means high levels of noise pollution, danger of accidents, environmental degradation and criminal offences committed by US servicemen. However, when Japan and the USA negotiate aspects of their military arrangement, they do so without consultation of Okinawans who, consequently, find themselves in a double colonial position.

Today, there are some efforts to revive the Ryukyuan language as a symbol of an Okinawan identity and as a symbol of resistance against Okinawa's double colonial position. However, again the linguistic story is not quite as expected. Language revitalization is not a central part of the Okinawan struggle against imperial oppression, military basing and their double colonial position. Linguistically, English has become a key tool in their struggle and, particularly, their discursive positioning as an *indigenous minority* in the global arena. Globally, interest in, solidarity with and support for the Okinawan struggle has been much enhanced by this newly claimed identity of an indigenous minority, which is recognizable and makes sense to campaigners globally.

The Okinawan story is an instructive one for understanding the relationship between language revitalization and liberation struggles: there is no simple, straightforward relationship! What it means to speak Ryukyuan or to not speak Ryukyuan is, as always, historically and socially contingent.



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