

# “Wanne Uchinanchu - I am Okinawan.” Japan, the US and Okinawa’s Endangered Languages

Patrick Heinrich, Fija Bairon

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Fija Bairon and Patrick Heinrich

*Patrick Heinrich interviews Fija Bairon on Okinawa’s endangered languages and culture, and efforts to restore them.*

The proportion of languages and of nation states stands roughly at a relation of 1 to 30. Hence, the predominant number of nation states is multilingual. Japan, notwithstanding its modern monolingual self-perception, is no exception. As with many other nation states, Japan has merely been invented as an “imagined community” of monolingual and monocultural members. The effects of monolingual and monocultural nation imagining are far-reaching for linguistic and cultural minorities, in Japan as in many other places across the world. For minorities, modernisation and incorporation often went hand in hand with pressures to abandon local languages and cultures. Monolingual nation-imagining ideology is one of the major forces behind the unprecedented loss of linguistic diversity we are witnessing today. Experts project that only 10-15% of the world's 6,000 languages are safe from extinction. In Japan, the Ainu languages, the Ryukyuan languages and Ogasawara-Creole English are extremely endangered while Japanese and Japanese sign language are safe. Many minority community members are aware of such “dark sides of modernity.” In this article Okinawan language and cultural activist Fija Bairon speaks on the discovery of his Okinawan identity and on his

attempts to maintain and revitalize Uchinaguchi, one of five Ryukyuan languages. An introduction addresses issues of Ryukyuan language endangerment and the local attempts of language revitalization.

## Introduction

Language and dialect are emic categories which rely on various criteria such as ethnicity, language genealogy, language typology, unshared linguistic innovations, orthography and mutual (un)intelligibility. Language boundaries are artefacts and those involved in the business of drawing these boundaries have consequently been termed “language makers” (Harris 1980). Japan’s most influential language maker was Ueda Kazutoshi (1868-1937), who, at the end of the 19th century, introduced the idea of “national language” (kokugo) to Japan (see Clark 2002 for details). Ueda’s idea of national language served as conceptual basis to either incorporate all language varieties spoken in the Japanese state into the ideological concept of national language, or to treat deviations such as Ainu as bound to vanish.

Researchers of all sorts of disciplines have been playing a decisive part in the rationalization of modernist nation imagining ideology. Most influential in giving currency to the view that the Ryukyuan language varieties were part of national language was Tojo Misao (1884-1966), the father of Japanese dialectology. The arguments underlying Tojo’s (1927) classification were political, linguistic and ideological. He considered the Ryukyuan language varieties as dialects of national

language because (1) the Ryukyu Islands were part of the Japanese nation state, (2) because comparative linguistics had confirmed that the varieties of the Ryukyus were historically (genealogically) related with Japanese and (3) because highlighting mutual unintelligibility by classifying the Ryukyuan varieties as languages in their own right would imperil the idea of a homogenous Japanese nation. Most researchers have never questioned the ontological status of the Ryukyuan languages as dialects of a national language. As a matter of fact, so commonsensical has the idea of a homogenous Japanese nation become today that only researchers talking of “Ryukyuan languages” have to justify their classifications, while those speaking of “dialects” do not.

Be it as it is. Suffice to note here that the identification and designation of languages within chains of linguistic variation are far from being acts of objective description. Not surprisingly therefore, language makers do occasionally meet with resistance. Consider two brief examples from the Ryukyuan context. In 1944 Kinjo criticized the classification of the Ryukyuan language varieties as part of national language because linguistic differences were brushed aside and their status as dialects had, in his own words, “from the start been considered as common sense.” The fact that Japanese and the Ryukyuan languages are historically related in that they share the same genealogy was, in his opinion, not sufficient to classify the latter as dialects of national language, i.e. of Japanese. After all, Indo-European languages, too, share the same genealogy but are considered languages in their own rights. Probably the most famous instance in which the status of the Ryukyuan varieties was negotiated was the dialect debate (hogen ronso) of 1940/41. Folk art scholar Yanagi Muneyoshi called for more recognition of the local languages in the Ryukyu Islands and, unsuccessfully, lobbied for an end of their suppression (Clark 1997).

Since the classification of language varieties into languages is an intricate issue, it is hardly surprising that the number of languages designated for the Ryukyu Islands differs between scholars or works of references. Some encyclopaedias name as many as eleven languages in the Ryukyu Islands (Grimes 2000), others only two (Voegelin 1987). Most often, however, five varieties are differentiated on the ground of mutual unintelligibility (e.g. Matsumori 1995). Mutual unintelligibility means that two neighboring local language varieties do not allow for mutual comprehension. Thus, while Japanese dialect speakers from Tohoku in the northeast and from Kyushu in the southwest of Japan might not be able to understand each other, the chain of mutual intelligibility is never interrupted as the neighbouring language variety is always intelligible. The same holds true for the language varieties in Germany and the Netherlands, despite the fact that German and Dutch are considered two distinct languages. They are considered distinct languages on political grounds. The Ryukyuan languages, on the other hand, are considered dialects of Japanese by many simply because their speakers have Japanese nationality.

This introduction differentiates between five Ryukyuan languages. These are Amami-Ryukyuan, Okinawa-Ryukyuan, Miyako-Ryukyuan, Yaeyama-Ryukyuan and Yonaguni-Ryukyuan. Such classification is based on (1) mutual unintelligibility to the neighbouring variety, (2) it reproduces the major island groups and local identities and (3) it coincides with the classification of the Society for Okinawan Language Revitalization (Uchinaguchi fukyu kyogikai) which asked on the 18th September 2005 for the recognition of Okinawa-Ryukyuan, Miyako-Ryukyuan, Yaeyama-Ryukyuan and Yonaguni-Ryukyuan as independent languages. (Amami-Ryukyuan is absent because it is spoken in Kagoshima Prefecture and not in Okinawa Prefecture.) Note also that in the interview Fija makes a

similar distinction between these languages and between what he calls “cultural spheres” in the Ryukyu Islands.

In order to exemplify the difference between these languages and their distance to Standard Japanese, consider the respective expressions for “thank you” (“arigato gozaimasu” in Standard Japanese).

| English              | Local language name | “arigato gozaimasu” |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| (1) Amami-Ryukyuan   | Shimayumusa         | obukuridaryon       |
| (2) Okinawa-Ryukyuan | Uchinaguchi         | nifedebiru          |
| (3) Miyako-Ryukyuan  | Myakufutsu          | tandigatandi        |
| (4) Yaeyama-Ryukyuan | Yaimamuni           | mifaiyu             |
| (5)Yonaguni-Ryukyuan | Dunangmunui         | fugarassa           |

All five languages are severely endangered today. There are several ways for measuring language endangerment. In an analogy to the Richter Scale for earthquake measurement, Fishman (1991) proposed to determine the degree of endangerment on a Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale ranging from 0 (safe) to 8 (moribund). On Fishman’s scale all Ryukyuan languages place on stage 7 (severely endangered). Another widely used method to measure language endangerment has been provided by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003). According to their criteria, the Ryukyuan languages are most often assessed to be ‘severely endangered’ or ‘critically endangered.’

The Ryukyuan languages are severely endangered today, because domains of Ryukyuan language uses have been continuously lost since the start of Japanese language spread in the 1880s. The expansion of one language always coincides with the contraction of another. Languages are thus not lost word by word but domain by domain. Once those domains in which the language is naturally transmitted are lost, the language is endangered in its survival. From that point on, languages are lost speaker by speaker. While

Japanese was largely restricted to official domains until the 1940s, shift to Japanese in private domains such as the family and the neighbourhood meant that natural intergenerational language transmission was interrupted. Since the 1940s two predominantly Japanese monolingual generations have been raised in the Ryukyu Islands (Heinrich 2004). It now only takes knowledge about average life expectancy, Ryukyuan demographics and a little mathematics to calculate the future decline of the Ryukyuan languages in the event that no effective counter action is taken. I will refrain from doing such maths here since language shift can be reversed.

The interruption of the natural intergenerational language transmission in the Ryukyu Islands is an intricate issue. It was partly the effect of suppression campaigns of the local languages by means such as the dialect tag (hogen fuda), a practice started in 1907. The dialect tag had to be worn around the neck by school children who had used local language in the classroom (Itani 2006). Ryukyuan were crucially involved in the promotion of Japanese over the local languages. Already before 1945, Standard Japanese language spread was mainly advocated by the prefectural government and a local popular Movement for Enforcement of Standard Japanese (Hyojungo reiko undo) while Tokyo remained relatively uninvolved (Kondo 2006). Penalizing measures such as the dialect tag aside, the spread of Standard Japanese was to a large extent driven by language ideological views according to which all Japanese nationals speak Japanese as their mother tongue (Ramsey 2004).

Languages spread on the basis of the societal, economic and symbolic advantages they have over other languages. This is an important point because local language decline continued unabated after 1945, despite the fact that US occupation authorities attempted to highlight

differences between Ryukyuan and Japanese by initially promoting everything which was Ryukyuan, including the local languages. This fact notwithstanding, American efforts accelerated Ryukyuan language loss because American policy was quickly recognized to serve American interests, that is the interests of the occupying authorities. American occupation between 1945 and 1972 gave rise to a fervent Japanese nationalism in the Ryukyu Islands. It led to the development of a popular Movement for Return to the Fatherland (Sokoku fukki undo) which advocated Japanese language use in all domains. It was in order to resist American occupation and in the hope of improving the dismal living conditions under US occupation that a generation, which had been made ashamed of their local languages before 1945, chose to raise their children in Japanese only. In so doing, Ryukyuan Islanders used ideologically mediated views which had largely worked against them before 1945 in order to safeguard their own interests against those of the Americans. Improving their situation meant proving themselves to be Japanese. Speaking only Japanese was a key factor therein. Thus, Japanese and not the Ryukyuan languages served as an emancipatory tool in the eyes of many under US occupation. The price Ryukyuan had to pay was the interruption of intergenerational language transmission. As a result, today's child-bearing generation in many parts of the Ryukyus no longer speaks the local languages and cannot transmit it to the following generation. This is the classical pattern of language loss.

But should we be concerned about the decline of languages in the Ryukyu Islands or elsewhere? Why care in view of many thousands of languages that have ceased to be used in human history (Brenzinger 2007)? Why care when we do not appear to be short of languages in our everyday communicative needs? Why care when languages are lost, after all, as an effect of collective decisions of speech

communities? Ever since Krauss (1992), in a seminal paper, projected that only 10-15% of all languages are safe in their survival, linguists have raised and faced such questions. The answers and reactions were divided. On one hand, the study of endangered languages has grown into a substantial field of linguistics in the last decade and has produced popular reference works (e.g. Crystal 2000, Fishman 2001). Others have attacked endangered language scholars for being "paternalistic" (e.g. Ladefoged 1992) in assuming that they would know what is best for endangered speech communities. Again others have warned that much of linguists' rhetoric on endangered languages, such as universal ownership of languages ("we are in danger of losing one facet of our humanity with every dying language"), is estranging community members from their heritage language (Hill 2002). Some have made a case in support of language maintenance and revitalization, arguing that loss of knowledge is inevitably accompanying the loss of languages (Harrison 2007). Language loss has also come to be understood as the loss of a powerful tool for securing the human rights of marginalized minorities (May 2001), for claiming more rights to self-determination (Kymlicka 1995), and for providing a powerful symbolic link to the past (Fishman 2001).

Should scholars care? I would argue they should. Benign neglect of minority interests, Kymlicka (1995) and May (2001) make clear, is de facto support of linguistic majorities and their interests. Get it right. Ignoring minority language and culture issues is just as ideological and political as the decision to make them an object of research. In the interview Fija asks "why does one get rid of something as wonderful as Uchinaguchi (Okinawan-Ryukyuan)?" I would not know the answer to that. As a matter of fact, I wonder whether all those who consider Ryukyuan language decline as inevitable, whether all those studying the language solely for their own scholarly benefit,

whether all those blocking attempts to establish local language education despite huge popular demand, whether all those who criticize the rise of English as the international language as an instance of “English language imperialism” in Japan (see Heinrich 2007b for details) but remain silent on what could much more aptly be termed “Japanese language imperialism” in the Ryukyu Islands could offer an explanation. I somehow doubt they could which is, upon reflection, good news. The most important answer to the question “why care” might, however, be that many speakers of endangered languages themselves do care about the loss of their heritage language and that specialists of language documentation, anthropological linguists and sociolinguists have the possibilities to shed light into the issues which concern them.

No language shift is identical with another as there are a plethora of factors involved which range from geography, to migration patterns, local economy, linguistic proximity to the dominating language, religious practices etc. The idea that the further one moves away from the centre, the more vital the local languages are is an oversimplification. Language shift in the Ryukyu Islands is highly complex and we are only starting to understand the differences between the various islands (Heinrich 2007a). It is beyond the scope of this introduction to attempt a summary of the language shifts across the Ryukyu Islands. Suffice to mention in this context that language shift in the private domain was delayed 5-10 years in Amami to that in Okinawa. It was most early and radical in the Yaeyama Archipelago, but most gradual in the neighbouring Miyako Archipelago.

### Map

While most local language use can be ascertained in Yonaguni today, Yonaguni’s demographic development is most unfavourable for the maintenance of the local languages. In addition, a continuous shift

towards Standard Japanese can be witnessed in Yonaguni, while the inhabitants of other Islands have started to shift from Standard Japanese to hybrid varieties of local Ryukyuan Japanese. This shift emerged earliest and most strongly in Amami and then in Okinawa. In these islands, designations for such mixed varieties have sprung up and in particular youngsters take pride in their use of Uchinayamatoguchi (“Okinawan Japanese”) and Tonfutsugo (“potato standard”). These new language varieties have become the unmarked language among the young generation, taking over the societal functions of solidarity and familiarity once linked to the local heritage languages. The emergence and spread of these mixed or hybrid language varieties are meaningful in several ways. The purposeful choice of a local hybrid variety over Standard Japanese testifies to a break with the modernist language ideology according to which all nationals were treated as abstract beings devoid of ethnicity, sex, education, and other aspects of identity. Hence, these language choices can be said to be reflective of modernity, if not post-modern, in nature.



Sonai on Yonaguni

In the Ryukyu Islands, organized attempts of language revitalization have come to the fore

only in recent years, although they have had their predecessors. As Hara (2005) illustrates, attempts of language revitalization are closely linked to concerns about the decline of local culture in Okinawa. Such concern first led to the establishment of local cultural associations which, from early on, included linguistic issues. The oldest such organization is that of Koza (today's Okinawa City) which was founded in 1955. Later Departments of Cultural Affairs were established in various cities, towns and villages and, in 1994, Okinawa Prefecture Cultural Association (Okinawa-ken bunka kyokai) was inaugurated as a parent organization thereof. These institutions have been central for the organization of speech circles, speech events or events of performing arts in which the local languages play a central role. The local media, too, played a crucial role and so did many individuals in making possible efforts aimed at linguistic revitalisation. Some of the most influential participants met in October 2000 to form the Society of Okinawan Language Revitalization (Uchinaguchi fukyu kyogikai). The society represents the most organized attempt to counter Okinawan language loss so far. Its 300 members set themselves the objective of establishing local language classes at elementary and junior high schools. With that aim, they have developed an orthography of Okinawan, published various teaching materials, trained volunteers as local language teachers and established an annual Local Language Day (Shimakutuba no hi). Local Language Day was first commemorated in 2005. Prefectural support for Shimakutuba no hi in 2006 (Okinawa Taimusu 2006/09/18) must be seen as an important symbolic contribution to Okinawan language revitalisation since, for the first time ever, Okinawa prefecture was acting in support of the local languages.



First Local Language Day, 2005

Language activists can draw on public support for their endeavors today. A questionnaire survey by the local newspaper Ryukyu Shinpo in 2006, for instance, revealed that, depending on the age of the informants, 81% (informants in their 20s) to 97% (informants in their 70s or older) had started to feel an affection for the local language (Ryukyu Shinpo-sha 2007: 25). It is also encouraging for language activists to see that prefectural support is growing. In July 2007, Okinawa Prefecture decided to set up an Expert Committee on Local Language Spread within its Educational Department. The Committee will work towards developing local orthographies of the languages of Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni and towards modernizing the lexicon where necessary. However, it is important to note that the local languages revitalization efforts have, until now, not attracted much attention among younger

people. Being supportive of local language is one thing – learning and using it another.

Fija Bairon might play a decisive role in making local language maintenance and local language revival an issue for the younger generation. To start with, at 37 he is one of the youngest speakers. To add, he is a popular radio DJ and a performing artist. His cool rubs off on local languages and, more crucially, efforts to maintain and revitalize them. Since Fija discovered his own local identity rather late and has only learned to speak the language in recent years, he has experienced life without the local language and remembers this experience vividly. Due to what he calls his “Okinawan identity,” Fija today prefers the Okinawan designation for the island and its language. He thus often uses the terms Uchina (Okinawa), Uchinanchu (Okinawan), Uchinaguchi (Okinawan language) and Uchinayamatoguchi (Okinawan Japanese). In transcribing this interview, I refrained from translating his usage of these terms into English as the English expressions are formed on the basis of Japanese.

Fija Bairon is an activist and not a scholar. The interview has profited enormously from Fija’s honesty and courage. I feel somewhat inclined to conclude this introduction with a remark in defence of possible criticism of him. Protest inevitably seems to involve the reproduction of unequal power relations. A feeling of humiliation is part of the experience of asking for the respect of one’s language and culture. Activists like Fija have to deal with this. But there is a way to circumvent it. Ridicule.



Fija Bairon

### Interview

Will this interview be in Uchinaguchi?

**I am afraid not.**

Oh well then. Japanese is fine.

**Fija Bairon is a rather unusual name, isn’t it?**

My name is Higa in Japanese. Fija is Uchinaguchi. The sound “fi” is used in the language of Shuri and Naha. In the countryside, Higa would be pronounced Hija. Since I am using the language of Shuri and Naha in my performing arts, I prefer Fija over Hija.

**Does it make a difference whether you are called Fija or Higa?**

It affects my identity, my existence. When being asked who I am, I prefer saying that my name is Fija, but not everybody understands my motives. Some laugh about it. They say, “You mean fijaa,” which means goat in Uchinaguchi. Many Okinawans don’t know that Higa in Uchinaguchi is Fija and that this name became only pronounced as Higa after Japan established Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. Fija is an ancient name from the Ryukyuan period and

I prefer to be called by it.

**When did you start calling yourself Fija?**

After an “eye opening” experience.

**So you were different before. What were you like?**

I was a person who didn’t know Okinawa. Or, more appropriately, I was someone who had been educated in a way to not know anything about Okinawa. Neither my teachers nor parents would teach me that Higa is a Japanese pronunciation of a name which used to be pronounced Fija. But now my identity is Okinawan and I speak Uchinaguchi and I decided that calling myself Higa wouldn’t make much sense. Higa is Japanese and that is not my identity. I am Fija, an Uchinanchu, and I speak Uchinaguchi.

**You mentioned that some people laugh at this, are there others who praise you for your decision?**

I haven’t met that many who would praise me for this.

**Why is that?**

Most Okinawans have no awareness of taking pride in their name. I guess they haven’t had their “eye opening” experience yet.

**How come you had an “eye opening” experience and others not?**

This is due to my parents. My father is American but I don’t know anything about him. My mother was from Okinawa. I was raised by my mother’s brother. My uncle and my aunt are both from Okinawa. Needless to say, they didn’t speak English. They were from Okinawa after all! So while I might look American, I was raised as Japanese. That was the idea of the parents who raised me. I was sometimes bullied for my appearance in school but that

was easily solved at the time. A bit of a quarrel and the whole thing was settled. No big deal. It became much worse when I turned 20. As an adult you have to go to various offices, you buy things, lots of formalities and so on. It was then that I was constantly asked whether I was a foreigner or whether I could speak Japanese.

**What effect did that have on you?**

These questions were asked so casually that I started wondering why I was treated so differently. I kept saying that I was Japanese, from Okinawa and that I couldn’t speak English. But there was no way of stopping these questions. It made me angry because the parents who raised me never treated me as anything else but a Japanese kid from Okinawa. I was never prepared for being treated differently. It is only when I married five years ago that my wife told me that people were just ignorant and that there was not much one could do about it. I wonder whether that is right, but anyway. . . Before, I couldn’t stand these questions but now I keep telling people “I am Okinawan, you see, although I look American. My father’s American but I don’t know him. My mother is from Okinawa. I was born and raised here.”

**Isn’t that tiresome?**

It is! 100 people, 1,000 people, 10,000 people and I keep saying the same thing over and over and over. I do this every day. But my wife is right. It has less to do with discrimination than with ignorance. There are some 10,000 people like me in Okinawa, with an American father who left. There are blond ones and black ones. They don’t speak English but none of them comes to the fore and explains why. They are merely trying to get along. So I decided that I will explain this, not only to one individual after another but through the radio, TV and the newspapers. I have to get it off my chest. I can’t not say it.

**But you speak English!**



Now I speak English but I don't want to speak the language because I have to prove that I am Okinawan. When I speak English, my identity suffers. Things get too complicated if I speak English. I am afraid that speaking English will again tip the balance I found. It's difficult. And then, speaking English would put a distance between me and all the others with an American father. After all, they have to say everyday that they don't speak English. At 37, I will set English aside for a while.

**After high school, you went to America. What made you go?**

Before I started talking about Okinawa all the time, I wanted to be America's next Bon Jovi. All I talked about was America, telling everyone, "I am American." The bad thing was that I didn't speak English at the time. But that didn't stop me. This only makes sense when I remember how painful life had been for me in Okinawa. I was always being told that I deviated and that I wasn't Okinawan or Japanese. Besides, I thought that Americans were best anyhow. And then I looked like one on top of it. All I lacked, it seemed, was the language. If I learn English, I thought, I can be an American. So I went to America, but it was not what I had imagined it to be. I became depressed.

**What was different?**

All the crime there. And the people there were so different from the Japanese. They only knew "yes" or "no" and nothing in between. I thought that these people were self-centred. I saw a country where nobody says "I am sorry." To say "I'm sorry" in America means to give in. But Japanese just naturally always go on saying sumimasen (I am sorry). What should I do, I was just used to saying "I am sorry" all the time! Here it's nice to say sumimasen. Personal relationships are smoother if you say sumimasen. Despite all my talk of being an American, I was in fact Japanese even though I spoke English by then. I came to realize that I

was not American.

**So what did you do?**

I went back to Okinawa and thought of going to Europe. It was at that time that I visited a folk song bar. And there it was, the sound of the Sanshin. I had a culture shock. Despite the fact that I had been born and raised on Okinawa, I had never before seen someone playing and singing folk songs. I knew Taiko drumming and Eisa drum dance, but I had never seen someone playing Sanshin. "What? Such culture exists in Okinawa," I thought. First thing I did the following day was ask some relatives if I could borrow their Sanshin. It's been 13 years now since I asked for that Sanshin. Me, who had claimed before "I am an American" and had vowed to give up Japan and Okinawa, to never return, had been drawn exactly in the opposite direction. It was like a bow being pulled towards America, but when the string was released the arrow flew directly towards Okinawa. BOOOOM, I had changed. I had finally become Okinawan.



Fija Bairon in a folk song bar

**Now that you have found your Okinawan identity, does it feel good?**

It feels good. After all, I've spent all these years on this island. All my friends are Uchinanchu, my parents who raised me, my mother who bore me, all my relatives here are Uchinanchu. Everyone in school was Uchinanchu. But this notwithstanding, I had always carried on saying "I am American. Hey man, what's up?" I had always thought that I should follow this direction but it had all been in vain.

**What kind of identity do you think others with a mixed background in Okinawa have?**

They are in doubt.

**Because they have little to fall back on?**

It's an issue of roots. I found my Uchina roots and then I had something to strive for. This is exactly what I am doing now. This is the reason why I am alive. If I hadn't found my roots, I might have gone crazy, ended up in a mental hospital, in prison or I don't know where.

**So your identity is something that you chose yourself?**

Looks like it, yes. I went to the folk song bar and everything changed. Sanshin. It does not exist anywhere else in the world. And the songs are in Uchinaguchi! Something like that only exists in Okinawa. I suddenly realized all this. A thorough culture shock was the result. Bon Jovi? Noborikawa Seijin! Ahh, how great is he! Have you heard anything by Noborikawa Seijin? You have to! He is Eddy van Halen on Sanshin! Knock out! Because I had not been taught anything about Okinawa, I could not think of it as a source of pride before. All I was taught was that Okinawa has that dark history and that Okinawans are supposed to be Japanese. In education, ultimately, Okinawa was nothing good.



Playing the Sanshin

**What did you do after that?**

Having heard the Sanshin made me go to the library, studying folk songs and getting tapes. How many cultural treasures there were! How many great things there are in Okinawan history! And nobody taught me anything about it! All I was taught is that things from Tokyo were great, or things from New York, London and so on. It's there you have to go I was told - anywhere else is just uncool (dassai). It's some kind of brainwash. I started getting aware of this in America. I had lived there and came to understand that being American is not that great after all.



**Did your interest in Okinawa develop gradually or were you all decided after your visit to the folk song bar?**

It developed gradually.

**What did you start with?**

The Sanshin. I started practicing and when I could play it, the next natural thing was to sing along. However, I didn't understand the meaning of the songs. Of course I didn't understand the songs - they are in Uchinaguchi! Anyway, I didn't understand a word. So I started looking up things in dictionaries or asked more experienced musicians. In this way I came to gradually understand the lyrics. However even the more experienced did not fully understand everything. Hence, all I could do was check it all out by myself. And if you do that, you have to use study materials like the Okinawa dictionary, the collection of Ryuka songs, or ask older people. Older people told me what the words meant and how to use them.



**So once again, you found yourself learning a language.**

Yes, I wonder why I have to lead such a life of always having to learn a language. Before that I was always concerned about what certain English expressions meant, and then the same

thing once more for Uchinaguchi. So you find out that there is a term like mensore (welcome) and you puzzle why there is mensochi kwimisoru (please feel welcome, informal) and when you know that you wonder what mensochi kwimishebiri (please feel welcome, formal) means and so on. Japanese is easy. In Japanese, I know it all. If I had a Japanese identity, how easy it would have been! But despite the fact that I was Uchinanchu, I couldn't speak Uchinaguchi. So now I am occupied day by day to bring back what has been lost.

**Didn't it take quite a while until you could actually use the language in communication?**

Not really. In school, I was a bit of a wild kid and wild kids use Uchinayamatoguchi (Okinawan Japanese). If you don't speak it, you cannot sell yourself as a wild guy. You have to use a bit of rough language and here this language is Uchinayamatoguchi. Weird Uchinayamatoguchi, I should say. Because I used such language a lot, I acquired the accent and other parts of the language. In addition, the parents who had raised me had used Uchinaguchi and Japanese fifty-fifty. Due to that I already had a basis. What was difficult though was using polite language. If you don't speak polite Uchinaguchi, you cannot be on radio or on TV.

**When did you start appearing on TV?**

Five years ago. I appeared in a documentary on TV but at that time I couldn't speak the polite language of Shuri and my Naha language skills were so-so. The language I used there was a bit strong (kitsui). While all my younger friends praised me for my first appearance on TV, the older ones were more critical. They scolded me. So while I was on TV like once or twice at that time, I understood that I had to learn polite language if I wanted to appear there more regularly. If not, people would call me an idiot. I resented the idea that people might think of

me in terms like “that chap doesn’t know a thing – he just babbles.” I had to study how to use softer, polite language. Now I speak such language. One has to take care that not only rough language is maintained. Okinawan society, like Japanese society, is a vertical society and one needs polite language for communication here.

**Lots of people here say that younger people are forgetting hogen (dialect). Do you think that this explanation is appropriate?**

For some people it is appropriate. One forgets a language if it is not used. So to a certain extent that’s happening in Okinawa. The real question behind this is the extent that people were able to speak before. One can say that those in their 50s and 60s are forgetting it, but it would be weird to claim the same thing for those in their 20s. It would imply that they spoke the language before, which is not the case. For those who grew up in the post-war period, when an Uchinaguchi speaking society existed, the explanation that they forgot the language applies. They had to transform into Japanese and erase Okinawan.

**Another thing one often hears here is the term hogen (dialect).**

That word, I’d like to see disappear altogether. What on earth should one do with it? Help! I keep saying over and over “Look, hogen is a discriminatory term. Please stop using it.”

**Why is it discriminatory?**

Because saying hogen implies that Japanese is on top and Uchinaguchi is underneath it. I don’t use Uchinaguchi as something which is underneath Japanese. Uchinaguchi is on the same level. I tell this to my students and then 30 minutes later somebody asks me “How do you say this in hogen?” What on earth should I do? It just seems to be impossible to get rid of this term.

**What kind of language is Uchinaguchi then? Where is it spoken and how much variation is there within it?**

Uchinaguchi is spoken on Okinawa and its neighbouring islands. As a matter of fact, I wonder whether the language of Yoron Island, for instance, belongs to it. Best thing is you ask the people there. That’s the best approach anyway. If people in, say, Aguni Island claim that they speak Aguni language, fine. Some people might say that, so I cannot just define the linguistic situation here as I want. There are various differences within Uchinaguchi. To start, there is the northern cultural sphere and the south-central cultural sphere. The language in the northern part is quite different despite being Uchinaguchi. The difference is big enough that I always tell my students that I don’t know the language of the northern part.

**Do you understand the language of northern Okinawa?**

Hard to say. I’ve never heard authentic (chanto shita) language from the northern part. I get to hear some language as spoken in Kin Village sometimes. I guess I understand half of it. But because it is the same Uchina, it’s not completely different. There are a lot of words which resemble one another. I understand it much better than say the languages of Miyako or Yaeyama which are not part of Uchinaguchi.

**How big are the differences within the language as spoken in the south-central part of Okinawa?**

Well, the language in Itoman is different and also that on the Katsuren Peninsula. When I am being asked what language I teach, I tell students that it is the language of Shuri and of Naha. Both languages became mixed and grew into what is called Shibaikutuba (stage language).

**Do all people of Naha today speak Shibaikutuba?**

It depends on the speaker. Shibaikutuba was formed and spread already in the pre-war period. Before that, there existed pure regional languages, the languages of Nishihara, Nakagusuku, Urasoe and so on. While a lot of these words remained, these languages gradually gave way to Shibaikutuba which spread through Shibai theatre TV, radio and folk songs. Furthermore, Shibaikutuba became the language of public speaking. While standard language is not a term I particularly like, I guess that Shibaikutuba can be called the standard language of Okinawa. What you hear today on TV, in radio, the folk songs, is all Shibaikutuba. It spread through the entire island.

**One can thus address people in Shibaikutuba throughout all of Okinawa and its neighbouring islands?**

Yes, when I go to Kin Village in the northern part I use Shibaikutuba and I make myself completely understood there. The elderly people reply in Shibaikutuba, but with a Kin accent. It's among themselves that they use the Kin language and then I understand only half of what they say. In other words, the elderly people from Kin speak Shibaikutuba, then the language of Kin and then Japanese. The people from Shuri and Naha, on the other hand, speak only Shibaikutuba and Japanese.

**So these people are multilingual?**

Yes, completely. The old man we visited today speaks 100 percent Japanese and 100 percent Uchinaguchi. That's how it should be. That's what one should have striven for! People should have been educated to become like him. Had we done so, we wouldn't need to sit here and talk about language endangerment today. One has to make use of people like this old man for educating future generations because if nothing is done, as is the case now, the language will disappear. But as long as I am here, the language will not disappear.

**Could one say that you lead an Uchinaguchi speaking life?**

I think so, yes.

**Where do you speak it?**

I speak it with my wife and then with older people. I've built myself an environment where I can speak Uchinaguchi. I am 37 years but I don't have friends of my age. Well, sometimes I meet some old classmates but they speak with these accents. It's not that we start arguing about their language but ... oh well, it's stupid the way they speak! It would be better if they spoke Japanese. My best friend is the 92 year old Yoshio Nakamura we visited today. He told you the same thing, didn't he, that I am his friend?

**He did.**

We are best friends! Him, I respect. He is, what should I say, the pronoun of the Naha language. I am closest to him.



**You say you've built yourself an Uchinaguchi environment, but is it not exactly this environment which is endangered? Will it still be here in 10 years?**

I don't know, but this only means that I will have to give my best effort in the next 10 years.

I purposefully speak Uchinaguchi wherever I go and in this way I spread the language. Uchinaguchi is important. But talk is cheap. The language has to be connected with something more precious than talk - it has to be connected to the economy. One needs to make a connection between Uchinaguchi and money. While language is important, you have to eat everyday, there is the rent to pay, and you need to put gas in your car and how do you earn all this money? By speaking Japanese!

**How should Uchinaguchi be connected to the economy and who should do it? It is something you can do by yourself?**

You will see! I will build a theme park, Uchina World, where everyone speaks Uchinaguchi. Uchinaguchi performances, Uchinaguchi broadcast, Shibai theatre, folk songs and so on. With a small school attached to it where Uchinaguchi is taught. I would like to do something like that and leave it at this for the moment. But there is also something that I can do for society. I can do something for education, for school education.

**Ultimately, decisions about school education are made by politicians. How is it with Okinawan politicians? Do older politicians ...**

The older ones are useless. They were brought up on imperial ideology. They haven't got the slightest doubt about being Japanese. But they are all wrong. They are Okinawan. If you need proof of this, just look at the American bases here. Seventy-five percent of all American bases are in Okinawa! One just waits for some kind of bomb to explode or for some jet fighter to fall onto the city. I wonder what will happen the next time something like that occurs or base crime rises again. I don't want to make statements here which smack of revolution or terrorism but what will happen when people come to ask themselves "what happened to our culture and our language? Why is it not here anymore?" What's the answer to that? "Japan."

It would be much better if we could avoid a situation like this. Maybe such a sense of awareness should not be created here. Maybe the present situation as it is now is best. Imagine huge unrest here in 10 or 20 years. One would then look back at today thinking it was much better when Okinawans had no idea about their language and culture. To what extent should one make Okinawans aware of this? Ultimately, one needs to change that awareness in a peaceful way. We should strive peacefully for cultural independence. We could set an example of how to do this for other regions, for Europe, for example.

**But in Okinawa the local language became endangered because Okinawans chose not to speak to their children in Uchinaguchi any longer. I wonder whether one can entirely blame the education system. The family is most important for maintaining languages.**

Well that exactly is the most frightening thing. Parents chose not to teach us the language and neither did our grandparents. This is why the culture and the language have vanished for us. I, too, have wondered why. They have all been brainwashed in order to become Japanese. And now, now ...

**... now it's difficult to maintain the language?**

I will do this peacefully and strive for cultural independence. The state is fine, let Okinawa be part of the Japanese state. But Okinawans should decide what is happening in Okinawa. What we need is a federal system, just like the one in America.

**Japan is not a country with one culture, one nation, one language then?**

It's not and from now on also the Japanese will have to accept this. But if they do, they have to return all of Hokkaido, return it to the Ainu.

**Do you think that your views on Okinawa are representative? Are there people thinking in the same way as you?**

I wonder myself. Somebody having the same ideas on Okinawa as me, I guess I never met. I'd like to speak about it, though. But people at universities and so on all seem to have the Japanese nationalistic ideology and other people probably do not get involved in these things too deeply. If you are not a scholar, you just don't think about such issues. The one who understands me best is my wife.

**Do you often speak about Okinawa with your wife?**

Every day! We barely speak about anything else. It's always the same, people from outside understand best. Maybe it would be better if I would go outside myself. At least people there understand what is self-evident. In Okinawa nobody seems to understand this, all the way up to the professors. They go like "what shall we do with this language we don't understand, let's all speak English." English! English is now taught from elementary school onwards here. We breed people who speak English. This here is not America! It doesn't make any sense. And they are all like that, 130 million Japanese. What kind of a country is this? I have no idea what this is all about. Why does one get rid of something which is as wonderful as Uchinaguchi? Why is there written "cleaning DVD" on this stuff here on the table? People wouldn't even understand what's wrong with it.

**Talking to people here, I am often told "from now on we will care about hogen (dialect)." In concrete terms, what ...**

It doesn't mean a thing. Zero! It's just words. It's the same as saying "care about elderly people." That, too, is just a slogan, a catchphrase. That's all it is, a catchphrase. It's like "let's see, how about if we care about hogen today?" Kind of puts you in a good mood. It's just words. Care about hogen, care about

Okinawan culture. Just words. Look behind these words and you'll find nothing. If they were serious, first thing they ought to do is ask themselves what their real name is and how come they don't know. I don't run around saying "my name is Higa, nice to meet you." That's over. I say "wanne Fija yaibin. Mishichoti kwimishebiri." I can introduce myself, to start with, and I do all kinds of activities to spread the language, teaching it to children and so on. I don't talk about things, I realize them.

**Are there other people like that in Okinawa?**

(Silence)

**There is the Society for Okinawan Language Revitalization, the Okinawan Speaking Society in Urasoe, the Junsui Society in Shuri. What do you think of their activities?**

(Silence) What should I say on this? (Silence) It's good that you went there and met them. That's all I will say on this issue. It's good that you went there and met them. They are trying to do the same thing as me. I can't possibly criticize them. Ultimately, they, too, want to maintain Uchinaguchi.

**One thing that strikes me is that I am the only one who knows all these people here in Okinawa personally.**

Indeed.

**I talk to Takara Ben, Fija Bairon, Miyara Shinso, Oyafuso Keiko, Higa Toyomitsu and so on, but these people often don't know each other personally.**

Worse yet, they ridicule each other like "that guy is wrong here and that guy is wrong there." That's how it is and this is not good. I guess this is due to the fact that Uchina is not united. That's what I've been thinking all the time

talking to you. There are the ancient three kingdoms on Okinawa, there is the northern cultural sphere, then there is Yaeyama and Yonaguni. Yonaguni is completely different. There is Miyako and then there is Amami.

**So you, too, are under the impression that people in Okinawa do not cooperate much on this issue?**

They are separated. But maybe that has always been like that here. I mean, look how small Okinawa is. I bet there are people in Germany who have as much land as all of Okinawa. And on this little island, there were three kingdoms, Hokuzan, Chuzan and Nanzan. The islands divided into three parts! And maybe this is where all this being separated originates. Maybe this is some kind of fate of Okinawa. Maybe that's how Uchinanchu are. They don't trust and accept each other. Maybe such line of thought exists on small islands. The smaller, the worse.

**In my opinion this is partly the way it is because language revitalization is a difficult undertaking.**

Maybe. But I am like that as well. I, too, think that the Okinawan language of certain people is weird and there are others that I don't even want to meet. I wonder how Europeans are dealing with this.

**In Europe things developed at a different time and circumstances than here. In Okinawa, language revitalization takes place at a time which some people call post-modernism. Modernist ideas won't work in Okinawa, I am afraid.**

But there is something like the Basque language.

**The idea of being Basque and the role that language plays therein is an old one. In Okinawa, people would like to create such awareness right now. That's different.**

But how come something like that has remained in Basque or in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and so on?

**I think it is because Basque people don't see themselves as Spanish. People in Okinawa are, however, Okinawan-Japanese or Japanese-Okinawans. There is almost nobody who is Okinawan-Okinawan. Okinawan-Okinawans would maybe create unrest.**

The Basques then are Basque-Basque?

**I guess so, being Basque means not being Spanish.**

But they have been made a part of Spain at some point. How come they can say that they are different?

**Because of language, culture and all that. Okinawa, too, has a distinct language and culture but before an awareness of being Okinawan was created here it became Japanese.**

It all starts with the 1609 invasion, right? Ever since 1609 Okinawa has been ruled and controlled by Satsuma (today's Kagoshima Prefecture P.H.). In a way, Ryukyu ends in 1609. So this has been continuing now for 400 years. That's why such awareness doesn't exist here.

**Ryukyu was a feudal society and ideas such as being Uchinanchu only existed in the upper echelons of society at the time.**

Right, that's how it must have been. There were no such ideas here at that time.

**In a situation like that in Okinawa today, how can the language be revitalized?**

I prefer to talk about cultural spheres these days. I came to understand the diversity which exists in Okinawa and I came to understand



that the language I was learning was a mixture of Naha and Shuri language which is called Shibaikutuba. So while I found out that I am not American despite having American blood and I only have a Japanese nationality, I define myself culturally as Uchinanchu (Uchinanchu bunkajin). There are also people who are culturally American, or Japanese or Ainu. That can be chosen and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the colour of the skin. One has to build societies where one can choose one's culture and then all kinds of discrimination based on skin colour and so on will be dissolved. Otherwise, you could say that I am not a real Uchinanchu because my father is American. Being Uchinanchu means choosing a culture. Look, there are plenty of Yamatunchu (Japanese) and Americans learning to play Sanshin. Playing Sanshin is not something restricted to Okinawans. All those who want to study Uchina culture should help maintain it. And the people here who admire American culture should culturally become American.

### **So what will ultimately happen to Uchinaguchi in the future?**

It will become related to those who are culturally Okinawans. That's the key concept, being Okinawan culturally. Such people are already being raised. I am doing this. If you talk about race, which is stupid anyhow, I wouldn't be an Uchinanchu. But this notwithstanding, nobody in the world at the age of 37 speaks Uchinaguchi as well as I do. I don't like the ideas of blood or nation (minzoku). If these ideas are applied, I am the first one to be excluded from being Uchinanchu. I am Uchinanchu due to culture. One more such person comes to mind, my wife. She is from the Tohoku region. Both her parents are from Yamagata Prefecture. This year she will turn 30 but she speaks Uchinaguchi. She speaks it very well. One has to wonder why there is no other 30 year old woman in Okinawa speaking Uchinaguchi as well as she does. We've been married for 5 years now and I've spoken

Uchinaguchi all the time with her. Culturally she has become Uchinanchu. The two of us, who are not Uchinanchu by blood, are Uchinanchu because we love the culture. I know someone else, somebody called Thompson. He is English by nationality, but culturally he is Uchinanchu. He knows the songs so well.

### **How is it to be Uchinanchu culturally?**

It's fun! What is more, for me it's good for self-fulfilment. I hate the term half which is used to designate people like me and I always wanted to be someone complete. But Okinawans, as it stands, don't take much pride in their culture. The average guy in Okinawa doesn't run around claiming "Wanne Uchinanchu - I am Okinawan" like I do. To them America is number one, then comes Tokyo and some two levels further below or so comes Okinawa. That's what people presently think in Okinawa. Awareness of Uchina as number one, Uchinaguchi as a part of a very important culture, a culture which developed on this island simply does not exist. In America, a country where nobody says "I am sorry," people run around saying "I am American." In a way, that impresses me. I respect Americans for that.

### **Revitalizing language and culture is fun too, isn't it?**

Yes, it's fun. One needs to produce a lot of things that can be seen and heard. One needs people like the 92 year old Nakamura. If I could, I would move into his house. I would sit all day in his place, taking notes. I want to know everything he knows. I want to be like him. He knows everything about the Naha and the Shuri language. I want to know that too.

### **Why that?**

Because the next time that I hear somebody say "I am German" or "I am American" I want to say "Wanne Uchinanchu - I am Okinawan," and

if they ask me, “Show me some of your culture,” I will be able to do so. But look around you (pointing out the window). There’s only concrete. There’s not so much one could presently show around here. Just Shuri Castle and that’s about it. All the ancient architecture that remains in Europe, it’s great. Okinawa, too, has had that, the red roof tiles and all that. Turn all the roofs of Uchina red! It would be a world treasure.

**If being Uchinanchu was not important, one needn’t have all the hassle of revitalizing the language and the culture. Am I right in assuming that being Uchinanchu is important to you?**

I don’t know. Language and culture must be liked. Importance is too strong a concept. That sounds like Basque-Basque to me and that is frightening. Uchinanchu at present are cowards (yowamushi). They can’t even quarrel. They run away. We are such people. But look at it from another perspective. Maybe there is something good about it. Who knows? I mean, what shall we do? Like start a war with Japan? (Silence). Who knows? Maybe this is an amazing place here. Maybe all the time we were saying “I’m sorry” and “Japanese, Japanese,” we went like that (sticks out his tongue and winks with his hands, thumbs in the ears). “Japanese, I am sorry, the Japanese age” but in fact we went like this (repeats gesture). Maybe that is what is really happening here.

(Laughter)

**Nifedebiru, thank you for this interview.**

*Fija Bairon appears on Radio Okinawa every Sunday from 13:00 to 15:30. He writes for Okinawa Taimusu every Sunday on Uchinaguchi and teaches Uchinaguchi at Okinawa Taimusu’s Cultural Centre. He can be contacted by e-mail in Japanese: fijabyron@yahoo.co.jp*

*Patrick Heinrich studies and teaches Japanese*

*Sociolinguistics at Duisburg-Essen University (Germany). He can be contacted by e-mail: [patrick.heinrich@uni-due.de](mailto:patrick.heinrich@uni-due.de). The author would like to thank Chris Nelson and Mark Selden for comments which helped to improve this article.*

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