

THE RYUKYU ISLANDS

by William P. Lebra

Introduction

The commonly held stereotype of Japan as a culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation overlooks the existence of more than one million Ryukyans (not to mention the Ainu, Chinese, and Koreans) also present in Japan. To illustrate more vividly that point I considered, somewhat facetiously, titling this paper with a well-known Okinawan joke, "*Urukun Nippon du yaibii ga yaa*" ("Is Oroku a part of Japan?"), which pokes fun at the dialect spoken by the inhabitants of the Oroku district of Naha, the capital of the Ryukyu Islands. It also expresses, I believe, the concern with identity vis-à-vis Japan common among Ryukyans.

This problem of identity derives from the fact that the Ryukyus have maintained culture(s) and language(s) quite separate and distinct from those of Japan until very recent times. The island groups of Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama encompass at least four related yet mutually unintelligible languages which make up the Ryukyuan branch of a Japanese-Ryukyuan family. From 1372 until 1874 the Ryukyu kingdom made regular tribute payments to China, permitting a beneficial trade and assimilation of many aspects of Chinese culture. Although conquest by Satsuma in 1609 reduced the small state to vassalage, a high degree of cultural and political autonomy was permitted; moreover, interaction with China, especially trade, was actually encouraged to the benefit of Satsuma. This duality of cultural influences has been well-recognized by Ryukyans; for example, the author of the *Kian Nikki* (1618-1619) ascribes to "elders" the saying, "Think of China as grandmother and regard Japan as grandfather." Although the Japanese government announced annexation in 1872, direct administration did not occur until March 30, 1879, when the last king, Shō Tai, was forcibly removed by soldiers to permanent exile in Tokyo. During the first twenty years of the new administration—with all major offices in the *ken* occupied by Japanese—there were few changes aside from the abolition of the old class system and civil bureaucracy. The land reforms of 1899-1903 abolished the system of communal tenure in the villages and introduced the Japanese system of private property and inheritance in accordance with the Japanese civil code. These changes and the spread of

primary schools throughout the countryside by the time of World War I marked the beginning of intensive Japanization in the Ryukyus. In summarizing the characteristics of the Japanese impact I stated elsewhere (Lebra 1966):

Official policy aimed directly at the eradication of Okinawan culture and the culture and the transformation of Okinawans into Japanese nationals. . . . Where necessary, repressive laws and police measures were also resorted to by the government, and things Okinawan were generally discredited. Initially, there was considerable reaction against the policy of Japanization and discrimination, but in time this feeling subsided and a sense of inferiority replaced it. Ultimately, the government succeeded in creating a favorable response to Japanese culture, and Okinawans came to regard that culture as superior and worthy of emulation. This achievement may be attributed in part to the linguistic and cultural affinities of the two peoples, since sufficient resemblances existed to make their differences bridgeable; a wider gulf might have produced lasting antipathy, as in the case of Korea. While the Japanese repeatedly discriminated against Okinawan culture, full and equal participation in their culture was proffered as an alternative. Equally significant was the official policy which treated Okinawa as one of the home prefectures and not as a colonial dependency. Many Okinawans came to acknowledge the Japanese as providers of modern, enlightened government, for the new administration had abolished class divisions, reduced taxes on arable land, and granted some voice in government to the common man. Even members of the former upper classes were not wholly alienated, for as the best educated and most wealthy they were often the first to obtain positions in the new bureaucracy or to invest in new economic opportunities. Sixty-six years of Japanese administration witnessed the progressive integration of Okinawa into the Japanese nation. However, the span of time was too brief and Okinawa's physical isolation too remote to eradicate the indigenous culture, although it had been severely altered.

Since July, 1945, the Ryukyus (i.e., Okinawa-ken) have been under the administration of the United States military forces although a high degree of internal autonomy is permitted and the "residual sovereignty" of Japan recognized. The presence of fifty to sixty thousand Americans (military, civilian employees, and their families) has, in my opinion, actually enhanced the Japanization process. Not only have language and social distance been major barriers to significant interaction between Americans and Ryukyuan but a policy of greatly expanding the education system, particularly at the high school and college levels, has exposed a larger segment of the population to Japanese culture for longer periods than ever before. Moreover, direct television reception from Japan, an influx of Japanese tourists and businessmen, and active political movements led by students have served further to emphasize ties with "Naichi." Nonetheless, the past is still much in evidence, for the process of Japanization has taken place only within the lifetime of the oldest generation. The elaborate tombs, suggestive of Fukien, are ubiquitous, and the indigenous language continues to find favor in the traditional drama appearing nightly on television, in music, in religion, and in the speech of the very old and the

very young. I have emphasized certain historical developments and facets of the contemporary scene because a comprehensive, sympathetic understanding of a Ryukyuan linguistic and cultural identity quite separate from Japan is a necessary prerequisite for successful research in behavioral science in the Ryukyus today. This is not to deny that a process of Japanization is rapidly accelerating and will in all likelihood totally efface Ryukyuan culture in several decades.

Accomplishments

By contemporary standards research in behavioral science has been rather infrequent in Ryukyuan studies until very recently. Prior to 1950, research in sociology and psychology was almost absent, with a few notable exceptions. (Tamura's classic sociological treatise [1927] might be cited as an exception.) The bulk of research falls under the heading of anthropology, or more accurately ethnography, folklore, folk history, folk ethnography, or Volkskunde. The history of Ryukyuan research in these areas may be roughly divided into two periods, from the 1890's to 1945 or 1950, and 1950 to present. In the earlier period two groups may be distinguished—Japanese and Ryukyuan. As early as the 1890's brief ethnographic reports on the Ryukyus appeared in the *Jinruigaku Zasshi*; the first 20 volumes (1888-1908) contained more than sixty articles on Ryukyu. As Taiwan, Korea, and the Pacific island territories passed under Japanese control, Ryukyuan studies languished. The major mainstay of Ryukyuan research during the second and third decades of this century was the Okinawan scholar, Iha Fuyu, and his associates. In very late Taisho and early Showa the attention of Yanagita Kunio and his group turned to Ryukyuan studies. The research of both of these groups has been much criticized, and with good reason, by the younger generation of Japanese scholars specializing in the Ryukyus. Entirely too much attention was devoted to the mistaken assumption that somehow the Ryukyus preserved many aspects of ancient Japanese culture, especially religion and language. The leading researchers drew their findings from very brief field visits, personal reminiscences, or old Ryukyuan literature, such as the *Omorō*. Comparisons were exclusively between Japan and Ryukyu; reference to China or Korea was rare. But in view of their lack of professional training and even more importantly the political climate of Japan during the time of their labors, their results were remarkable. (As late as 1940 the Japanese governor of Okinawa-ken stated that there was no place for Ryukyuan culture in the Japanese nation and that it must be wiped out.) Moreover, these men stimulated many petty officials, school teachers, and principals throughout the Ryukyus to collect and preserve data on the folk traditions of their districts. As a field anthropologist, I have not found the efforts of Yanagita or Origuchi of much value; but their encouragement and example stimulated men such as

Shimabukuro (1929) and Sakima (1936), whose publications provided useful leads and insights for field work.

A new phase of Ryukyuan research commenced in the years after World War II, beginning approximately in 1950. In that year an entire issue of the *Minzokugaku Kenkyu* was devoted to a survey of Ryukyuan research. The period after 1950 stands in marked contrast with preceding years in that more researchers are professional anthropologists, greater attention is given to field research, and for the first time a number of non-Japanese, predominantly Americans, have entered Ryukyuan research. The contribution of Japanese anthropologists has been recently reviewed (The Japanese Society of Ethnology, 1968) and need not be repeated here.¹ However, I would point out that the best work by Japanese anthropologists, especially that by Nakane, Gamo, Ogawa, and Muratake, is being done in studies of kinship, kin group, and community organization. Research on various aspects of Ryukyuan religion is for the most part still confined to descriptions of ritual offices and recitations of the *nenchu gyoji* (annual ritual cycle), quite lacking any dynamic or functional interpretation. The major limitation for the Japanese professionals has been the lack of protracted field studies.

American research in the Ryukyus commenced in the early 1950's with village studies—the Smiths in Yaeyama, Burd in Miyako, and Glacken in Okinawa—marked by fairly long periods in the field. Haring, who worked out of the city of Nase in Amami, unfortunately experienced the loss of nearly all of his field notes. About the same time, Lieban, while employed by the United States Civil Administration, conducted a study of the communal land tenure system in Kudaka. Somewhat later, in 1953-54, Suttles, Pitts, and Lebra (1955) worked in several villages, concentrating on the problem of change in rural society. This work and that of the others (save Lieban) were funded by the United States Department of Defense, and the resulting monographs were produced for the civil administration rather than for professional audiences. As part of the Whiting project on the study of child rearing in six cultures, the Mareztkis undertook the study of the community of Taira in 1954-55 (Maretzki 1966). Lebra's subsequent field studies (1956-57, 1960, and 1961) focused initially on religion and social organization and shifted to an intensive study of ten shamans and their clients. The linguist, Owen Loveless, has continued his studies of the Okinawan language, initiated in 1945-46, concentrating in particular on the old capital of Shuri. This research, which is being funded by the National Science Foundation, should provide an interesting comparison with the work of Japanese linguists on the Ryukyuan language. The Mareztkis returned to the Ryukyus in 1960-61 to study characteristics of adult personality; their efforts focused on two rural villages, mental hospital records, and a study of suicide data. Since then field work by American

anthropologists has languished, and so far as I am aware only one young American anthropologist has written a thesis on Ryukyuan field research carried out in the mid-sixties (Whitney 1968). In consideration of the amounts of time and money invested, research by Americans has produced few publications. Moreover, while our research represents longer periods of field residence than those of Japanese colleagues and includes functional interpretations, some of our more sophisticated Okinawan colleagues have discreetly indicated that we have failed to portray our subjects' behavior adequately. Certainly one major limitation of both Japanese and the American field researchers is a lack of fluency in the indigenous language. We must welcome the recent appearance of young Ryukyuan behavioral scientists who are bilingual, and in some instances trilingual, and who can contribute much by their participation.

The University of the Ryukyus, from its modest beginning in 1950, has grown in less than twenty years to have a full-time student enrollment of 4,000 and a faculty of 200. Under the Ryukyuan Scholarship Program, approximately one thousand Ryukyuan students were sent to the United States for study, and a number of them returned with master's and doctor's degrees. Some Japanese institutions since World War II have also provided Okinawans with special scholarships and other aids to advanced education. Although the behavioral sciences at the University of the Ryukyus have grown more slowly than other scholarly fields, they have nonetheless probably attained a status at this institution above that at prefectural universities in Japanese prefectures of comparable size and wealth. Psychologists in the Education Division at the University initiated research in behavioral science with particular attention to mental development, the psychology of language, achievement motivation, and techniques of testing; in particular, the works of the Agarie brothers (Yasuharu and Nariyuki), Matsusuke Yonamine, Toshio Akamine, and Akira Kobashigawa should be noted (see Ryukyu Daigaku Kyoikugakubu 1957-). Some of the same faculty have also shepherded publication of a journal called *Psychology* by the student-faculty Psychology Study Club. More recently, sociology and political science have emerged as separate departments in the Faculty of Law and Literature. Particularly noteworthy has been the work of Mikio Higa (1963) on the military occupation. In sociology Tomoaki Iye has focused attention on juvenile delinquency, urbanism, and changing values. Noboru Yonaguni has concentrated on the traditional Ryukyuan religion and intends to study new religious movements, and Masahide Ota has been active in the study of mass communications. For the efforts of these scholars, see Ryukyu Daigaku Hobungakubu (1956-). Two other journals, maintained by private study groups in Naha and Tokyo that are predominantly historical in focus but wholly oriented toward Ryukyuan subjects, should be noted, *Okinawa Bunka* (Okinawa Bunka Kyokai

1959-) and *Ryukyu* (Ryukyu Shiryo Kenkyu Kai 1955-). Although anthropology has not emerged as a separate discipline and no professionally trained anthropologist has been appointed to the staff, interested faculty members in history, language, and sociology have given attention to the study of Okinawan culture. Of particular importance have been two student-faculty clubs, Folklore Study Club (Ryukyu Daigaku Minzoku Kenkyu Kurabu 1960-) and Ryudai Dialect Study Club (Ryudai Hogen Kenkyu Kurabu 1958-). The Okinawa Culture Institute (Okinawa Bunka Kenkyujo), occasionally funded by The Asia Foundation, has published two volumes on the culture of Miyako. Another institute (Ryukyu Daigaku Jimbun Shakai Kagaku Kenkyujo) is subsidized by the University and publishes an occasional bulletin (seven volumes to date). It should be emphasized that the department, institutes, and clubs have overlapping memberships.

Problems

I should like to consider the problems in background data and field conditions facing the behavioral scientist interested in Ryukyuan research. The Ryukyuan researcher is vastly more handicapped than his counterpart working in Japan proper. The entire archives of the former Ryukyuan kingdom as well as the later prefectural records were totally destroyed in World War II. Although the Ryukyuan Government and particularly the library of the University of the Ryukyus have endeavored to build up new collections, much of the remaining material is widely scattered or irretrievably lost. The University of Hawaii possesses perhaps the best single collection in the world, consisting initially of the late Frank Hawley's library and subsequently augmented by additional purchases, exchanges with the University of the Ryukyus, and acquisition of major historical documents from the Satsuma collections and Kagoshima-ken sources. During the early 1960's an Okinawan-born Ph.D. candidate was funded by the East-West Center in Hawaii for eighteen months of microfilming private collections and public documents throughout the Ryukyus. His efforts resulted in many thousands of feet of microfilm, most of which have yet to be adequately catalogued, not to mention annotated. The most recent summary of Hawaii's collection can be found in Sakamaki (1965).

Unfortunately, the records of the U. S. military occupation have not been carefully collected by any library in the United States or Japan, and it is imperative now, as the end of the occupation approaches, that some concerted effort be made to collect as much of these materials as can be obtained. It has been my experience and that of my colleagues that record-keeping in schools, hospitals, land offices, and so on, has not yet been brought up to Japanese standards, but we acknowledge that in many areas of Okinawa and the offshore islands the village offices containing *koseki*

and other valuable records were totally destroyed by the war.

In field research one encounters two obstacles, or perhaps two facets of the same problem, which are not encountered by a researcher in Japan proper. I refer here again to the Ryukyuan identity problem² and to the existence of the indigenous language. Virtually all Ryukyuan today are bilingual in Japanese and the local language, but the researcher repeatedly finds that informants are reluctant to use the Ryukyuan language and culture to talk about things Ryukyuan. The school teachers have done a good job of projecting this attitude. For many, the indigenous language and culture, if not actually shameful things, are certainly to be discredited. Pitts and I were solemnly told by a rural headman that "everyone" in his village spoke pure "*hozungo*," standard Japanese, pronouncing the term for this standard form of the Japanese language with native phonemes, and thus mispronouncing it. Ryukyuan are generally very accommodating informants. If one speaks exclusively in Japanese, they will respond in kind; when one attempts to elicit "real" Okinawan terms, the response is usually Japanese Okinawan to accommodate the Japanese questioner. As a consequence, some Japanese researchers who ought to know better have the firm conviction that Okinawan, Miyakoan, and so on are only dialects, not distinct languages. I have the impression that an Okinawan term is thought to sound more respectable when given a Japanese tinge. As a result, both American and Japanese field researchers have at times come back with texts in a never-never language. This phenomenon has been further compounded by the practice of the prewar Japanese and Ryukyuan researchers of giving Ryukyuan terms a Japanese sound. For example, the community priestess in Okinawa is called *nuru*, but almost everywhere in the Japanese literature until recently this has been rendered as *noro*. I emphasize the importance of the native language because I believe it is still significant in the cognitive orientation of most Ryukyuan. When we recorded shaman-client sessions in 1960, the discussion and conceptual orientation was predominantly in the Okinawan language. The Rorschach tests of most of the shamans whom we studied required administration and translation by native speakers. Finally, I would conclude this section by commenting on the inadequacy of *kana* in recording any language other than Japanese. The Okinawan term *uttu*, sibling younger than ego, is exempletive; in *kana* this could be read as *utsutsu*, *ututu*, or *uttsu*. Fortunately, the practice of recording data in this syllabary is disappearing among the younger generation of professional researchers.

Prospects

A vast array of potentially exciting avenues is open for research in the Ryukyus. So little has been accomplished and so much remains to be done, especially since the Ryukyus compose a group of languages and

cultures which are rapidly becoming moribund. The promising work being done by younger Japanese scholars on kinship and social organization should continue and be expanded. It is also hoped that much more will be done in sociology and psychology, concentrating on aspects of the larger society beyond the village, especially on the process of urbanization and Japanization and on an understanding of personality dynamics.

I have referred to a Ryukyuan identity problem deriving from the assimilation of the Ryukyus into Japanese society and culture. Interesting in this respect are certain of the character traits of Ryukyus which have been commented upon by travelers during the nineteenth century and more recently by trained observers. The feudal tradition and martial spirit associated with the Japanese stereotype have been notably absent from the Ryukyus. Unlike Japan, a civil society was established in the Ryukyus at the end of the fifteenth century, when all weapons were collected for storage. Prior to World War II, the suicide and homicide rates for Okinawa prefecture were lower than those for the rest of Japan, and in the 'sixties suicide rates have reached the lowest incidence in this century. DeVos (verbal communication), in reviewing TAT's collected by Marezki in rural Okinawa, commented on the lack of achievement motivation vis-à-vis Japanese of the same age, sex, and background. Yet, in Hawaii the Okinawan minority within the larger population of Japanese ancestry is particularly noted for a high level of financial achievement and job attainment. I have the impression that assimilation into Japanese society and deculturation in terms of Ryukyuan traits have been accompanied by a repression of spontaneity. The late Okinawan folk historian, Nakahara Zenchu, once told me of his boyhood in Kume Jima and of the people's passion for cockfighting and gambling; every house kept fighting cocks, he said. He also recalled being physically chastised by the school teacher for mentioning cockfighting in class. I am not aware of cockfighting being carried on anywhere in the Ryukyus today. Moreover, bullfighting has largely disappeared, and the horse racing described by nineteenth century travelers is no longer remembered.

Some attention should be given to the Ryukyuan factory workers in Japan, particularly in the Osaka area, where there is some segregation and their social status is said to be low. I am told by Okinawan colleagues, although no statistics are furnished, that suicide rates are high in these groups. It should be determined if they are any different from Japanese of the same locale and status, but Osakan officials indicated to me that their statistics on suicide do not record Okinawans separate from other Japanese. Similarly, it has been said that the incidence of mental disturbances among Ryukyuan students studying in the United States and Japan is high, though again, these remain unverified observations.

The most encouraging sign for the future of Ryukyuan studies has been

the continuing development of behavioral science at the University of the Ryukyus. An impairment of continued growth may come with the return of the Ryukyus to Japanese control, when the University may be scaled down to a size more realistically in keeping with the limited population and resources of Okinawa. Although sociocultural anthropology remains largely undeveloped at the University of the Ryukyus, it is hoped that some Ryukyuan doctoral candidates in these fields can be trained overseas, especially in field research outside Japan. A very desirable goal would be the creation of international research teams, involving not only Japanese and American but particularly Chinese and Korean behavioral scientists as well. In this respect, the recent field research (1969) conducted by Professor Choi Jai-seuk, a sociologist of Korea University, on the similarity between the Okinawan patri-sib (*munchu*) and the Korean *munchung* is a step in the right direction. The study of Ryukyuan culture should at least involve comparison with adjacent cultures in East Asia, and ideally comparisons ought to be made with other groups in similar processes of assimilation into large nation-states.

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NOTES

1. The work cited contains more than eighty references in Japanese on the Ryukyus. Additional references may be found in Kinjo (1948) and Sofue (1962).
2. As illustration see Masahide Ota's popular work, *The Ugly Japanese (Minikui Nipponjin)* (Tokyo, Saimaru Shuppankai, 1969).

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