

Okinawa: Legacies of History

By Catherine Maxwell (Editor)



Shisa, the lion-dog figures seen all over Okinawa, are evidence of the Chinese influence on Ryukyuan culture.

Okinawa, the southernmost prefecture of Japan, is a chain of subtropical islands famed in Japan as a tourist destination with beautiful beaches and warm climate. It is also known less favourably as a major location for American military bases. Geographically closer to Taiwan and China than to the Japanese mainland, the culture, language and customs of these islands are distinct from those of Japan and this makes Okinawa a particularly interesting place. In this issue of **Omusubi**, we will look at the historical developments that have shaped the Okinawan people and culture. The next issue is intended to cover aspects of Okinawan culture and lifestyle as a special two-part *Hitokuchi Memo*.

The origins of the Okinawans are thought to be the same as the Japanese – a prehistoric people originating somewhere in Southeast Asia who migrated over land bridges during the Ice Age to inhabit the Japanese archipelago. On the main islands of Japan however, these people gradually mixed with later arrivals from Northeast Asia. Okinawa was cut off from mainland Japan when sea levels rose, and developed its own dialects and indigenous culture. Even today many Okinawans noticeably differ in physical appearance from their Japanese counterparts.

The Okinawan archipelago was unified into an independent country, the Ryukyu Kingdom, in 1429. But as a small island kingdom Ryukyu could not afford to ignore its much larger neighbours. It sent regular tribute missions to China, receiving emissaries from the Chinese emperor to invest the Ryukyu king and benefiting from trade and the importation of Chinese knowledge and culture in return. Ryukyu also came under the increasing influence of Japan, culminating in invasion by Satsuma (a feudal domain in southern Kyushu) in 1609. Ryukyu was forced to recognise Satsuma as overlord, but this was kept secret so as not to interfere in relations with China and damage the trade that Satsuma was eager to exploit. Ryukyu remained at least nominally independent for approximately the next 250 years.

Trade was integral to the Ryukyu kingdom, with Ryukyuan ships trading as far as Southeast Asia, and the islands were an important transit point in trading routes between Japan, China and Korea. The riches acquired through trade ushered in a Ryukyuan golden age, when many of the distinctive aspects of Okinawan art and culture were developed, often synthesising Chinese, Japanese and indigenous customs. This interesting blend of regional cultures is still evident in Okinawan society today.

However, by the 19th century, the increasing frequency of European ships in northeast Asian waters focussed the attention of Japan on Okinawa's strategic importance. Japan took various measures to assert its authority over Okinawa, finally declaring it a prefecture in 1879, despite Okinawan and Chinese protest. The Japanese government embarked on a vigorous assimilation program, aimed at eradicating the Ryukyuan language and customs that were seen as a potential threat to its sovereignty. This was initially met with opposition, but Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese war convinced many Okinawans that Japan



Shuri Castle, palace of the Ryukyu Kings, blends Japanese and Chinese architectural styles.

was where the future lay. Desire to assimilate was further fuelled by the discrimination encountered by Okinawans who migrated to work on the mainland, over their different dialect and customs. They resented a Japanese tendency to view them as outsiders and to classify them together with the people of Japanese colonies such as Taiwan and Korea.

The coming of WWII was seen by many Okinawans as a chance to prove themselves loyal to the emperor and a true part of the Japanese nation. Instead, Okinawa was the site of one of most bitterly fought battles of the Pacific war, a tragic last stand before the Allied forces were to reach the Japanese mainland. One in four Okinawan civilians lost their lives, totalling more than the number of Japanese military casualties. There were numerous incidents of mass suicide and murder to avoid being taken by the enemy. Some Okinawans were shot by Japanese soldiers believing they were spies because they spoke in dialect, and school-age children were coerced into civilian defence forces or nursing wounded Japanese soldiers, very often at the cost of their own lives. With their homeland devastated and so many lives lost, in the war's aftermath many Okinawans felt a sense of having been betrayed by the nation to which they belonged.

The difficulties for Okinawa did not end with the end of the war. American forces occupied the islands until 1972, appropriating large tracts of land for use as military bases. Under occupation, Okinawa missed out on the reforms occurring on mainland Japan, and postwar reconstruction and subsequent growth were stunted, entrenching economic disadvantage. Despite a certain ambivalence towards Japan because of past history, Okinawans began to call for reversion. But reversion to Japan, when it eventually occurred, was negotiated as bilateral agreement between USA and Japan, denying Okinawans a voice and resulting in very little progress on key issues such as the location of bases.

The American military bases, of which almost 75% in Japan are located in Okinawa prefecture (despite constituting less than 1% of Japan's land area and population), continue to be a thorn in the side of many Okinawans. Not only was the land often unfairly taken from its Okinawan owners, the bases create a range of ongoing problems, including noise and environmental damage caused by aircraft and military traffic, and a number of violent crimes committed by American servicemen.

The ongoing presence of military bases as well as recent history has generated a strong Okinawan movement, not only in opposition to the bases, but also in the promotion of peace for both Okinawa and the world. There are many people, especially amongst the older Okinawans who lived through the horrors of the war, seeking just recognition of the injustices wrought by war on both sides, and working to spread the story of the Battle of Okinawa, in the hope that such tragedy can be prevented from happening anywhere again.

Okinawa's history sets it apart from the Japanese mainland, yet this same history is inextricably intertwined with Japan. The legacies of history have furnished Okinawa with a unique culture and experiences, but have also left many unresolved issues. Nowadays, the younger generations are growing up with no memory of an Okinawa without bases, no direct experience of the war and with fewer opportunities to learn indigenous Okinawan dialects and culture. It may be that the history which has shaped Okinawa is entering a new phase.

In the next issue of Omusubi, unique aspects of Okinawan culture and customs will be examined in more detail.

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