

Rice Island, Satellite Island,
Border Island: Yonaguni Across Time

A language connects the people who speak it, and it divides them from those who do not. Yonaguni deserves our attention already because this small island of 28 km² has its own distinctive language. The language is called Dunan. Across its history, there have been less than 50,000 speakers of Dunan, and there are currently only about 100 speakers left. The Dunan language has given rise to a unique society, and this society is the carrier of a distinctive culture. In Dunan, Yonaguni Island is called *Dunancima*, with *cima* referring to both 'island' and 'community'. The origin of the word 'Dunan' is not entirely clear, but it is believed to be derived from *dimi*, 'sandbank'. This is a fitting name for a small and isolated island in the Pacific Rim. There are three local communities in Yonaguni: Sonai, Higawa and Kubura. The latter was once predominantly populated by settlers from Okinawa Island, and it is today the center of scuba diving and open-sea fishing tourism.

Yonaguni is in the southern Ryukyus, which is composed of the Miyako Islands, the Yaeyama Islands and Yonaguni. Taken together, this part of the Ryukyus Archipelago is called Sakishima, literally the 'outlying islands'. Yonaguni is last of these outlying islands. It is located more than 500 kilometers south of Naha, the capital city of Okinawa Prefecture. It is more than 2,000 kilometers to Tokyo, but Taiwan is only 110 kilometers to the west of the island. It is about 1,000 kilometers to Hong Kong. In other words, Yonaguni sits at the intersection of the Sinitic, Austronesian and Japonic cultural spheres. Yonaguni was once independent, and it was the last Sakishima island to be incorporated into the Ryukyus kingdom (1429-1879). Arguably its best time after the loss of independence in 1522 was during the short-lived Japanese Empire (1895-1945) when Yonaguni was a satellite island to its mighty neighbor Taiwan. After the war, Yonaguni became quite literally the end of Japan, and its existence as a border island coincided with its steady population decline.

Yonaguni is located in the middle of the Kuroshio current, one of the strongest ocean currents in the world. The Kuroshio constitutes a natural barrier that separates Yonaguni from its immediate neighbor Taiwan as the current flows right between these two islands. The Kuroshio then flows parallel to the Ryukyus Archipelago, which is composed of circa 180 islands, before it crosses from east to west between Amami Island and the Tokara Islands. The flow of the Kuroshio historically constituted a barrier that allowed for Ryukyuan cultures to emerge. It constrained contact between Amami and Yamato (mainland Japan) in the north, and between Yonaguni and Formosa (Taiwan) in the south. Yonaguni is part of the Japonic linguistic and cultural sphere, but it stands out there as its most unique and smallest subgroup. North of the Ryukyus we find the largest Japonic language, Japanese, and in the south the Austronesian languages that originated from

the second around ten (*tiiri*), the third at three in the afternoon (*sumadagi*) and the last meal at around nine in the evening (*aihi*). Independent, and without a class of nobles or warriors of its own, Yonaguni was then an egalitarian society where collaboration and mutual help (*yimamari*) were deeply institutionalized.

Yonaguni was the last island to be incorporated into the Ryukyus kingdom. King Shō Shin, who reigned the kingdom from 1477 to 1526, started his invasion campaigns into the southern Ryukyus (Sakishima) in 1500. His campaign of unifying the Ryukyus Islands was completed with the invasion of Yonaguni in 1522. Under the guidance of their chief Untura, Yonaguni Islanders put up a fierce fight against the invading forces that had been recruited from Miyako Island. The Islanders had previously succeeded twice in defending their island from invasion. The first attempt had been launched from the neighboring Iriomote Island in 1450, and a second one from Miyako Island in 1500. After Untura's defeat, his daughter was captured as a prize and taken to Miyako Island. The battle and the fate of Untura's daughter are subject to various legends in the Dunan language.

Soon after the invasion, economic hardship started for Yonaguni Islanders. Exploitation and poverty would characterize their life for the next 400 years. In 1611, the island was surveyed by the Satsuma domain in Yamato (Japan). Satsuma had secretly gained control over the Ryukyus kingdom in 1609. It started to collect taxes from the kingdom, and this meant that commoners in the Ryukyus were taxed twice, once for the kingdom and once for the Satsuma domain. In 1637, a crushing poll tax system (*araduzun*) was imposed. This poll tax remained in place for 266 years, that is to say, for some ten generations. Every man between the age of 15 to 50 had to pay a set amount of taxes in rice irrespective of whether he was healthy and capable of work. These taxes were collected by officials from the neighboring Ishigaki Island. Yonaguni never developed a class of nobility of its own, nor any form of social stratification. The entire population were simply farmers (*hiyagusa*). Control over these farmers from the outside was so strict that musical instruments were banned from the island. It was believed that musical instruments would distract them from devoting their entire energy on cultivating rice. Traditional songs on Yonaguni were performed by voice only.

SATELLITE ISLAND

In 1872, the Ryukyus Kingdom was annexed, and it was brought under control of the Japanese Meiji government in the following years. This process was concluded in 1879 with the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture. The period between 1872 and 1879 is known as *Ryūkyū shōbum* in Japanese, literally 'Ryukyus punishment', and this punishment was imposed on these islands

for not voluntarily wanting to join the newly founded Meiji state. The incorporation of the ancient kingdom into the modern Japanese nation state had not been uncontroversial, already because Qing China also claimed rights on the Ryukyus Islands. The Ryukyus kingdom had maintained tributary relations with China, and there had been intensive and fruitful cultural and economic ties between the two countries for many centuries. The situation remained controversial from Japan's annexation of the Ryukyus in 1872 until Japan's victory over China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). At some point, Meiji Japan and Qing China entertained the idea to cede the Amami Islands in the north of the Ryukyus Archipelago to Japan, to leave Okinawa Island as an independent nation, and to grant sovereignty of Sakishima to China. Negotiation on this issue went as far as drafting a settlement. Even a date for signing the agreement had already been decided (31 October 1880), but the ratification was canceled in the last minute. It was once and for all refused as unacceptable from the Chinese side in December 1880. This settlement draft is known in Japanese as 'Additional clause to divide islands' (*Bunshimo sōyaku*), as it was meant to be added to revisions of the so-called Tientsin Treaty that defined Qing China's borders. During the entire time, from the annexation of the Ryukyus, to the dissolution of the kingdom, to the forced abdication and exile of its last King Shō Tai (1843-1901), to the deliberation of splitting the Ryukyus between Japan and China, the opinions of Ryukyusans were never consulted.

The Ryukyus became part of Japan in 1879, when Okinawa Prefecture was established, but it took many more years for modernity to arrive in Yonaguni. There were two reasons for the belated start of modernity there. Firstly, the Meiji government initially imposed a policy called 'Perseverance of Old Customs' (*Kyūkan onsen*). This policy reflected Japan's uncertainty to what extent the Ryukyus should become part of the Japanese state (and to what extent Ryukyusans could become Japanese). Secondly, all modernization efforts arrived in Yonaguni last, due to its geographical remoteness. The southern Ryukyus remained the least developed part of Okinawa Prefecture, which was itself the least developed prefecture of Japan. Yonaguni, in turn, was the least developed island of Sakishima.

In effect, the policy to 'preserve old customs' meant that the Ryukyus were part of the modern Japanese nation state, but that many institutions and practices of the feudal age still remained in place. The Ryukyus were unabashedly treated as a colony under this policy. The sole reason why they were not designated the status of 'colony' rested simply in the fact that no Japanese constitution existed yet. The Meiji constitution was only promulgated in 1889, and until then the idea of a Japanese state, territory, people, and identity remained flexible and ambiguous.

It was only after 1889 that territories that were brought under control of the Meiji state would be designated as 'colonies'. The Old customs at the time included issues like the absence of land privatization and, hand in hand with this, the poll tax continued to be collected in Yonaguni until 1903. In other words, Yonaguni Islanders lived a feudal life in modern Japan for three decades.

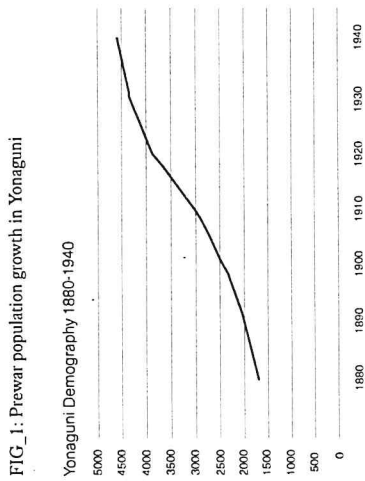
In the wake of modernization, several new institutions were set up, most notably compulsory school education and a commonly shared standard language. In Yonaguni, the first school was set up in 1885, 13 years after compulsory school education had started in Japan. School education was initially limited to four years, and teachers were by necessity recruited from outside the island. Yonaguni Islanders did not speak Japanese then. School played an important role in spreading Japanese in Yonaguni. Japanese language learning was also a key element in transforming the children of Yonaguni farmers into imperial subjects (*kōmin*). This transformation was the stated objective of school education in the Ryukyus back then. Until 1914, Yonaguni was administered by the neighboring Yaeyama Archipelago. In 1916, that is, 48 years after modernization had started in Japan, Yonaguni Islanders for the first time elected their own mayor.

Abolition of the poll tax, land reform, and its new status as a village did not mean the end of poverty in Yonaguni. There subsequently emerged social classes of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The former were often newcomers from the neighbouring Yaeyama Islands. While the local economy was still based on agriculture, Yonaguni society became divided as outside middlemen profited from their knowledge about trading and prices to the detriment of local farmers. During the pre-war years, there was a stark opposition and conflict between a wealthy fraction of society called *iyaginin* in Dunaan and the more destitute farmers and workers called *hishimuru*. The latter group pressed for improvements of living conditions and democratisation, while the former sought to maintain the status quo.

Modernity was thus not all about progress and improvement. Many hardships remained, and they were accompanied by natural calamities such as storms, floodings but also by diseases. Yonaguni went through a cholera outbreak in 1919 that left dozens of islander dead, and in the following year started a great famine that is collectively remembered as 'palm tree hell' (*gōtatsu jigōku*). Scarcity of food often forced inhabitants to eat the fruit of the cycad plant (*sasata*). Although widely available on the island, this fruit needs to be boiled for many hours to drench it from its deadly poison.

Modernity saw an increase of population on the island, already due to improved medical services and assistances. The pre-war

demography of Yonaguni can be broadly divided into two stages. There was first a population growth until 1925. It was followed by a more stagnant phase until 1945.



The lower population growth in the second phase was crucially alleviated by the arrival of some 150 migrants from Okinawa, mainly fishermen from the city of Itoman from 1919 onwards. This community then grew to about 500 people in the following years. Their immigration to Yonaguni was the result of a resettlement policy that had been promulgated by Okinawa Prefecture. The prefecture sought to move people from the overpopulated Okinawa Island to Sakishima. By and large, this policy failed as Okinawans preferred to migrate to the Japanese mainland (in particular to Kawasaki, Tokyo and Osaka) or the more affluent Okinawans chose to move abroad with South-America, Hawaii and the Philippines being popular destinations. The prevalence of malaria in Sakishima, the frequent occurrence of devastating typhons, and the history of the southern Ryukyus as a place of harsh exile, made these outlying islands look unattractive to most Okinawans. Nonetheless, for the case of Yonaguni, this policy resulted in the emergence and growth of an Okinawan community. This new community spoke a different Ryukyuan language, namely Uchinaaguchi (Okinawan). Consequently, there were now three languages spoken on this small island: Dunaan, Uchinaaguchi and Japanese. Japanese gradually became the lingua franca for communication between Yonaguni and Okinawa Islanders. Ikema Nae, who was born in 1919, shared the following memory in an interview with me in 2007:

I used to hear a lot of Okinawan around here in Sonai, but then they all moved to Kubura. Initially, they left from Nantahama beach to go fishing near Ishigaki and Tarawan, and they would sell their catch directly at the beach after their return. We used to speak in Japanese because you could otherwise not converse with them.

As Ikema mentioned, the Okinawan community gradually settled in Kubura, where a natural port could also be used on those windy days in winter when the northern wind pushed high waves onto the shores of Sonai village. Kubura had always been used as a temporary location to settle in winter, but it had by and large been abandoned when the first Okinawan migrants arrived in Yonaguni.

Almost at the same time as Yonaguni's belated modernity started, a second dramatic change occurred. Following Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Taiwan became part of a newly founded Japanese Empire, and Yonaguni turned into a satellite island of its big neighbor island. In many ways, Yonaguni was much closer connected to the colony of Taiwan than to the Japanese mainland. For example, Taiwanese banknotes (*Taiwan ginkōken*) were used in Yonaguni, and Yonaguni was also part of the Taiwanese time-zone (one hour behind Tokyo). Taipei was now the closest urban center of the entire southern Ryukyus, and close economic ties were formed. Some 90% of Yonaguni's trade was related to Taiwan during the days of the empire.

Yonaguni's status remained ambiguous during the days of the empire. While formally being part of the so-called inner circle (*naiichi*) of the empire, neither Japanese mainlanders nor Taiwanese colonial subjects regarded Yonaguni Islanders as bona fide Japanese. At the same time, Yonaguni was not part of the outer circle (*gaichi*) to which Taiwan clearly belonged. Fact is that there existed no simple dichotomy between colonizer and colonized. This becomes evident from the case of Yonaguni and its people, who found themselves sandwiched between the inner and the outer circles of the empire. Only mainland Japanese were regarded being genuinely Japanese (*niño kokumin*), Ryukyuan were regarded as second order (*sainō kokumin*) and Taiwanese as third order (*sainō kokumin*) nationals. In practice, this meant discriminatory behavior against Ryukyuan from Japanese mainlanders in the mainland but also in Taiwan. Yonaguni Islanders failed also to pass as Japanese *isot court* in the eyes of Taiwanese, who often spoke better Japanese and were better accustomed to modern Japanese life than the Yonaguni immigrants to Taiwan.

In the 50 years that Taiwan remained a Japanese colony, young and mostly unskilled Yonaguni migrants would move back and forth between Yonaguni and Taiwan. The main bulk of them would work for Japanese families in larger cities such as Taipei, Keelung or Hualien. These young migrants were pulled to Taiwan by work opportunities and the possibility to participate in modern urban life, and they were pushed out of Yonaguni by the lack of social mobility and by the dire poverty that had remained there. Note that the period of migration falls also into

the time of the palm tree hell famine that followed the world-wide collapse of the raw sugar price in the 1920s. Outmigration to Taiwan played a crucial role in flattening the curve of population growth in Yonaguni from the 1920s onward (see FIG_1).

Work opportunities in Taiwan were limited for Yonaguni Islanders. Women usually worked in the maid service (*shaochi jōkō*), with the nightlife entertainment industry being the sole other major occupation field that was open to them. 70% of all household maids employed in Taiwan were from Okinawa Prefecture, and this took to the effect that the ships operating between Okinawa Prefecture and Taiwan were called 'maid ships' (*shaochisen*) in popular language use. Men predominantly worked as day laborers, barbers, fishermen or factory workers. Migration was often spontaneous, temporary, quickly planned and mediated through personal networks. Mainland Japanese residing in Taiwan did not see Yonaguni Islanders as their compatriots, already because they had to first improve their rudimentary Japanese language skills. It usually took Yonaguni migrants two to three years to adapt to the Japanese language, customs, and lifestyle in Taiwan. Upon their return to Yonaguni, these migrants reported back about Japanese food, language, fashion, and the cinema. In so doing, they fanned a desire for others to try their fortune in Taiwan. Returnees were also proud of the clothes they wore, their proficiency in Japanese, and they were often the only ones in possession of money.

Taiwan was also the destination for some male islanders who sought to receive an advanced education, which could not be obtained in Yonaguni. Taiwan functioned as a social elevator for these education degree seekers, and some of these migrants later became central pillars of Yonaguni society. Ikema Eizō (1905-1971), for example, continued his school education first on Okinawa Island and then went on to study medicine in Taiwan. He afterwards returned to Yonaguni and practiced medicine there. Ikema was also an influential intellectual who wrote a history of Yonaguni and who gave lectures on democracy after the end of the war. Miyara Saku (born in 1927) is another such person. The Yonaguni native followed his family to Taiwan as a teenager, and he graduated from middle and high school there. By the time he had graduated, the war had ended. He was repatriated to the mainland and continued his education at Chūō University in Tokyo. He turned to politics after graduation. He was first active in national politics before being elected to the Okinawan Diet where he served two terms. Miyara is the author of several books on Yonaguni history, society and culture.

Both types of migrants – those working as helping hands and those pursuing an advanced education – contributed to the spread of Japanese in Yonaguni. Japanese was always used in

encounters between Taiwan and Yonaguni, and good knowledge of Japanese was crucial for securing an occupation in Taiwan, or to leave one employment in search of a better one there. Ikema Nae (born 1919), the author of a Dunan dictionary and the wife of Ikema Eizō, told me in 2007 that:

It appears to me as if everybody in Taiwan spoke Japanese then. Japanese was used a lot there. There were also constantly ships moving between Taiwan and Yonaguni, and it seems to me that the Japanese language came to Yonaguni on these ships.

The Second Sino-Japanese War started in 1937, and since Japanese advancements in China soon started to stall, a general mobilization campaign was launched in the following year. This implied for Yonaguni the start of what was called 'Imperial Subject Education' (*Kōminka kyōiku*) at school. It focussed on the history of the Emperor and on militaristic education that emphasized morality, loyalty and patriotism. Imperial Subject Education was accompanied by a highly orchestrated (Standard) Japanese Language Enforcement Campaign (*Hyōjungo seikō undō*) that oppressed and stigmatized the local language in order to spread Japanese more thoroughly.

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the Pacific War broke out, and its effects were immediately felt in Yonaguni. In the same year, a military observation post started being built on Mt. Urabu, with 146 meters the highest elevation of the island. Also, a total of 20 soldiers were deployed on the island, three of whom were from Yonaguni. School children had to carry one brick per day up to Mt. Urabu to build a shelter. Yonaguni Islander Ukemasa Hideo (born in 1921) was stationed there and connected by telegraph wire with the post office in Sonai. In 1943, Ōmasu Matsuchi, a native from Yonaguni Island, was killed in combat in Guadalcanal Island, and he received posthumously, and as the first Okinawan ever, the highest military decoration. This led to a veritable Ōmasu-Boom in Yonaguni, and young people were encouraged to follow what was then called the 'Ōmasu spirit' (*Ōmasu seishin*).

From October 1944 onwards, the Allied Forces were in striking range of the Japanese Archipelago. Yonaguni was first bombed on 13 October 1944, and the Bonito factory next to the port of Kubura was destroyed in this attack. Allied Forces had mistakenly taken it for an arms factory. Some 30 islanders died in this air raid. A second bombing raid followed on 31 December 1944. Fearful of further attacks, many islanders hid in natural caves for several weeks afterwards.

BORDER ISLAND

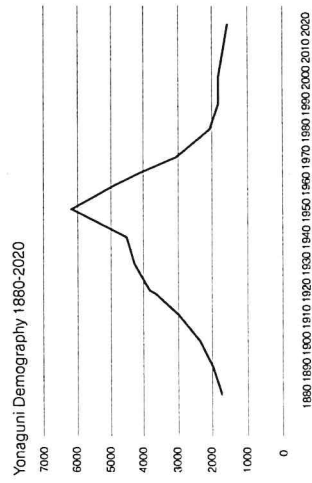
When the Pacific War ended in August 1945, there were about 30,000 Okinawans residing in Taiwan who needed to be repatriated. Some of these went to Yonaguni, causing a sharp increase of the island population. Yonaguni was an easy solution to the impasse of moving Okinawans out of Taiwan as the trip from the former colony to Yonaguni could be privately organized. Due to its vicinity and a lack of control, Yonaguni remained for several years closely connected to Taiwan. The first post-war years are vividly remembered in Yonaguni as the 'boom period' (*keiki jidai*). Outside Yonaguni, this period tends to be referred to as the 'smuggling period' (*mitsubōeki jidai*), as daily necessities from Taiwan were secretly shipped to Yonaguni and traded at a burgeoning black-market in Kubura.

Driven by internationally operating smuggling rings, the informal economic ties between Yonaguni and Taiwan helped to compensate for the lack of food and everyday products in post-war Japan. At the heyday of the black-market, as many as 80 vessels a day brought merchandise to Kubura. It would then be transported from there to Okinawa Island or to Hong Kong. Yonaguni became an international trading hotspot for rice, brown sugar, flour, cigarettes, and toiletries. Although many of the newcomers to Yonaguni who sought to make their fortune there never officially registered, and therefore do not show up in official demographic data, it is said that the population peaked at 20,000 people at one point. As a consequence, a lively nightlife scene emerged. People report that there were more than 100 bars in Kubura then. In 1947 a Miss Yonaguni competition was organized, and a perm boom is also vividly remembered from these days. A cinema called Port Theatre (*Minato gekijo*) was set up in Kubura. Islanders who experienced this boomtime report that films, trends, fads and entertainment closely reflected the experiences and knowledge that Yonaguni migrants had made during their sojourn in Taiwan.

Smuggling was tolerated by the Allied Forces until 1952. However, when patrol boats from the Chinese Communist Army started controlling the Taiwan Strait, Allied Forces enforced an end to smuggling and the black-market. Arrests were made, and the vessels operating between Taiwan and Yonaguni disappeared from one day to the other, and with them thousands of adventurers who had temporarily settled on the island. The boom came to a screeching halt, and Yonaguni's golden years ended as suddenly as they had started. While all those who experienced these years have fond memory of that time, they also tend to be embarrassed about Yonaguni having been the major nexus of international smuggling networks. 'Smuggling' (*mitsubōeki*) remains some sort of taboo word until today, and the preferred keyword to talk about this period is 'boomtime period' (*keiki jidai*).

It was only after the end of the post-war boom, that closer economic ties between Yonaguni and other Ryukyuan Islands developed. With increased logistics and contact, farming started to focus on sugar cane as a cash crop, and trade with other islands started to play a bigger economic role. Demographically, Yonaguni started to enter a phase of long and continuous decline, a trend that has not been stopped until today. Yonaguni has today less inhabitants than it had at the start of the modern period.

FIG. 2: Yonaguni Demography 1880-2020



Population decline should not obscure the fact that the 1950s and 60s saw a dramatic improvement of everyday life in Yonaguni. In 1953, a first community center (*kōminkan*) was set up. Amongst other things, adult education was organized there. Radio broadcast started in the same year. In 1960, waterworks supply was completed. Malaria was eradicated once and for all in 1961. The Yonaguni airfield offering services to the neighboring Ishigaki Island was completed in 1965. The farming economy was modernized, and the Yonaguni Sugar Manufacture was inaugurated in 1967. Given the demographic decline, shortage of labor was felt already back then, and some 50 laborers from Taiwan had to be recruited to work in the sugar cane industry. In 1967, electrification of the entire island was completed, and 14 hours of electricity services were provided. TV broadcast also started in 1967 but remained restricted to one Okinawan channel. Last but not least, the modernization of Kubura Port was completed in this year, and Yonaguni could now also be accessed by larger ships.

Allied occupation in Yonaguni continued until 1972, and this meant that the entire Ryukyū Archipelago was cut off and left out from Japan's post-war economic miracle. It remained poor and underdeveloped. Following the post-war educational reforms and the popularization of secondary education, a middle school had been established in Yonaguni in 1949. While the possibility of setting up a high school was discussed for several years, this

project was never realized. This proved fatal as the lack of high school education became the main motive for the continued emigration of young people, often in company of their entire family. Predominantly older inhabitants remained on the island, and this led to a process of social ageing. The average age of residents rose, and along with this the average, the fertility rate of the population sank. Population decline started to reinforce itself.

Modernization efforts of everyday life continued after reunification with Japan in 1972. Japanese public TV program (NHK) could be received from 1976 onwards, and the island was connected to the telephone network via sea cable in 1977. In 1981, Sonai Port was opened and to the following year a city partnership with Hualien in Taiwan was established. Regular exchange and direct charter flights between Yonaguni and Hualien started. In the meantime, the arrival of some 100 Vietnamese boatpeople in 1977 and 1978 served as a reminder of Yonaguni's geographic position between continental Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Japanese Archipelago.

From the early 1960s onwards, the Dunan language became endangered. According to the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Language in Danger of Extinction*, it is considered 'severely endangered' today, and it set for extinction by the mid-century. A language becomes endangered when it is no longer naturally transmitted to children in the family and when it cannot be learned as a second language in school either. In Yonaguni, natural intergenerational language transmission was interrupted at the end of the 1950s. Everyone being born in the 1960s and 70s is usually passively bilingual. This generation is able to understand Dunan but cannot freely converse in it. People born in these years were actively discouraged from speaking Dunan and many never tried. Yet, the frequent exposure to Dunan by listening to the conversations of older generations resulted in acquiring passive knowledge. Those born from the 1980s onwards are usually monolingual Japanese speakers as they are the children of the passive bilingual generation. All speakers of Dunan are Japanese-dominant bilingual. Just like language itself, bilingualism is a dynamic concept. Not even the most proficient speakers of Dunan are today capable of using the language in all situations. Ikema Nae, one of the best remaining speakers, often told me "I am too young to know this" when I was tapping on her knowledge of the Dunan language. Ikema Nae was born in 1919. She regretfully acknowledged that her grandparents, who had been born in the Ryukyū kingdom, spoke a Dunan that was richer in vocabulary and more nuanced in its use than her own language.

There are attempts to revitalize the Dunan language, but this is a difficult endeavor. For one, it means that older speaker should be encouraged to speak the language as often as possible. When I suggested this to Ikema Nae, she answered me "How can you

speaking if speakers are vanishing? What do you do then?" and she then continued "I am worried. Only people from my generation speak our language." At the point of writing this article, Ikema Nae is 101 years old, and transmitting the language to new generations becomes increasingly difficult as the remaining speakers are less knowledgeable, and already for this reason do not feel competent enough to engage in revitalization efforts. At the present, the so-called Integrated Study Hour, a school subject where teachers are free to select a study topic, sometimes includes the study of Yonaguni folk songs (*minya*). These songs have Dunan lyrics and address the geography, events and life on Yonaguni. There have also been attempts to create children playgroups involving elderly who use Dunan, but it is difficult to maintain these meetings regularly. All the while, every funeral in Yonaguni marks the passing of yet another Dunan speaker. It seems that keeping the language in use is an uphill battle at this point.

YONAGUNI HENCEFORTH

On the occasion of celebrating 50 years of Yonaguni Town in 1997, inhabitants were asked how they imagined life in 50 years' time, that is, in 2047. Many were concerned, but there were also expressions of optimism. One person stated, for instance, that Yonaguni could become an important node in an international trade network between Okinawa Prefecture and Taiwan, just as it once had been. Others believe that technological change would facilitate life on Yonaguni in 50 years, and they hoped that population numbers would rise again. In the immediate present, it is however difficult to predict whether Yonaguni will survive as a community in the long run.

The continued demographic decline at a time when the Japanese government seeks to slim down public administration, state services and responsibilities, casted the question of whether Yonaguni could remain an independent town in the new millennium. A possible administrative merger with the neighboring Yaeyama Islands was deliberated, but the issue was settled by a referendum in October 2004. Yonaguni's long history as an island with a distinctive history, culture and language was used as a central argument. Yet, the question how Yonaguni as an independent municipality could be revitalized remained.

Two ideas emerged how to do this. On the one hand, there was the idea of Yonaguni as a place where green and slow life should be fostered, and where IT could help bridge the difficulties of living in such a remote place. The second plan was the militarization of the island, as Yonaguni sits directly on the Taiwan Strait, a hotspot of international military tensions. In 2005, Hokama Shukichi was elected as new mayor of Yonaguni Town, and he subsequently turned into the main proponent for the militaristic option (even

though he had been campaigning on a slow life vision platform). After years of controversy that divided Yonaguni into a military pro- and anti-faction, it was decided that a base of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces should be built, and that this base would bring new residents to Yonaguni and help revitalize its economy.

Let us also briefly consider a plan that was published in 2005 and titled "Vision of Autonomy". It emerged directly as a reaction to the sense of crisis that had taken hold in Yonaguni at the turn of the new millennium. This initiative envisioned that the people of Yonaguni could stir a new course in the twenty-first century by retaining, protecting and promoting their specific culture, by enhanced use of media and communications networks, by building an international society through good relations with Taiwan and other Asian countries and by establishing a free trade zone. Establishing Yonaguni as a brand was another central idea of this plan. Main products to be associated with the Yonaguni brand came from fields of natural medicine, healthy food, healing (*iyashi*), longevity and green tourism. The vision explicitly included the objective of reviving local culture, and while the Dunan language was not explicitly mentioned, the introduction of Chinese language education in Yonaguni was deliberated.

15 years after the publication of the plan, not much of these visions have been realized. Yonaguni has now a military base, and the presence of military personnel has for the time being halted the demographic decline. There are currently 160 Self-Defense Force servicemen stationed in Yonaguni, and many of them are accompanied by their families. The number of children in Yonaguni has also been growing due to the presence of these families. In 2020, these amounted to 39 children in Kindergarten, 137 in elementary school, and 48 in middle school (Muramatsu 2020, personal communication).

All the while, the number of native Yonaguni Islanders (*dunanthi*) living in Yonaguni continues to decline. The vast majority of young Yonaguni Islanders do not return to Yonaguni once they leave for high school education outside the island. Those who want to return have difficulties in finding employment there. Modern life and cultural heritage turn out to be hard to reconcile in real life. In order to turn around the trend of continuous demographic decline, living conditions need to be improved in Yonaguni. At the moment, the difficulties of living in this remote island appear to outweigh the benefits of a quiet life on a beautiful island that once constituted an entire world of its own.

FURTHER READING

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