

The Debate over Language Education in Pre-war Okinawa

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Introduction

Okinawa has been in the news again lately. The rape of a schoolgirl by American servicemen stationed on Okinawa island and the defiant response of the prefectural governor, Ōta Masahide, have alerted Japanese to the special problems of the island-prefecture on the southern periphery of their country. The Japanese press is awash with stories of Okinawa's economic backwardness, cultural difference and semi-colonial subservience to the United States. On a wider front, the chaotic situation spawned by the fall of communism in eastern Europe on the one hand and the eruption of ancient tribal rivalries in Africa on the other, remind us that it is extremely difficult to strike a harmonious balance between regional interests and national cohesion. The tension between assimilationist policies of central governments and the desire of people to preserve their own regional identity has been one of the most pervasive forces in politics internationally over the last two decades of the twentieth century. Time will tell whether we are witnessing the final throes of tribal independence before the inevitable globalisation of the new information age, or the ushering in of a more tolerant period of mutual respect for diversity and cultural independence. In Australia policies advocating the assimilation of migrants and aborigines to mainstream Anglo-Celtic culture have been largely discredited, giving way to multi-culturalism and the fostering of diversity. Within Japan too, particularly in the current economic downturn, there has

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been considerable reappraisal of the value of regional traditions and criticism of the excessively centralist nature of Japanese government and culture. The desire for recognition of regional difference is evident in the revived interest in Ainu language and culture in Hokkaido. We can also see it in the readiness of modern Japanese popular musicians and composers to introduce traditional Okinawan rhythms into their repertoire. The debate over the relative merits of tradition and progress still rages as one of the major issues in Japan as it approaches the next millennium. It is surprising, however, that the most vehement and public controversy over this question in Japan occurred in 1940 at a time of strict wartime controls on speech and freedom of the press. I refer to the so-called 'dialect debate' (*hōgen ronsō*) in which Yanagi Muneyoshi, founder of the Folk Art Association (*Mingei Kyōkai*), clashed with prefectural authorities over the question of standard language education in Okinawa.

In the following account I have tried to allow the protagonists to speak for themselves, relying on the reports given in the pages of *Gekkan Mingei* (*Folk Art Monthly*), the journal of Yanagi's association.

Yanagi Muneyoshi (often known as Sōetsu) founded the Mingei Kyōkai (Folk Art Association) in 1934 to promote traditional arts and crafts, which he felt were necessary to assure the survival of Japan's identity in the face of increased westernisation, mechanisation and mass production. The Folk Art Association had grown out of Yanagi's membership of the humanist literary group Shirakaba, centred on a small group of minor aristocrats including Arishima Takeo, Shiga Naoya, Mushanokōji Saneatsu and the English potter Bernard Leach. It saw in the naive crafts of unnamed artisans both the embodiment of the human spirit and an aesthetic of the highest order. While he espoused a universal humanist philosophy and advocated the return to a simpler, less materialistic existence based on cooperation and mutual respect, Yanagi was, nevertheless, a nationalist seeking to forge a Japanese identity from the diversity of regional cultures he found within the Japanese empire. Yanagi's nationalism appealed to the Japanese political leadership, but he had frequently clashed with authorities over his criticism of Japanese excesses in Korea. He had been a tireless campaigner for the need to recognise the contribution of Korean art and culture. For a time at

least, he succeeded in saving the Kwang Hwa Mun gate in Seoul which had been earmarked for demolition to make way for the construction of the colonial administration headquarters.¹ Yanagi had been a strong critic of the prevailing assimilationist policies of the central government. He also believed that modernisation had robbed major Japanese cities like Tokyo and Osaka of their traditional culture and humanity as their populations were becoming enslaved to machine production. The purpose of this trip to Okinawa was to alert the inhabitants of Japan's urban centre to the dangers they were facing and to make them aware of the richness and diversity of Okinawan culture. Ironically, the visit brought Yanagi into direct confrontation with the very people whose cause he sought to foster and kindled a debate over the relative merits of conservation and progress which continues to reverberate in Japan over half a century later.

The Symposium

The events leading up to the great dialect debate, or perhaps more accurately, the great standard language debate, are summarised in the March 1940 edition of the association's magazine, *Gekkan Mingei* (*Folk Art Monthly*). The Folk Art Association group had been met on its arrival at the wharf in Naha on 3 January, ushered into waiting cars and taken on a tour of the attractions of Okinawa.²

There were twenty-six members in the touring party, but only nine were actually members of the Mingei Kyōkai. The leader of the group was, of course, Yanagi Muneyoshi himself, curator of the folk art museum in Komaba, Tokyo. Practising craftsmen included the celebrated potter Hamada Shōji, the woodblock print-maker Munakata Shikō and the lacquerware craftsman Suzuki Shigeo. There were a further two potters who had come to see the famous *tsuboya* kilns in Naha, a Buddhist priest, Asano Chōryō, the medical doctor and critic Shikiba Ryūzaburō and Tanaka Toshio, editor of the association's journal, *Gekkan Mingei* (hereafter simply, *Mingei*). The other seventeen people in Yanagi's party were drawn from the tourist industry, art galleries, the media and the general public. The media contingent alone was made up of three photographers and two cinematographers. The strong commercial representation

seems to indicate that this trip was to be a major promotion of Okinawa as a tourist destination and source of folk art for the expensive galleries of Tokyo and Osaka. There is little wonder that many in Okinawa felt that the mission was not merely a study-tour by a small group of eccentrics interested in Okinawan crafts. In this context the over-reaction of the prefectural authorities, as we shall see shortly, becomes easier to explain.

Here is how Yanagi Muneyoshi reported the incident in the March, 1940 issue of the journal *Mingei*, though it is clear that the account draws heavily on the notes taken by the doctor and critic Shikiba Takasaburō. It can also be seen that the discussion ranged widely over a number of issues and that the debate over standard language education was kindled by remarks made by representatives of the tourist industry in Yanagi's party.³

We welcomed in the New Year of 1940 (Shōwa 15) somewhere off the Tosa coast and finally, after much eager anticipation, came alongside the wharf at Naha at noon on the 3rd January.... Then, on the afternoon of the 7th January, after experiencing in this way something of the scenery, architecture, crafts, theatre, music, cuisine and customs of Okinawa, we attended a symposium, primarily on the subject of tourism, which had been arranged by our Ryukyuan hosts. Here, a casual remark in the course of the discussion regarding the current problem of standard Japanese in Okinawa led to an unexpected conflict in opinion between the members of our party and the Educational Affairs Division of the Okinawan Prefectural Government. It is very fortunate that Dr Shikiba Takasaburō was present at the meeting to make the following detailed written record through which I now continue my account:-

The symposium, organised by the Okinawa Kankō Kyōkai (Okinawan Tourist Association) and the Kyōdo Kyōkai (Association for Local Culture), opened in the Naha City Public Hall at 3:30 pm. on the 7th January, 1940. It was a lively meeting attended by many people from various walks of life. From our group Yanagi, Hamada, Shikiba, Minazawa, Inoue, Asano, Sasakura, Hota, Suzuki (Sōhei), Funaki, Hama, Suzuki (Kunji), Tanaka, Aiba etc. were present and the Okinawan side included Shimabukuro, director of the library, Shikiya, middle-school principal, Yamauchi, Head of the Police Department, Maekawa, local manager of the shipping line, Umetsu, head of the commerce section and Matayoshi, president of the *Ryūkyū Shinpō* newspaper.

First Mr Shikiya, who was president of the Association for Local

Culture made the opening address then asked us to give our opinions. When Mr Shimabukuro, who had been appointed chairman for the meeting, called upon Mr Yanagi to speak, he stood up and told us of the deep ties which had brought him back on his third visit to Okinawa. After giving an outline of the work of the members of the Folk Arts Association he moved on to tourism, the main topic of the day and spoke warmly of the need for more positive activity in this sphere and how he would like to see this wonderful area made available for the world to enjoy....

Next Mr Minazawa of the International Travel Bureau stood up and gave his impressions. He took out a memo-pad and spoke using some notes he had prepared. As a member of the Travel Bureau visiting Okinawa he said there were three points he wished to make. They could be broken down, he explained, into the broad categories of development, preservation and prohibition. He said there was a need to construct many more paved roads for cars. The lack of hotels was also inconvenient. It was particularly unfortunate, he continued, that in such a picturesque town as Shuri there was not a single lodging house. The construction of hotels in Naha and Shuri would be enthusiastically welcomed by tourists. He also said that there were countless things which should be preserved. He went on, "I was surprised to discover such an abundance of lovely sights and scenery, not least the architecture which sparkles in its traditional beauty. Now, I believe, is the time to make a real effort to preserve these things. Posters for the promotion of standard language are stuck up everywhere. Slogans such as *itsumo hakihaki hyōjungo* (always clearly in standard Japanese) and *ikka sorotte hyōjungo* (all the family using standard Japanese) struck us as very strange. The movement for the popularization of the standard language is all very well, but one wonders whether perhaps it has not gone a little too far. In regard to things I would like to see prohibited, I would list the concrete fence around Shuri castle and the *torii* gate at Manzamō..."⁴

I suggested that pamphlets on Okinawa be produced for distribution to all agencies of the Japan Tourist Bureau and that they also be placed in all cabins of ships of the Osaka Shōsen Line. Then having expressed my surprise and delight at the beauty of Okinawan graves I voiced my opposition to the widely held view that they should be destroyed. While perhaps it might be appropriate to prohibit the building of new graves from now on, it would cause great injury to the spiritual lives of the Okinawan people to remove existing graves. I feel this could become a serious social problem unless it is treated with sufficient caution. The

same is true of promotion of the standard language. It is by no means an easy task to wipe out a language which has permeated the land over such a long period of time. Rather, particularly in the case of the archaic Okinawan dialects which are the most beautiful in Japan, we should be striving to preserve them. I said, while it goes without saying that there is a need for the dissemination of standard Japanese, I could not agree with any movement which sought to achieve this by scorning the local language or seeking to abolish it.

Then Mr Hamada, citing concrete examples in his desire to gain the support of the Travel Bureau, complained that the unsightly electricity pole in front of the gate of the Sōgenji Temple which he had requested to be moved when he last visited Okinawa, was in fact still there, and how much the modern automobile garage at the entrance to Shuri detracted from the beauty of the surroundings. A man from the electricity company spoke in defence against this charge. He explained that in this period of restrictions it would be very difficult to meet Mr Hamada's request and that technically, too, it was no easy matter to move the pole. That was all very well, but when he added comments along the lines of, "I don't recall last time saying that I would move the pole immediately" or "I find it offensive to be spoken to in such a peremptory fashion", I began to feel offended myself. I discovered later that there were other considerations at stake here which made it difficult to comply with our feelings, though our concern was only for the dignity and beauty of Sōgenji Temple. When Mr Hamada said he would be prepared to donate a pole, he was told, "it is not just a question of the electricity pole" and when someone on the Okinawan side asked whether it could not be replaced by an underground cable his question was ignored.

At this point Mr Yamauchi, Head of the Police Department, prefacing his remarks with a statement that he would like to respond to our views from the standpoint of one representing the prefecture, continued along the following lines:-

"The standard language movement is a major policy initiative of the prefecture and we intend to pursue it more thoroughly. Special conditions prevailing in Okinawa make the situation here different from the case of dialects in other prefectures. The dissemination of the standard language is a matter of immediate and vital concern even for prefectural administration. It is intolerable to have tourists who find fleeting enjoyment in hearing the local dialects tell us that we must preserve them. We would like you to cooperate with the prefectural policy. On the question of graves too, we must stamp out this custom

which requires such large-scale expenditure. Improvements are also necessary on the grounds of public health and there must be some regulation of the present proliferation of graves in the light of the housing problem due to the scarcity of land in Okinawa.”

He concluded by reiterating the point that, quite apart from questions of interest and cultural significance, the prefecture had decided on a thorough program of standard language education which made it impossible to accept our opinions as they stood.

Mr Yanagi stood up and said that the promotion of the standard language was giving the local people a feeling of inferiority and was causing more harm than good. The Okinawans speak the modern language admirably well. “Isn’t it a fact”, he said, “that they speak it far better than the people of northern Honshū. We also acknowledge the necessity for standard Japanese. But we are opposed to the attitude which denies the deep significance of Okinawan by sweeping it aside under the label of dialect. If the prefecture insists on pursuing its policy relentlessly we are equally determined to work towards the affirmation of our view. I am unhappy that we are being considered temporary tourists and with the suggestion that we are making these claims for our own interest or entertainment. We have the benefit of longer experience, knowledge and reflection. This assertion is not a thought which came to mind on the spur of a moment.” He sharply refuted the opposing argument and held that his claim was founded on a proper basis. Then, with the aid of actual examples and outstanding rational argument he demonstrated how the prefectural policy had been excessive.

Mr Yamauchi stood up again. He spoke of the special conditions in Okinawa, how the meaning of standard language here was quite different from other prefectures and that it was absolutely imperative to have a policy of thorough promotion. Unprepared to yield any ground at all he declared that to achieve the desired aims one had to adopt a slightly excessive attitude.

In this vein there were several more exchanges between Mr Yamauchi and Mr Yanagi. The atmosphere of the seminar became tense when Mr Aiba and some of the others from our side expressed opinions in support of Mr Yanagi. At one stage an Okinawan gentleman stood up and voiced his support for Mr Yanagi’s view only to be rebuked by Mr Yamauchi with the words, “what are *you* doing saying that kind of thing!”, but he continued his speech without flinching....

[T]he debate over standard language continued with neither side

giving an inch although it was getting dark outside. At this point the Chairman asked Mr Hamada to change the topic, so there was an exchange of criticism and opinion covering a wide range of concrete topics. Finally Mr Hamada concluded with these words of conviction, "The debate will soon be resolved and the outcome is clear. You just wait and see!" By now the sun had set and it was difficult to make out the faces of those present. So, Mr Shikiya stood up and, in closing, acknowledged the deep significance of today's meeting. He said that even the differences of opinion had arisen on both sides through a love of Okinawa and that he hoped that the question would be thoroughly studied so that the best course could be chosen for the future of the prefecture.'

The reaction

On the following morning, 8 January, the seminar was featured on the front pages of the three major local newspapers, the *Ryūkyū Shinpō*, the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* and the *Okinawa Nippō*. The issue of standard language education was discussed almost to the exclusion of any mention of tourism which had been the main topic of the seminar. The enormous interest this issue generated was no doubt an indication of the effect the prefecture's campaign was having on the local population.

On 10 January the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* carried a letter from a certain Yoshida Tsugunobu criticising Yanagi and his group for their condescending attitude which, he said, sought to make Okinawa a 'pet prefecture' (*aigan-ken*). Yoshida claimed that the Mingei Kyōkai's interest in Okinawa was akin to what one might feel for a 'pet dog' or 'an ornamental plant' and that the members of the association resented any change which might impinge on their self-indulgent curiosity.⁵ Although Yoshida's letter made no mention of the fact, Yanagi was able to discover later that Yoshida was an Okinawan-born (significant at a time when many bureaucrats were from outside the prefecture) official in the Department of Educational Affairs. This was the department which was responsible for the carriage of the official standard language campaign and the same department which took the unusual step of placing the following formal statement in each of the three local newspapers on 11 January:

As we welcome in this very significant 2,600th year of imperial rule, we must seek to serve in this historical, sacred work, by resolutely carrying out innovations and improvements in all aspects of the lives of the people in a truly cooperative spirit embracing the entire prefecture. Our current standard language promotion program is just beginning to produce excellent results and is on the verge of becoming a great prefecture-wide popular movement. However, as there has been some unjust criticism which appears to have confused some people I would like to say a few words about the background to this movement.

At a time when the movement for the spread of the standard language has taken off and is finally beginning to show signs of producing both practical and psychological results, there has been some publicity given to views which might hinder the progress of this movement. In this regard I hasten to add that almost all such opinions have been either the exaggerated statements of outsiders or they have been based on false logic and are not worthy of our attention, but recently it seems that a certain influential expert on folk art has been making statements from his own peculiar point of view to the effect that the promotion of standard Japanese has gone too far, or that one should have reservations about promoting the standard language if one wishes to preserve traditional beauty and cultural characteristics or to determine what should be the standard Japanese of the future. However, these views should not be adopted by anyone who desires progress and development for this prefecture.

Now when the prefecture-wide standard language promotion movement is finally gathering momentum and is producing results, it is hoped that, despite any peripheral interference and extraneous criticism, the sights of all involved remain firmly on the task at hand and, by affirming the fundamental essence of this movement, as the prefectural government we are determined to do all that we can to spur ourselves on in order to achieve our initial objectives in this great spiritual movement encompassing the entire prefecture in the 2,600th year of the Imperial reign. We hereby request that all people of the prefecture maintain a correct awareness of the situation and give us their absolute cooperation.

It is difficult to understand why the Prefectural authorities reacted so strongly to the original press coverage of the incident. Yanagi himself seems to have been astonished by the government response. Could it perhaps have been that the central authorities felt uneasy about the degree of Okinawan support for the war against

China and that they were acting quickly to stem any sign of resistance?

Whatever the intention of the government's action, the letter merely drew more public comment on the problem of standard language education and elicited a response from Yanagi which prolonged the debate in the Okinawan press.

Most of the editorial comment and letters from readers which appeared alongside the Department of Educational Affairs' statement on 11 January were critical of Yanagi's views. Only the *Ryūkyū Shinpō* carried an editorial column which argued strongly for the need to foster local dialects and traditions. In contrast, the editorial in the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* echoed the militaristic mood of the times:

There should be no need to explain again the reasons behind the prefecture-wide standard language promotion movement currently under way in Okinawa, but, in a word, the spread of the standard language has as its objectives the clarification of the fundamental concept of the national polity (*kokutai no meichō*) and the raising of consciousness of the father land (*sokoku ishiki no kōyō*).

Yanagi, feeling that the official government statement had attacked his personal integrity, countered with the publication of his open letter, 'In Reply to the Department of Educational Affairs', in the three Naha dailies on 14 January. He began,

The debate over the question of the standard language which is currently being pursued in the pages of the three newspapers has been an unexpected bonus for us, giving this trip to Okinawa added significance.

He went on to point out that he had never questioned the need for Okinawans to speak, read and write standard Japanese, but that he feared the excessive implementation of government policy would lead to a denigration of local dialects and a weakening of Okinawan traditions. He also expounded the view that standard Japanese was not yet fully established and that the language of the centre suffered the burden of extraneous loan words from English and other western languages. Extending to language his metaphor of folk crafts embodying the nobility of the human spirit, Yanagi claimed the Okinawan dialects, 'the most beautiful in Japan', could enrich the

standard language of the future by furnishing it with 'pure native Japanese words'.⁶

Yanagi's open letter seems to have had a very positive effect on many readers. A letter to the editor printed in the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* on 16 January warned that many school teachers were beginning to take heed of Yanagi's views and that this was having an adverse effect on the standard language promotion movement. The writer of the letter suggested that a conference of the Department of Educational Affairs and primary and middle school principals and teachers be called at once to clarify the prefectural government's position on the teaching of standard Japanese.⁷

The same edition of the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* also carried a rejoinder to Yanagi's letter from Yoshida Tsugunobu, who this time clearly acknowledged his connections with the prefectural government. In contrast to the emotional personal attack against Yanagi which characterised his earlier correspondence, Yoshida spelled out the disadvantages faced by Okinawans who did not have an adequate command of standard Japanese:

It is impossible to estimate how much the people of Okinawa are disadvantaged both materially and spiritually, and consequently just how much their prosperity is being hampered, through their inability to speak standard Japanese adequately. This fact along with other differences in life style have plunged the Okinawans into a state of abject misery. Aren't these people aware that in the south seas Okinawans are called 'Japanese kanakas' and that in places like Osaka and Taiwan they are being subjected to the misery of discrimination?

A counter view detailing the excesses of the standard language promotion movement was serialised in an article entitled, 'On dialect and standard language' (*Hōgen to hyōjungo ni tsuite*) over 19 and 20 January in the *Okinawa Nippō*. Signed simply K. I., the article criticised the inhumanity of the dialect card (*hōgen fuda*) system of punishing students who lapsed into dialect at school.

We have a good description of the dialect-card system and a glimpse of the ingenuity of children of the time in the following reminiscence of the late Nakasone Seizen, perhaps Okinawa's most influential and certainly most-loved dialect scholar, as he recalls his own experience as a schoolboy in Nakijin in the north of the main island of Okinawa.

From my early primary school days I kept up my own little resistance to attempts to get rid of the local dialect. The school I attended, the Kanetsugu primary school in Nakijin, also had the dialect card (*hōgen fuda*) system. Anyone using dialect would be given a dialect card. If you got one of these cards you would spend the school recess periods desperately running around trying to find someone using dialect. I still cannot forget that sense of embarrassment and humiliation when, like some little private detective, with the dialect card tucked inside my shirt I would have to tag along behind my schoolmates as they played happily in the playground. There was nothing I hated more. And every day, there in the bright expanse of green lawn in what should have been our happy play time, we worried that someone might be lurking close by waiting to catch us out. We found the situation so unbearable that when we were in sixth class some of us came up with a plan. This was because we frequently found we were unable to express certain ideas in standard Japanese. At first there was nothing particularly devious about it, but we would simply preface our remarks with the standard Japanese phrase, 'in dialect we say ...' then go on to say whatever we needed to in dialect and finally finish off with 'like that' at the end of our dialect speech.⁸ This became our secret plan and it was entirely legal. As long as we followed this formula we had nothing to worry about because we could logically defend our use of dialect. This stratagem made it possible for us to speak dialect for ten or fifteen minutes on end and gave us a moment's respite from the gloom of the playground.⁹

The dialect card theme was taken up in a report which appeared in the *Okinawa Asahi Shinbun* on 29 January. Apparently in the first Ōzato primary school in Shimajiri county, which regarded itself as a model in the promotion of standard Japanese, a survey of the 1,500 children was carried out to discover if the short vacation over the New Year had weakened the resolve of any of the pupils to speak only standard Japanese. Four children who had been secretly reported by their classmates for using dialect on the way to school were chastised and humiliated by the teacher with responsibility for enforcement of the standard language policy and made to write a letter promising that they would not speak dialect again. The report noted that after these initial punishments, there was no longer any need for written apologies.¹⁰

The controversy continued in the pages of the three local

dailies in Okinawa until the end of April. Gradually the number of letters from readers decreased and it seemed as if the issue would peter out naturally, but the debate was rekindled with renewed vigour when the Tokyo edition of the *Asahi Shinbun* published an article by the critic Sugiyama Heisuke to the effect that the prefectural authorities had been entirely correct in their attempts to suppress local dialects and in the methods they had adopted to promote standard language education. He made the point that much of the discrimination and feelings of inferiority which Okinawans faced could be attributed to the fact that they 'speak Japanese with a Chinese accent'.

Yanagi in turn wrote a letter to the same newspaper refuting the position taken by Sugiyama and criticising the dialect card sanction. He clearly stated his conviction that the inferiority complex to which Sugiyama had alluded could never be eliminated with punitive measures like the dialect card system. He wrote,

First, should we not ensure that the Okinawans have a true appreciation of the value of their own culture and provide them with the spiritual awareness that their culture clearly falls within the lineage of Japanese culture? We certainly cannot agree with the attitude displayed in the policy of Okinawa prefecture which completely denies this local culture.

In the July issue of the magazine *Shinchō*, Sugiyama reiterated his view that the Okinawan prefectural authorities were correct in their policy of seeking to suppress the local dialects in order to ensure a thorough dissemination of standard Japanese.

At this point the Okinawan Department of Educational Affairs rejoined the battle with a second official statement—this time appearing not only in the three local papers, but also in the regional editions of the *Ōsaka Mainichi Shinbun* and the *Ōsaka Asahi Shinbun*. The second statement, couched in the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of mobilisation for the war effort against China, launched into a direct personal attack against Yanagi himself. After several unsuccessful attempts to secure an apology from the head of the Department of Educational Affairs, Yanagi sought and obtained a meeting with the Governor of Okinawa Prefecture, Fuchigami Fusatarō. In the frank, hour-long interview which took place in Naha on 2 August, 1940, not only did Yanagi fail to get the apology he wanted, but it also

became clear that Fuchigami himself had ordered the Department of Educational Affairs not to engage in further debate with Yanagi. It also emerged that the prefecture was determined to pursue its policy of promotion of standard language education and that the ultimate goal of government policy was to get rid of local dialects altogether.

The debate which had begun in the pages of the three daily newspapers in Naha spread to the major papers in Tokyo and Osaka and continued for most of 1940. The Folk Art Association itself had been partly responsible for keeping the issue alive through its coverage of the debate in its journal *Mingei*. In addition to the March 1940 issue which was devoted to language education in Okinawa, the numbers for April, August and November-December also covered the debate in detail. For the combined November-December special issue on Ryūkyūan crafts, Tanaka Toshio compiled a scholarly paper on the present state of standard language education in Okinawa based on official prefectural sources and on documented evidence of teachers engaged in the implementation of the policy. As late as April, 1946, *Mingei* carried an exchange of letters between Sugiyama Heisuke and Tanaka Toshio under the title *Okinawa hōgen ronsō shūketsu ni tsuite* (On the conclusion of the dialect debate).¹¹ Despite the title, the two proponents failed to reach a conclusion beyond recognition of the fact that their opposing points of view defied reconciliation, as one, that of Sugiyama, was founded on political and economic considerations while the other emphasised the cultural and aesthetic importance of local traditions. Tanaka made it clear that he did not want to continue debate on the question of language education in Okinawa as the views of the Folk Art Association on this question were well known. Rather, Tanaka wrote, he would prefer to carry out further research into Okinawan culture and to resume the quest for Japanese beauty (*Nihonteki bi*) in the works of provincial craftsmen—the mission for which the association had been founded.

The coverage of the debate in the press seems to have had little effect on the implementation of the standard language promotion program in Okinawa. The dialect card penalty system continued to be employed to ensure that students applied themselves diligently to the study of standard Japanese. And there can be no doubt that the enthusiasm for the teaching of standard Japanese resulted in the

denigration of local dialects.

What strikes us most in this whole question is that the debate should have arisen at all. At a time when, we are told, strict wartime controls were in place and the minds of the people were being mobilised in whole-hearted support of the war against China, how was it possible for such a potentially divisive topic to be given such a public airing? Much of the credit must be given to Yanagi and his group, who raised the issue at the seminar on 7 January, responded quickly to criticism in the local press and continued the debate in the pages of *Mingei*. It can also be explained in part by the fact that, although Yanagi opposed official policy over a number of issues, his strong nationalist leanings were widely recognised and his basic philosophy did not in any way challenge the National Polity. While on the one hand, assimilation and uniformity were necessary to create absolute allegiance to the imperial design, Yanagi's call for national purity and the creation of a truly Japanese ideal purged of corrupting foreign influences struck a sympathetic chord among the ruling authorities. Both sides of the debate, whether one supported the need for standard language education or whether one sought to preserve the richness of Japanese cultural diversity, were seen as issues that should exercise the minds of patriotic Japanese. It should be remembered that Yanagi felt that Okinawan language and customs reflected an earlier, purer period of Japanese culture which could enrich contemporary Japanese society and contribute to the formation of a truly national standard language.

The background

The incident of the great dialect debate should be interpreted within the historical and cultural context of Okinawa's relationship with the rest of Japan. After 30 years of isolation and neglect since annexation, Okinawa emerged into the modern world to find its traditional culture under threat. Other Japanese found Okinawan language, food, dress and burial customs at best quaint, at worst barbarous, but always alien.

More particularly, the standard language debate must be seen in the light of the language history of Okinawa prefecture. Since the unification of the country under the third king of the second Shō

dynasty in the late fifteenth century, the dialect of the royal court of Shuri had been used as a *lingua franca* throughout the archipelago. There was, and still is, very great variation from one dialect group to another and quite often a dialect may be restricted to a single island or community. Broadly speaking, Ryukyuan falls into four main dialect groups, the Amami dialects in the north, the dialects of the main island of Okinawa, the Miyako dialects and the Yaeyama dialects to the south.

Reasons given for the policy of strong enforcement of standard language education included the need to create a sense of unity and nationhood on the one hand and, on the other hand, a desire to eliminate the prejudice exacerbated by the Okinawans' poor command of Japanese. Perhaps the reluctance of many Okinawans to take up Yanagi's call to foster Okinawan—he always used the term *Okinawago* (Okinawan), never *Okinawa hōgen* (Okinawan dialect)—derives from the fact that there was no single dialect which could be used and understood by all Okinawans. The inhabitants of Yaeyama would have felt less resistance towards learning standard Japanese than they would to adopting the language of the main island of Okinawa which carried with it memories of harsh oppression under the Ryukyu kingdom.

The standard language movement was taken more seriously in rural areas than in the urban districts of Naha and Shuri. This can probably be explained by the fact that city residents tended to make up their own minds on questions of education whereas in the country policy was determined through consensus at the village level and all cooperated in the enforcement of the general will. In Okinawa itself there had always been a tendency for the speakers of the urban areas, particularly those who spoke the prestigious Shuri dialect, to look down in disdain upon the language of the countryside. The dialects of outlying areas such as Yanbaru in the north of Okinawa island were regarded as uncouth, partly because they did not have the elaborate honorific system of the language of Shuri, the capital of the former royal court.

Although falling clearly within the Japanese language family, none of the dialects of Okinawa (or the Amami group which was annexed by Kagoshima in 1609) is intelligible to speakers of any Japanese dialect. It is therefore impossible to set up a dialect chain

of mutual intelligibility with the Japanese dialects. Consequently, I prefer to classify Okinawan as a cognate language. This is contrary to the general Japanese practice which classifies all the Okinawan dialects simply as dialects of Japanese. It is estimated that the mainland Japanese dialects and Okinawan separated between 1200 and 1500 years ago and developed largely in isolation. The Shuri dialect has also taken in a number of loan words from Chinese. This depth of separation, too, suggests that Okinawan is a cognate language rather than a dialect of Japanese. The Okinawan dialects have a dozen or so common words which do not appear to have Japanese cognates. Notable among these are /qwaɑ/ (the q represents a glottal stop), 'pig'; /kuga/, 'egg'; /wiki/, 'male, man'; /winagu/, 'woman'; /gushiku/, 'castle, wall'; /gamaku/, 'waist' and /tiida/, 'sun'. In addition to the dialect of Shuri which was the *lingua franca* for the entire kingdom, prestigious regional languages in Amami, Yanbaru, Miyako and Yaeyama provided means of communication among the inhabitants of many outlying islands who spoke their own mutually unintelligible dialects.

After the Satsuma invasion of 1609 the language of Satsuma (present-day Kagoshima at the southern tip of Kyushu)—itself a very divergent dialect of Japanese—was known as Yamatuguchi ('Yamato language' or 'Japanese') and the language of the Shōgun's capital at Edo, with which there was very little direct contact, was known as Ufuyamatuguchi ('Greater Yamato language'). A distinction between these two kinds of Japanese was made by the small number of traders from Naha who needed to be able to communicate orally, but for most of the population there was no need to speak either.

The changes in the name used in Okinawa to designate the Japanese language—Ufu Yamatuguchi, Yamatuguchi, then Tōkyō nu kutuba (Tokyo language), Futsōgo ('normal language'), Hyōjungo (standard language) and finally Kyōtsūgo (common language) reflect educational and political policy on the one hand, but also represent important cultural keywords—symbols of sophistication and enlightenment.¹²

The late 1880s was a time of strong nationalist sentiment in Japan. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 consolidated the Emperor System and the Imperial Rescript of Education of 1890 set the course

for a unified education in the emerging standard language. The new education had been slow to take root in Okinawa because of the presence of conservative elements who had not ruled out the possibility of an alliance with Qing China. Only after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–95 did these pro-Chinese elements cease to be a force in Okinawan politics. Okinawans felt the need for standard Japanese most when economic circumstances compelled them to join the army or join Japanese emigrant communities in Hawaii or South America.

It was not until 1880 that Okinawa began to come to grips with the problem of a common language. The Meiji government had been late in enforcing reforms, with the result that the old social order remained little changed until the 1890s. The internal 'colonial rule' affected only the upper echelons of government.

In 1880 a government school known as the Kaiwa Denshūjo (Conversation Academy) was established. Students used a Japanese conversation manual, *Okinawa Taiwa* (Japanese-Okinawan dialogues) as a textbook. It opened with the sentence:

Anata wa Tookyoo no kotoba de ohanashi ga dekimasu ka.
(Literally: Can you talk in the speech of Tokyo?),

with its Okinawan gloss:-

Unjoo Tookyoo nu kutuba shaai ufanashi unamisheebiimi.

It is interesting to note that at this stage the speech of Tokyo played the role of a *lingua franca*, as the idea of a standard language for Japanese had not fully crystallised. Even in the dialect debate of 1940 Yanagi Muneyoshi repeatedly made the point that standard Japanese was not yet established and that it was necessary to purify the language through the addition of native words from regional dialects.

The push to learn standard Japanese also came from young Okinawan intellectuals keen to break down the feudal system and free themselves from the economic backwardness and social oppression they had inherited from the Ryukyuan kingdom. In 1900 the students' council of the First Prefectural Middle School in Naha adopted the rule that only standard Japanese was to be used on school premises. After Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of

1904–1905, there was increased pressure from the central government to enforce the use of standard language by introducing the punitive dialect card system. Okinawan students who themselves had introduced a rule banning the use of dialect at school, angered at the unfair dialect card punishment decreed by school authorities, this time rebelled against the use of standard language and used dialect in a display of open defiance.

On the one hand were these internal pressures for standard language education stemming from the desire felt by Okinawan intellectuals for modernisation, economic advancement and freedom from discrimination. Running parallel was the external pressure exerted by the Japanese state which saw standard language education as a precondition for the elimination of pro-Chinese sentiment and the fostering of a sense of the 'Japanese spirit'.

The dialect debate of 1940 introduced another factor, of equal importance, but this time emphasising the need to foster Okinawan language and traditions. I refer here to Yanagi's call for the creation of a strong Japanese identity to counter the cultural hegemony of western modernisation. This, he claimed, could be achieved only by incorporating those pure Japanese elements which were rapidly disappearing from the culture of the political centre and could still be found in the language, crafts and traditions of outlying communities.

Although Yanagi's efforts to curb the excesses of the standard language education campaign in Okinawa seem to have met with little success, ironically, his notion of cultural nationalism, supported by the work of others like Yanagita Kunio, became official government policy by the end of 1940, when Governor Fuchigami established the Taisei Yokusankai Okinawa Shibu (Imperial Rule Assistance Association—Okinawa Branch) to replace existing government structures. The introduction of the new cultural policy at this time, however, seems to have owed less to Yanagi's quest for pure Japanese beauty than it did for the need for a strategy to appease farming villages and stimulate food production for the war effort.

The arguments advanced for and against centralism or regional independence, assimilation or diversity, conservation or development change with the times, but the question itself still defies resolution. What emerges is that both points of view can be encompassed

within the philosophy of nationalism and that the delicate balance of compromise is likely to yield the most enduring accommodation.

Notes

- 1 William M. Steele, 'Nationalism and Cultural Pluralism in Modern Japan: Sōetsu Yanagi and the Mingei Movement', in *Diversity in Japanese Culture and Language*, eds. John Maher and Gaynor Macdonald, London, 1995, pp.27-48 for a discussion of Yanagi's views on *mingei* and nationalism.
- 2 Tanikawa, Ken'ichi, ed., *Waga Okinawa—hōgen ronsō*, Tokyo, 1970, p.3. This volume is a collection of the main writings pertaining to the dialect debate.
- 3 Tanikawa, p. 7.
- 4 The construction of *torii* at the entrances to traditional Okinawan *utaki* (sacred groves) was an assimilationist strategy to incorporate the local beliefs into State Shinto. For other examples of 'the manipulation of imperial symbolism', see George H. Kerr, *Okinawa—the History of an Island People*, Tokyo, 1958, p.452.
- 5 Kerr, p.9.
- 6 Kerr, p.21.
- 7 Kerr, p.22.
- 8 Hōgen de nee, ... to yū.
- 9 Nakasone, Seizen *Ryūkyūgo no utsukushisa*, Naha, 1995. p.ii
- 10 Tanikawa, p.25.
- 11 Tanikawa, p.156.
- 12 Hokama, Shuzen, *Okinawa no gengoshi*, Tokyo, 1975, p.66.