

Vocational School and University

Highest Award

“Okinawan Languages”

1<sup>st</sup> Year, International Resort College Okinawa by Yurika Shimoji

“Namanowakataya, Nunwakaranya (Young people these days do not know anything about Okinawan dialect),” mentioned a Sanshin (an Okinawan musical instrument) player, during his performance at the place where I work as a part-time job.

“Hai, Nifedebiru. Yushokuyausagatan? (Thank you. Have you eaten a dinner already?)” he asked to customers, but audience could not understand his talking because most of the audiences were tourists.

"Could someone translate my talking to the audiences?" he asked to the shop's staffs, but all the young staffs could not respond to him. I was one of them. Although I knew the meaning of the words, I could not answer with confidence.

I was going to a Sanshin class for three years since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of elementary school. Okinawan folk songs are written by Okinawan dialect so that I knew the dialect very well more than my friends. However, I have already forgotten the dialect because I did not need to attend the class after I have obtained the skills of playing Sanshin so that the opportunity to speak the dialect decreased.

There are some opportunities to use Okinawan dialect when we talk with people of the older generation. Although my grandmother uses the dialect when talking with my mother and aunt, she speaks standard Japanese when talking with us. However, not only my grandmother but also most elderly people do not use the dialect when they talk with young people because they think that all young people do not know the dialect. In fact, there are a small number of the younger generation who know Okinawan dialect nowadays. Most people around me cannot speak the dialect. Although we can listen and understand the dialect, the majority of us cannot understand the dialect completely.

Why has the dialect almost died out? One of the causes is that the use of Ryukyu languages was forbidden by Japanese government during the World War . A strong vowel sound is the main characteristic of Ryukyu languages and the unique sounds could be heard like foreign languages. Due to the reason, people who spoke Ryukyu languages suffered a severe penalty even capital punishment because it was considered that they are a spy who is connected with the U.S. Military or an offender who do not follow the rules or acts against the Emperor of Japan. This prohibition order has still lived on Okinawan people's memory since the end of the war. When Okinawan people, who were dispatched as an expeditionary force to outside of Okinawa, went back to Okinawa, they grieved over the rapid change of the languages, “Okinawan people have not had pride of being an Okinawan anymore.”

On the other hand, communication has decreased itself through economic development, an improvement of convenience and the spread of the Internet. The relationship between people called "Icharibachode (all becoming brothers and sisters once you have met) " is one of the strong points in Okinawa, whereas it is starting to fade away to extinction.

Nowadays in Okinawa it is no longer possible to share common values with families, relatives, neighbors, and local communities than in the past. However, it is the most significant thing for

carrying on a culture. As a result of this influence of the history and the social background, the Okinawan dialect is going to die out little by little.

However, local governments are holding some activities such as a dialect class, volunteers in a region, and contact with the elders. Furthermore, there are a wide range of TV programs such as comedy shows which are spoken by Okinawan direct, kids programs that the screen heroes speak the dialect in order to popularize the dialect not only Okinawa people but also the people in the mainland.

Okinawan dialect has been handed down from the Ryukyu Kingdom to the modern times beyond a long period of time. The great traditional language includes Okinawan history and people's warmth and kindness. We should not lead the dialect to die out. If the current situation continues, there would be no more people who know the dialect and then we would not be able to carry on the dialect to the next generations.

I suggest some actions should be taken to get the younger generation to take an interest in Okinawan dialect. For instance, people may feel more familiar with Okinawan dialect if there are the songs by Okinawan dialect which are written by young popular musicians, receipts with a notes by dialect at convenience stores or gasoline stations, the sweets or snacks with the packages which include some notes of Okinawan grandma's ideas, and beverage cans or bottles with a Senryu (traditional humorous sentences) in the competition entry. More people in the Japanese mainland as well as the visitors to Okinawa will be familiar with Okinawan dialect if they tell their friends or families what they have experienced through the Okinawan dialect during their journey. In addition, it may encourage repeat visitors or fans of Okinawa and it may be the key to lead Okinawan tourism through cooperation of the companies in Okinawa.

However, the best way we can achieve this is by getting every single person to have an interest in Okinawan culture. It is important to proactively communicate in the dialect with the local communities and the seniors. "Uchinaguchi" literally means Okinawan languages and is also known as "Kuganikutuba (Okinawan golden sayings)". The languages contain the thought of "Chimugukuru (the heart, the soul and the mind)" and it can be difficult to express by other multiple languages. The warmth of the languages may attract many people. "Chimugukuru" is also said that it connects directly with "Icharibachode". It is important to bear in mind people's feelings and nature the "Chimugukuru", and thus it maintains and inherits the tradition.

There are plenty of precious teachings of Okinawan dialect such as wisdom gained in the experience of life through coexistence with our forefathers in Okinawa. "Kutubajikeyajinjike" means that we should treat our dialect with great care as same as money. I wish many people understand the meaning of Okinawan dialect accurately. Let's protect our important things in Okinawa in order to greet visitors warmly by saying, "Mudumisouchi (Welcome back to Okinawa)" and "Mensouchi (Welcome to Okinawa)" to visitors in Okinawa.