

## Songs, Language and Culture: Ryukyuan Languages in Ryukyuan Music

Matthew Gillan, International Christian University

The Ryukyu islands are well known within Japan as a region where traditional music and performing arts survive as part of everyday life, and Okinawans are rightly proud of their rich performing arts heritage. As in many other parts of the world, traditional music has been one of the most important contexts for the preservation and dissemination of disappearing Ryukyuan languages since at least the mid-20th century. Many Okinawans who otherwise have little opportunity to use local languages in everyday life still use traditional music as a way of connecting with the language patterns of previous generations.

While language use in Ryukyuan songs reflects local languages, it is rarely identical to the everyday spoken languages of the islands. As examples from musical and literary traditions in many parts of the world have shown, song lyrics are often composed in fixed metrical forms that are not found in everyday spoken languages, and use specific literary vocabulary or grammar patterns that differ from the standard language. They often include nonsense syllables or phrases that contribute no particular meaning to the text, and vocabulary or other influences from imported languages that are not otherwise used in everyday speech.

Ryukyuan songs have likewise developed a variety of literary language styles reflecting various cultural influences, from mainland Japanese poetical forms, to the regional languages of the smaller Ryukyuan islands, to the language of the ruling Shuri elite. In this talk I consider a number of examples of Ryukyuan song lyrics, from the classical court tradition to modern pop songs and consider some of the cultural meanings of language use in music. I argue that, in addition to being an important way in which languages are preserved, song lyrics are also useful in understanding the social and political life of the islands, past and present.