

## THE HISTORY OF OKINAWA

The people of Okinawa, formerly called the Ryukyu Kingdom, were a mixture of three main Asian cultures: Mongolian, Ainu, and Malayan. The Okinawans adapted what they borrowed from their neighbors and created their own unique culture.

Recorded Ryukyu Kingdom history dates back to the 14th century, when writing was introduced from China's Ming Dynasty. Our knowledge of the Ryukyus prior to this time is sketchy. The Ryukyu Islands were first mentioned in Chinese history in 605 A.D.

Formal trade began with China in 1372 when Ryukyuans began paying tribute to and exchanging scholars with the Ming Dynasty. Tribute was a small price to pay for the prosperous trade between the two countries that chiefly benefited the Ryukyuans.

The island of Okinawa was divided into three small kingdoms. They consisted of the North, Central, and the South. These kingdoms lasted until the 15th century. At that time, Sho Hashi became king of the central kingdom and subsequently conquered the entire island and established his government in Shuri.

The next 200 years were considered the “golden age” of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The island's central locale made it an ideal staging area for trade. Ryukyuan ships sailed everywhere in the Far East on trade missions; relations with other countries as far away as Indonesia and Malacca Straits were established. Ryukyuan crafts were perfected and music, poetry, and dance unique to the Ryukyus flourished.

In 1609, the Satsuma clan dispatched Samurai from Kyushu to invade the Ryukyu Kingdom. For the next 270 years, Ryukyuans remained “independent” but were forced to pay tribute to the Satsuma conquerors. Ryukyuans paid tribute to China as well and did not want to offend either giant.

The situation became trickier when Commodore Perry's fleet landed in Naha in 1851 to open trade and relations with the United States. Other European expeditions soon followed, and the Tokugawa government became concerned that they might lose control of the Ryukyus to “outside interests.”

Japan sent military expeditions to the island in 1868 and 1879, naming Okinawa (which is Japanese for big or long rope) making the island Japan's 47<sup>th</sup> prefecture. The island's official language became Japanese and its educational and political systems rapidly conformed to dictates of the Japanese government. Due to its geographical location, Japan turned the Ryukyu Islands into a bastion in order to guard the southern approach to Japan during World War II.

The people of the Ryukyus had little say in shaping the policies that involved them in World War II. Moreover, they were the ones who experienced the most significant losses at the close of the war in 1945. The Battle of Okinawa caused widespread destruction and the deaths of about 140,000 non-combatant Okinawans.

The close of World War II brought the Ryukyu Islands under the administrative rule of the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyus. The Ryukyu Islands were returned to the Government of Japan on 15 May 1972 and Okinawa once again became the 47<sup>th</sup> Japanese prefecture.

