

## Young Okinawan Leaders Support Restoration of Independence



*Illustration 1: From left to right:  
Lima Tokumori Kinjo, Shinako  
Oyakawa, Yuzo Takayama, and  
Robert Kajiwara*

On February 23, 2019 in Naha City, Okinawa, a symposium was held in which four young leaders of Okinawa shared their thoughts on the present issues Okinawans are facing. Among the hot issues of the day are the continuing heavy U.S. military presence on tiny Okinawa Island.



*Illustration 2: Flier advertising the symposium of young  
Okinawan leaders.*

The symposium was held just one day before the historic referendum in which the people of Okinawa voted overwhelmingly against the construction of the military base at Henoko – a bay that contains a rare coral reef that is home to hundreds of rare and endangered species, including the Okinawa dugong.



*Illustration 3: The coral reef at Henoko, Okinawa, home to hundreds of rare and endangered species. The Japan government is building a new U.S. military base against the will of the Okinawan people that will destroy the reef.*

Among today's young Okinawan leaders is Yuzo Takayama, a [YouTuber](#) who often discusses Ryukyu issues in fun and relevant ways. His channel, [マヨ基地 TV](#), can be translated into English as “Okinawa, This and That.” Takayama is also a music teacher and musician, who specializes in a genre called Ryukyu rock, which is a hybrid of traditional Ryukyuan music with American-style rock.

Takayama lives in Nago City, which is right next to Henoko. He has been a vocal critic of Japan and the United States' handling of the Henoko military base which has had numerous design flaws, such as the “mayonnaise-like” foundation which the base is being built on. Takayama, like many Okinawans, believes that neither Japan nor the U.S. has any respect for the will of the Okinawan people.



*Illustration 4: [Music video created by Yuzo Takayama](#) about the issues of the military base at Henoko, Okinawa.*

Takayama, also like many Okinawans, favors a return of Okinawa's independence.

Okinawa was an independent nation known as Ryukyu or Lewchew up until Japan invaded and annexed Lewchew in 1879. The annexation helped spark the Ryukyu diaspora, where thousands of Ryukyans fled into exile overseas.

“I want my future children to grow up knowing their Ryukyu identity,” said Lima Tokumori Kinjo. A Peruvian Okinawan, Kinjo served current Governor of Okinawa Denny Tamaki in an unofficial capacity as he ran for election largely on a platform of stopping the base at Henoko. She helped drum up community support for Tamaki, particularly among Okinawan millennials. Kinjo has since gotten an official position in the Okinawa Prefecture Government. Though she prefers to stay mostly behind the scenes, Kinjo's willingness to serve the Okinawan people, along with her ability to network and strategize, have made her one of the most influential Okinawans of the day.

During the twentieth century many Okinawans migrated to Peru and other South American countries where they established thriving Okinawan communities.



*Illustration 5: Lima Tokumori Kinjo (left, in black) dances kachashi (traditional Okinawan dance) at the announcement of the victory of Denny Tamaki (center) as Governor of Okinawa*

The long history of discrimination by both Japan and the United States against Ryukyans is [encouraging support for a return of Ryukyu's independence](#).

“We are in the gap between two countries – Japan and the United States. Neither one respects us,” said Shinako Oyakawa, co-director of the Association for the Comprehensive Studies for Independence of the Lewchewan peoples (ACSILs). Oyakawa is also a Ph.D. student in Linguistics at Okinawa University, studying the revitalization of *Shimakutuba* – the Ryukyu languages, all of which are in immediate danger of dying out due to ongoing colonization efforts by Japan.



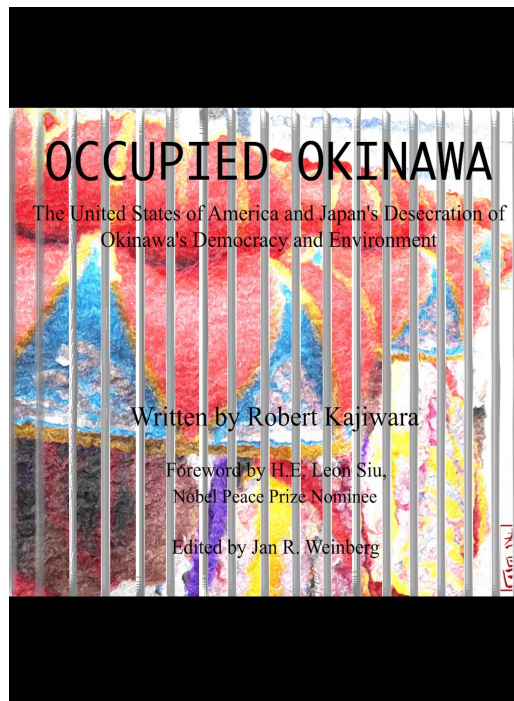
*Illustration 6: Shinako Oyakawa (center) speaks at the United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples while wearing a traditional Okinawan outfit.*

[ACSILs](#) believes that by regaining their independence from Japan and removing all military bases from Lewchew, that their islands can once again become a nation of peace, hope, and friendship with the other nations of the world.

Oyakawa has twice spoken at the United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Peoples in New York City, advocating for a return of Ryukyu independence.

Robert Kajiwara, an Okinawan Hawaiian, has also been a very vocal supporter of independence.

“Ryukyu has a long history as a peaceful, prosperous, advanced independent nation,” said Kajiwara. “It was only in 1879 that Japan annexed it, against the will of Ryukyans. So why should Ryukyu be ruled by Japan today?”



*Illustration 7: Occupied Okinawa: The United States of America and Japan's Desecration of Okinawa's Democracy and Environment, by Robert Kajiwara. [Available on Amazon.](#)*

Kajiwara is President of the [Peace For Okinawa Coalition](#), a 200,000-member think-tank and cultural organization dedicated to advancing peace, diplomacy, justice, and human rights through the promotion of Okinawan culture, history, language, and issues. The Peace For Okinawa Coalition is headquartered in Honolulu, Hawaii, where a large Okinawan community has existed for over a century, but its membership is multinational and spread throughout the world.

Kajiwara is also a Ph.D. in History student researching the history of Ryukyu – China cultural exchange.



*Illustration 8: Robert Kajiwara with his great-grandfather's sanshin - a traditional Okinawan musical instrument.*

In his book, *Occupied Okinawa: The United States of America and Japan's Desecration of Okinawa's Democracy and Environment*, Kajiwara states his belief that five critical aspects make up the Ryukyu people – culture, history, language, environment, and identity. All five, he says, are under attack through colonization by both Japan and the U.S. “To lose any one of these five elements,” says Kajiwara, “would be to eventually lose all of them, since they are all intricately connected to each other, and one cannot survive without the others.”

Roughly 1.4 million Ryukyuan presently live in the Ryukyu Islands, with another 300,000 living overseas in Hawaii, South America, China, Japan, the continental United States, and elsewhere. Ryukyuan all over the world maintain close connections with each other, as can be seen in events such as the Worldwide Uchinaanchu Festival, held every five years, where thousands of Okinawans living abroad return home to visit relatives and friends, and to reconnect with one another.



*Illustration 9: Robert Kajiwara (right) with Yuzo Takayama (center), Reona Nishinaga (center, in purple) and Shinako Oyakawa (far left) at a speaking event at Nago City Hall, Okinawa*

Ryukyuan have a long history of music, dance, and art dating back to ancient times, and young Ryukyuan today are continuing that tradition to preserve their identity and advance Ryukyuan causes.

Reona Nishinaga is an art student at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts Graduate School. Through experimental art she explores her own family heritage and identity.



*Illustration 10: Young Okinawan graphic artist Reona Nishinaga uses shadow puppets and creative lighting to tell stories of her family history.*

Referring to the decision of the Ryukyu people to stop the construction of the military base at Henoko, Nishinaga said she “wants this declaration to be known [throughout the world.]”

Nishinaga says her long-term dream is to do art, graphic design, and Ryukyu activism.

Though these five young Okinawan (or *Uchinaanchu* in the indigenous Okinawan language) leaders come from different backgrounds, have different interests and vocations, and possess different personality types, all share a great pride in their *Uchinaanchu* identity and love for Okinawa. All five would also like to see Ryukyu once again become independent.