

The *Ryukyu* People

Those Who Seem to Live Forever

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Who are the Ryukyu people?



Introduction

- The *Ryukyuan* (or “*Lewchewan/Loochooan*”, 琉球民族) people are an East Asian peoples who are indigenous to the Ryukyu Islands of the former Ryukyu Kingdom, currently administered by Japan as the Okinawa prefecture
- The islands reach from the southern tip of Japan all the way to the northern tip of Taiwan
- The Ryukyu Islands themselves are made up of smaller island chains including the Senkaku Islands, the Daito Islands, the Sakishima Islands, the Amami Islands, and of course the major cultural hearth of the island of Okinawa itself
- Genetically, they share ancestors with the mainland Japanese people, but are composed of more *Jomon* DNA (an indigenous proto-Japanese people) than mainland Japanese people, which is actually more similar to a major northern indigenous Japanese ethnic group widely known as the *Ainu* (アイヌ民族) people, who are indigenous to the northernmost islands of Japan and Northeastern Russia

The former Ryukyu Kingdom & Ryukyu people, Historically



18th Century scroll pictures of the Ryukyu people in the Ryukyu Islands

Okinawans Today



Modern-day; young Ryukyu women in traditional *rūsō*, taking selfies

Older Ryukyu women performing a traditional dance, wearing casual *rūsō*



A traditional-style Ryukyu wedding photo, with husband and wife wearing *rūsō*.



What are we looking for and analyzing?



Background, objective and thesis

- Many around the world are astonished at the peculiar life expectancy of Ryukyu Okinawan people; since antiquity, the population has enjoyed a life expectancy of over 100 years old, a feat even in comparison to their mainland Japanese counterparts
- Even until today, although their life expectancy has dropped slightly, they still have a plethora of the oldest-living people in the world on the Ryukyu Islands
- The research I've done will take a look at *why* is it that Ryukyu people live so long? My assumption and thesis statement is that the Ryukyu people's longevity may very well be due to a **unique diet** of indigenous foods that they consume on Okinawa, as well as several unique **sociocultural** factors that separate the Okinawan archipelago from mainland Japanese cultural phenomena

**How do Ryukyu
people eat?**

How and What do Ryukyu people on Okinawa eat?

- The traditional indigenous diet of Ryukyu people mainly consists of starchy root vegetables, principally the Okinawan purple sweet potato, as well as purple yams and taro root - all of which are purple in colour!
- In addition to these, green and yellow vegetables such as the bitter melon (*goya*), cabbage, seaweed, salad leaves and luffa are also frequently eaten!
- The Ryukyu people also have a high fruit intake which consists of pineapples, papayas, mangoes, passion fruit, guavas, and citrus fruits - which well reflects the tropical climate and nature of the Ryukyu Islands
- Some common dishes made with these ingredients include the famous *goya champuru* (a bitter melon medley) and *rafute* (soy-stewed pork with pork skin)

Authentic Ryukyu Okinawan cuisine (minus the beer!)



Traditional Okinawan soba noodles (left), served with *goya champuru* (right) and Orion-brand draft beer



Rafute, which is soy sauce-marinated stewed pork with the pork skin on. Served with a side of *goya* bitter melon and carrots on the side.

Connections to their diet and health

- Many of the traditional Ryukyu diet and eating habits are notably similar to those in which are also touted as being generally excellent to human health, such as the traditional Mediterranean diet
- The Ryukyu Okinawans' traditional cuisine is notable for using ingredients and being cooked in ways that are known to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, they have a high intake of unrefined carbohydrates, and have a moderate protein intake with a focus more on vegetables and legumes rather than a largely meat-based diet - although they do enjoy meat, it is not in extremely large quantities
- Their diet can be greatly contrasted by modern Western diets such as in the contemporary United States and the United Kingdom, where fast food and highly-processed foods are more commonplace and normalized
- To this day, Ryukyu Okinawan people continue to consume their traditional dishes, although the advent of fast foods and Japanese processed foods have reached the Ryukyu Islands as well, resulting in their recent slight dip in longevity

Connections to their diet and health (cont.)

- Although Ryukyu Okinawan diets do not focus as much on meat consumption, when they do consume meat it is mostly lean meat such as chicken and specific cuts of pork, or fish
- Like the usage of fish in many East Asian traditional diets, the consumption of fish in the Ryukyu diet adds to the healthy absorption of omega-3 fatty acids and other polyunsaturated fats, which is notable for reducing inflammation and optimizing cholesterol in the human body
- Their consumption of specific fruits and vegetables also results in a lower average caloric intake and a higher intake of phytonutrients and antioxidants
- All of the factors described can reduce several chronic age-related conditions such as cancers, strokes, diabetes and dementia, and can help promote healthy living and longevity

**What do Ryukyu
people do?**

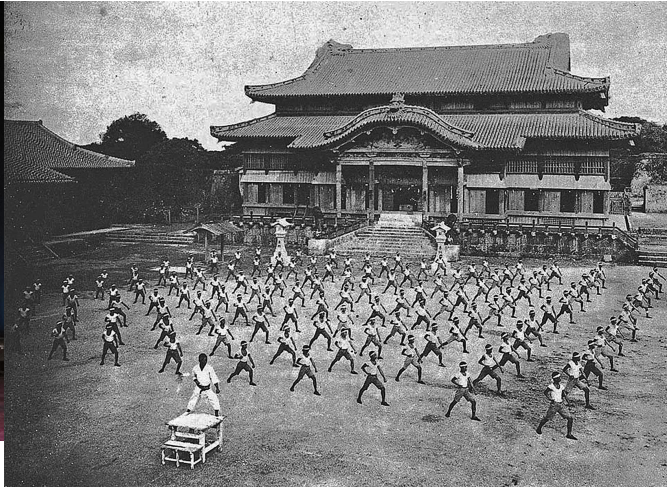
Lifestyle Choices & Cultural Practices

- One of the many tenets of Ryukyu Okinawan culture that may promote their historical longevity can be associated with a good amount physical activity that is ingrained into the culture
- A simple form of physical activity that is tied to their cultural practices is known as “kitchen gardening” - gardening plants that produce flowers, fruits, and vegetables and is inextricably linked to the indigenous spirituality and native animistic and shamanistic religious practices of the Ryukyu people
 - An important component of *Utaki Shinko* (御嶽信仰), the native religion of Ryukyu people, is that everything organic in nature carries a *kami*, or a deity/spirit that needs to be respected and cared for
- In addition to this, many Ryukyu people even in their youth participate in typical cultural dances and rituals, and even *karate* (空手), as it is an indigenous Okinawan martial art

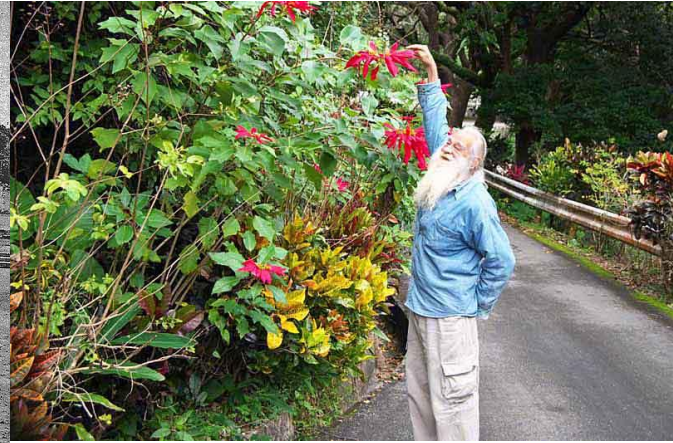
What Ryukyu People Do



A traditional form of Ryukyu dance being performed by a troupe of older women



19th Century photo of *karate kata* being performed in front of Shuri Castle in Okinawa



An elderly Ryukyu man partaking in “kitchen gardening” on Okinawa, tending to poinsettia flowers, which *are* edible!

**Any other
contributors to
longevity in the
Ryukyu people?**

Social Connections and Sleep!

- Especially for the case of the elderly, like the centenarians of Okinawa, Ryukyu culture places a huge emphasis on maintaining social circles and interactions with other in a harmonious and positive way throughout one's entire life
- Coupled with their good diet and exercise, this maintenance of social interaction with friends, family, colleagues and neighbors can improve one's mental health and has been noted as another factor in lower rates of dementia among the Ryukyu people
- In addition to this, studies conducted on the elderly population in the village of Ogimi in Okinawa revealed that good sleep among the elderly is a very important contributing factor to their longevity and could affect their behaviors; the “good sleep group” of the study ate more fish & seaweed, interacted more and better with others throughout their day, and tended to exercise at a higher rate all in comparison to the “poor sleep group”

Social Circles Matter!



In conclusion...

Yes, diet and sociocultural factors are *major* reasons for the Ryukyu people's longevity!

- The Ryukyu people partake in a generally healthier diet and lifestyle than the majority of the world, even by today's standards!
- Natural, unrefined sugars, polyunsaturated fats, low meat consumption and high antioxidant consumption are the major factors in the Ryukyu traditional diet that have helped them achieve such long lives with relatively little-to-no chronic age-related conditions like hypertension, diabetes, coronary heart disease, strokes, cancers, or dementia
- Their maintenance of physical health through dance and casual forms of labor like walking and gardening helps even the elderly do simple exercise that can help boost their lifespan
- Emotional and mental health is also important! Both getting a good night's rest of undisturbed sleep without napping and being connected to others in your community or family can help bring about a healthier mindset, which can influence you to make healthier choices

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