

# HAWAII'S OKINAWANS

*Dr. Franklin Odo of University of Hawaii was interviewed by Karleen Chinen in 1990. Following are excerpts from her article printed here with her permission.*

According to Professor Odo, World War II had a profound effect upon Hawaii's Okinawan community. "Prior to the war, most Okinawans were trying to assimilate on two fronts -- into the naichi community and into mainstream society."

"After Pearl Harbor, it became possible to try to assimilate not in dual directions, but to essentially cut off the naichi side and to concentrate on adapting to American society. That psychological release lifted a tremendous burden off the shoulders of local Okinawans."

The war left Okinawa a U.S. territory until 1972. "The erasure of naichi colonial rule was a positive thing and a morale booster for the people of Okinawa. Just as the war had enabled Okinawans in the Ryukyus to finally be themselves, so too did Hawaii's Okinawans begin to relate to one another as Okinawans," said Odo.

Ironically the table seemed to have turned on Okinawa-naichi relationships. While most naichi

today see no difference between Okinawans and themselves, Okinawans, on the other hand, are celebrating their differences, said Odo.

Odo disagrees with the notion that the focus on being Uchinanchu is regressive and too limiting and parochial. He believes that being grounded in your own ethnic heritage allows you to look at other ethnic groups with more empathy.

Odo believes that the present upsurge of Okinawan pride is "almost totally positive." He believes that local Okinawans need to be ex-

posed to a broader picture of conditions and problems in their ancestral homeland.

People outside the Okinawan community often describe Okinawans as friendly and peace-

loving people. They marvel at the group's ability to pull together and organize so successfully. When asked the secret of their success, many reply, "Hey, that's Okinawan. That's the way us Uchinanchu are."

Odo cautions against explaining characteristics in terms of "innateness." "I don't believe in innate nature. I think Okinawans, too, could oppress other people if they had the power to do so. It's not that they're

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He adds that it is a dangerous and incorrect means of explaining what one sees or experiences. "There is a terrible temptation to explain it on the basis of culture...The next step can then be that not only is it a part



*Franklin Odo earned his Ph.D. in Japanese history from Princeton University. He has been director of the University of Hawaii Ethnic Studies Program since 1978. Photo courtesy of Franklin Odo.*

of our culture, but it's better than other cultures and explains how we've succeeded and why we're better than others."

Odo underscores the importance of turning to history to understand how and why events developed as they did.

Characteristics like "cohesiveness" and "peace-loving" are not innate traits, he stresses; they are rooted in an historical condition.

"Something happened that made it more worthwhile for people to get together and put aside their differences than to maintain them." \*



*Karleen Chinen is currently Editor of the Hawaii Herald. Photo courtesy of Karleen Chinen.*

## OKINAWA KENJINKAI OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

by Tom Shiroma

**T**he first Okinawa Kenjinkai of Northern California was founded in 1902 and based in San Francisco. It served the needs of the immigrants from Okinawa. When the 1906 earthquake hit the city of San Francisco, the Okinawans decided to evacuate

together -- first to Golden Gate Park, and then to Berkeley. Most of them eventually moved to Southern California.

Since 1924 a group of ten to fifteen Okinawan families in the Bay area gathered at each other's homes for potluck dinners. Tom and Isabel Oshiro were the frequent hosts. The Okinawans kept close contact with one another and gave a helping hand when needed.

The Okinawans' longing for their music and dance was realized at our first public New Year party held in 1977 at Sigmund Stern Grove in San Francisco. It was a resounding success.

In each succeeding year the interest in Okinawan music and dance performances increased tremendously. We were discovering many talented Okinawan performers in our midst. We realized that Okinawa was truly a land of

song and dance.

In 1980 the group was formally structured as the Bay Area Okinawa Club. Due to people joining from outside the Bay Area, in 1989 the club name was changed to Okinawa Kenjinkai of Northern California.

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By 1992 our membership had increased to 450. Fifty percent of our club members are non-Okinawans.

Dignitaries from Okinawa have been entertained by our group, such as Governor Nishime and Vice Governor Miyagi in 1988. In 1992, Yuka Arakaki was the first club member from Northern California to receive a one year scholarship to study at Ryukyu University.

The purpose of our club is to maintain and to demonstrate here in America our cultural heritages of Okinawa. \*

*Tom Shiroma, a Nisei, is the founder and the president of the Okinawa Kenjinkai of Northern California. He and his wife, Beatrice, reside in San Francisco.*

*Their daughter Yukie was born in San Francisco. She moved to Hawaii in 1980 to study Okinawan dance and music. She currently teaches and performs with the Kin Dance Academy of Honolulu.*