**SICRI 2018 Conference, France**

***“The Vending Machine Man: innovative ways of sustaining Okinawa’s Shima kutuba and culture”***

**by**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the role of local Okinawan initiatives for language revitalization through the case study of a cultural enabler. The loss of language indicates changing collective language choices that result from shifting language ecologies due to changes taking place in the socio-cultural, political and economic ecology of these linguistic communities. The phenomenon of language shift occurs only in dominated communities: Ryukyuan languages in Okinawa can be seen within the context of the dominance of Japan and the Japanese language. This dominance has contributed to the gradual loss of Ryukyuan languages or the *Shima kutuba (island languages)* and the perception that they are Japanese dialects, not only by mainland Japanese but also by local young Okinawans, rather than stand-alone languages as designated by UNESCO. Several efforts by the Okinawa Prefecture, the Society of Okinawan Language Revitalization and other committees and groups have resulted in some successful re-introduction of *Shima kutuba* and *Uchinaguchi* (language spoken in Okinawa Islands) into the Okinawan society, including for instance a policy to greet all visitors to offices in Naha city in *Uchinaguchi*, intensive classes at cultural schools and public halls and inclusion of *Shima kutuba* in advertising.

Media play an important role in language revitalization and the strong link between Okinawan music and *Shima kutuba* led to the broadcasting of these languages on the radio, as the case of Radio Okinawa demonstrates with its Folk Songs Contest (*Min’yo taikai*) and its Dialect News (*Hogen nyusu*). Radio Okinawa and language revitalization provide the context for this paper within which we place our case study of locally driven initiatives by an Okinawan businessman who acts as a ‘cultural enabler’. This ‘agent of change’ or ‘influencer’ uses his company to promote *Shima kutuba* through its various innovative enterprising activities which include the Okinawa Shima kutuba Broadcasting Station, FM Nirai and various events such comedy shows, bus tours, theater drama and recycled tobacco vending machines that sell merchandise in *Shima kutuba* (drinks, food, clothes etc.). These vending machines are connected to FM Nirai which is broadcasted through internally installed old recycled smart phones. Hosting personalities for the radio programs involve people who work for the traditional Ryukyuan arts and music, cultural practices such bullfighting, performers of traditional and folk music and local ordinary people. This case study provides evidence for the role local cultural enablers can play in language revitalization efforts and that language needs to be used in everyday life and as part of everyday life activities in order to survive. As this local businessman argues, top down efforts by official bodies only cannot succeed in bringing *Shima kutuba* closer to people.