Episode Book

EPISODE #6702

The Ryukyu Islands Beyond Okinawa's Resort Strip

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SYNOPSIS

The Ryukyu Islands are often sold as a single tropical resort, yet this thousand-kilometer arc holds six endangered languages, two major geographic breaks, and distinct histories from the Ryukyu Kingdom to American administration. A trip through the chain reveals Okinawa's centenarian village of Ogimi, analog whale scouts in the Keramas, Miyako's 152 cultural properties and mud-smearing Paantu festival, the Yaeyamas' water-buffalo carts and Yonaguni Monument, and Kagoshima's overlooked Amami islands.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a question. How many places can you name where the tourist brochure, the linguistics textbook, and the United Nations all disagree about what the place even is? Hannah sent us a prompt about that this week — the Ryukyu Islands.



Herman

And this is a household prompt with weight behind it, because Daniel's been circling Japan for years. But Hannah's angle is the far southwest — the whole island chain, not just Okinawa the resort.



Corn

Right. She's got Daniel's old fascination to draw on — he had a karate teacher from the Ryukyus as a kid, and Michael Booth's Japan books brought it all back, especially the one that opens in Okinawa with purple sweet potatoes and the everyday texture of the place. She wants a trip planned through the entire arc — Okinawa, Miyako, Ishigaki, the Yaeyamas, the small islands — weighted toward the obscure and local rather than the beach lounger.



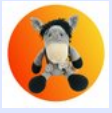
Herman

She said it beautifully, actually — she wants the kind of details that make a place feel real rather than just like a tourist destination.



Corn

Which means the first thing to get straight is that the Ryukyus aren't one place. And the tourist industry has spent decades pretending otherwise.



Herman

The scale of this always gets me. It's a thousand-kilometer arc running from Kyushu down to within sight of Taiwan, and the standard mental image is a beach with a cocktail on it. There are two hard geographic breaks inside it — the Tokara Strait between the Tokara and Amami groups, and the Kerama Gap between Okinawa and Miyako — and south of the Tokara Strait you're in coral-reef country, north of it you're mostly volcanic. The culture splits along those lines too. The Ryukyuan culture literature is blunt about it: the cultural



Herman (continued)

elements are, quote, "far from a unified entity, with different islands having their own distinct subculture and practices."



Corn

Six languages, I know you're about to say.



Herman

Six! Okinawan, Kunigami, Miyakoan, Yaeyama, Yonaguni, and Amami — and they're not mutually intelligible with Japanese, nor mostly with each other. UNESCO classifies Yaeyama and Yonaguni as severely endangered, the other four as definitely endangered. That's a language family quietly going out, island by island.



Corn

And the reason it's like this is historical, not geographic.



Herman

The Ryukyu Kingdom. Independent from fourteen twenty-nine to eighteen seventy-nine — a maritime trading state that paid tribute to Ming China and, after the Satsuma domain invaded in sixteen-oh-nine, was simultaneously a vassal to Japan. It ran that double game for centuries, which is why the culture has Chinese and Japanese and Southeast Asian layers that don't map onto either mainland. Then Japan formally annexed it in eighteen seventy-nine, exiled the last king to Tokyo, and started assimilating. Schoolchildren caught speaking Ryukyuan had to wear dialect cards — the hgen-fuda — around their necks as punishment.



Corn

Punish the language out of them, then spend a century selling the culture back as a souvenir.



Herman

Then nineteen forty-five to nineteen seventy-two — twenty-seven years of American administration, longer than some listeners have been alive, which gave the islands taco rice, military bases, and a very complicated relationship with Tokyo. And the complication isn't finished: the UN Human Rights Committee recommended in two thousand eight that Japan recognize Ryukyuans as indigenous peoples. Japan hasn't accepted it, and several Okinawan municipal assemblies actually passed resolutions rejecting the label themselves — partly because recognition carries base-removal implications that not everyone on the islands wants to own.



Corn

One more administrative wrinkle that kills most itineraries before they start.



Herman

The northern islands — sumi, Tokara, Amami — are Kagoshima Prefecture, not Okinawa. So when someone books "Okinawa," the Amami group simply isn't on the map they're holding. And Amami is arguably the most distinctive part of the whole chain.



Corn

Which is a good place to start walking the islands, because Hannah's core question is what actually distinguishes them from each other. Let's do this as a gradient — most to least tourist-trodden, or most to least Japanese, or something.



Herman

Gradient works. Okinawa main island first — the Honto. It's the political and cultural center, the most Japanese in its infrastructure, and it has the largest concentration of karate anywhere, which matters to this household specifically. But most visitors never leave the Onna resort strip on the west coast — that's the concrete-and-poolside Okinawa. The interesting material is south and north: Itoman and Nanjo in the south, and up in the north, Nakijin with its castle ruins and Ogimi, the village famous for its centenarians.



Corn

Ogimi is the one Booth wrote about, isn't it — "little more than a dirt street lined with small houses, home to more than a dozen centenarians."



Herman

That's his line, from his longevity writing. And the funny thing is how mundane it is — the world's oldest demographic village is a dirt street, not a wellness resort. There's a lesson in there that nobody selling longevity retreats wants to hear.



Corn

Next rung out: the Keramas.



Herman

Tokashiki, Zamami, Aka — forty to seventy minutes by fast ferry from Tomari Port in Naha. Coral, and humpback whales from late December through April. And here's my favorite piece of small-scale local infrastructure in the whole prefecture: the whale-watching isn't luck-based. There's a scout stationed on an island observation deck who radios the boats when he spots whales. A man with binoculars on a hill, running the entire industry's success rate.



Corn

Analog whale detection. Half a century of sonar technology on those boats, and the system is one guy on a deck.



Herman

He's apparently excellent. Fares are modest — Tokashiki is around twenty-two hundred yen one-way on the regular ferry, Zamami around twenty-nine hundred, plus a hundred-yen island entry tax. One caution: ferries go to dry dock for maintenance, and the windows move. The Queen Zamami, for instance, is out of the water for weeks at a stretch in the fall. You build slack into any Kerama leg.



Corn

Then Miyako. And I remember you going through the municipal cultural property data at the kitchen table for this one.



Herman

Because it's a great fact! Miyakojima City claims a hundred and fifty-two designated cultural properties — the most of any municipality in Okinawa Prefecture — while being the least visited by foreigners of the major groups. The two facts are related. Miyako is culturally the most distinctive per head of population in the chain, and hardly anyone flies in from abroad. It has its own boat-race festival, its own circle dance, the Kuicha, that's partly a rain prayer and partly a courtship ritual —



Corn

The two classic reasons to dance in a circle.



Herman

— and it has Paantu. We'll get to Paantu properly, because Paantu deserves its own segment, but Miyako is where Paantu lives.



Corn

Then the Yaeyamas, which are practically a different country.



Herman

Twenty-three islands, twelve inhabited, about four hundred kilometers southwest of the main island and closer to Taiwan than to Naha. Yonaguni sits a hundred and ten kilometers from Taiwan — on a clear day you can see it. Ishigaki is the hub, population around fifty thousand, with an international airport that takes direct flights from Tokyo, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea. And since May there's even a ferry from Taiwan to Ishigaki, which is quietly redrawing the map of how the region gets visited.



Corn

The islands scattered around it each have a character.



Herman

Taketomi is fifteen minutes by ferry and Lonely Planet calls it "a bit like a living Yaeyama cultural museum" — red-roofed houses, stacked limestone walls, shiisā lion-dogs on the rooflines, and the famous water-buffalo cart tours where the driver plays sanshin and there's a flower tucked behind the buffalo's ear.



Corn

The flower behind the ear is the detail I refuse to skip. Somebody decided the buffalo needed to look festive, and that decision has outlived everyone involved in making it.



Herman

Iriomote is forty-five minutes by ferry and it's ninety percent jungle, population two thousand four hundred — people call it the last frontier in Japan. It's home to the Iriomote yamaneko, the wildcat that wasn't registered as a species until nineteen sixty-seven. Kuroshima is heart-shaped, flat, and has more cows than humans. Hateruma is Japan's southernmost inhabited point, famous for its shade of blue and its stars. Yonaguni is the westernmost, with the underwater monument we'll come to.



Corn

And Amami, the forgotten half.



Herman

Kagoshima Prefecture, so it drops off every Okinawa itinerary by administrative accident — and it has shima-uta, its own music tradition that's actually popular on the mainland; its own sanshin, different materials, different sound from the Okinawan one; shima tsumugi silk, which has a thirteen-hundred-year history and takes about two months to weave a single bolt, dyed with iron-rich mud and sharinbai tannin; brown-sugar shochu; the Hachigatsu Odori festival; and UNESCO World Natural Heritage status since twenty twenty-one for the rainforest. It is the single best answer to "less touristed" in the entire archipelago, and it's excluded by a prefecture boundary.



Corn

Give me the eisa example, because I love it.



Herman

Eisa drumming — the thing every tourist associates with Okinawan festivals — is not traditional in most of Amami. Except Yoron and Okinoerabu, which are close enough to Okinawa to have picked it up. So the single tropical-brand postcard of "Ryukyu culture" sells a drumming tradition that a big chunk of the Ryukyus never had. That's the whole misconception in miniature.



Corn

So the islands really do each have their own weather, and their own way of doing things.



Hilbert

Hilbert's Mid-Show Haiku.



Hilbert

The ferry schedule. It does not care about your feelings. Neither does the sea.



Herman

He's not wrong about that — the ferry schedule will end you.



Corn

He once explained a missing segment to me as "boat reasons." No boat was involved.



Herman

Moving on. So that's the map. The part Hannah actually wants is what you'd go and see — the obscure layer, the slightly eccentric layer — and then the itinerary built on top of it. I'd start with the two best "is this real?" stories in the entire chain, and they're both on different islands.



Corn

Paantu and the monolith.



Herman

Paantu first. On Miyako, in the Shimajiri district of Hirara, on an auspicious day in the ninth lunar month, men dress as visiting deities — masks, bodies covered in vines and leaves — and they roam the village smearing mud on residents to drive off evil. If you get mud on you, the tradition says you stay healthy for the year. They chase children. New houses, new cars, new anything are considered especially in need of mud. UNESCO put it on the Representative List in twenty eighteen as part of "Visiting Gods: Masked and Disguised Deities," and it's been a nationally designated important intangible folk cultural property since nineteen ninety-three.



Corn

So the local festival is being ambushed by a swamp creature, and the correct response is gratitude.



Herman

The correct response is to not clean it off, actually. That's the whole point — you wear the mud. There's a variant in the Nobaru district called Satiparai, held on the last ox-day of the twelfth lunar month, which the New York Times covered back in two thousand eight. Different date, same mud.



Corn

And on Yonaguni, the mud is replaced by a rock.



Herman

The Yonaguni Monument. A submerged formation about a hundred meters by sixty, roughly twenty-five meters tall, with its top terrace only five meters below the surface — shallow enough that it's a popular dive site. Discovered in nineteen eighty-six by a divemaster named Kihachiro Aratake, who was scouting hammerhead shark sites and found a stepped, terraced structure instead. Marine geologist Masaaki Kimura has spent decades arguing it's man-made — a stepped monolith, possibly ruins. Robert Schoch and a twenty nineteen paper by Takayuki Ogata and colleagues conclude it's natural: weathering and erosion along sandstone bedding planes and joints, which produces



Herman (continued)

exactly that stair-stepped look. And here's the part that settles it for me — neither the Agency for Cultural Affairs nor Okinawa Prefecture recognizes it as a cultural artifact. Japan, the country that designates a mud-smearing swamp god as an important cultural property, looked at this rock and said no.



Corn

That's actually a decent epistemic test. The agency that will paperwork anything ancient looked at the pyramid of the sea and shrugged.



Herman

So if Daniel goes, he should dive it, but dive it knowing he's looking at very geometric sandstone. The hammerheads are real either way.



Corn

Karate next, because that's the origin of this whole interest.



Herman

And the misconception is a big one: karate is not Japanese. It's Okinawan. It grew out of an indigenous art called ti — "hands" — and split into Shuri-te, Naha-te, and Tomari-te, named for three districts of the old capital. Japan imported it afterward and gave it the gi and the belt system. For someone like Daniel, whose teacher was Ryukyuan, there are two specific places. The Okinawa Karate Kaikan in Tomigusuku, opened twenty seventeen — multiple dojos including the vermilion Shurei Hall overlooking Naha, a reference room with documents and weapons, a short history theatre, leaflets in nine languages, and an annual Karate Day with grandmaster demonstrations across the styles.



Corn

And the other one is better.



Herman

The Okinawa Prefecture Karate Museum is on the second floor of Tetsuhiro Hokama's own dojo in Nishihara-cho. Hokama was born in nineteen forty-four, learned Shuri-te from his uncle, and has assembled over five hundred materials — documents, photographs, weapons. It's a museum run by a working master, above the room where he still teaches. No visitor center, no nine languages. You climb the stairs of a dojo and there it is.



Corn

A museum whose ticket office is a lesson. Hokama's own site points out Okinawa has three "national sports museums," by the way — his karate museum, a Yoko Gushiken boxing museum on Ishigaki, and a triathlon museum on Miyako.



Herman

A boxing museum and a triathlon museum, both named after local sports heroes, both on the remote islands. I find that trio oddly moving. The islands memorialize their athletes with the seriousness other places reserve for wars.



Corn

Which is a pivot, because baseball is next, and Okinawa takes baseball more seriously than war.



Herman

That's — hm. Actually, the strange thing is the war sites memorialize the war, and baseball memorializes the reversion. Before reversion in seventy-two, Okinawa had essentially no presence at Koshien, the national high school tournament. Then Okinawa Shogaku won the prefecture's first spring title in nineteen ninety-nine, won again in two thousand eight, and Konan High swept spring and summer in twenty ten — only the sixth school ever to do that. The Cabinet Office's own fiftieth-anniversary-of-reversion project documents what happens when an Okinawan team plays at Koshien: "the roads empty of cars." Everyone's indoors watching.



Corn

The government publishing that the prefecture shuts down for a high school game is my favorite sentence in Japanese bureaucratic literature.



Herman

It's not merely a sport, they write, but a culture rooted in the region. And there's a modern layer: since twenty twenty-two the Japan Winter League runs every November and December in Okinawa — a league explicitly for players nobody drafted. This year's edition has a hundred and twenty-five players, runs from late November to mid-December, NPB clubs like Yakult and Lotte send players, and more than forty MLB and NPB scouts watch. If Daniel timed a trip for late November, he could watch a stadium full of men playing for their careers in the one prefecture where baseball still functions as civic religion.



Corn

That's tomorrow, almost. Twenty twenty-six season starts the twenty-second.



Herman

He'd have to leave tonight.



Corn

The American layer, before we build the route.



Herman

It's the under-touristed part. Twenty-seven years of US administration left taco rice — the actual classic hybrid, essentially a taco served over rice — the base fences, and an economy still entangled with the military presence. And the thing guidebooks glide over: Okinawa's most-visited war sites memorialize Japanese violence, not American. The Himeyuri Peace Museum in Itoman commemorates the Himeyuri Student Corps — schoolgirls conscripted as nurses during the Battle of Okinawa, most of whom died when the hospital caves were overrun. Open daily, mornings to late afternoon. It's a hard visit, and it should be. The other site I'd insist on is the Nakamura House, a mid-eighteenth-century farmhouse compound, an Important Cultural Property, and described as exceptionally rare precisely because an entire residential compound survived the battle — closed Wednesdays and Thursdays, which tells you how small an operation it is.



Corn

That pairing is the trip in miniature — the museum of what was done to the schoolgirls, and the farmhouse that got through it.



Herman

Then the texture layer — crafts and food. In Itoman, the Ryukyu no Yakata does bingata and weaving with a thirty-minute dyeing course you can just walk into. On Ishigaki, the Yachimun-kan Kobo puts you at a table with veteran weavers, mostly grandmothers, and in a couple of hours you make a placemat or woven sandals. On Iriomote there's Panari ware — hand-shaped earthenware, clay mixed with ground shell, open-flame fired, far less known than yachimun pottery. And Makishi Public Market in Naha — established nineteen fifty-one, rebuilt and reopened in twenty twenty-three as a three-storey building, about fifty stalls plus twenty more outside, open eight to ten. The system is called mochiage, running since nineteen ninety: you buy fish or pork downstairs, carry it upstairs, and the restaurants cook it for you.



Corn

You shop, they cook. The entire meal is a relay.



Herman

It's the correct market design. Elsewhere you get what the kitchen decided; here the market and the kitchen are two departments of the same building.



Corn

One more layer before the itinerary — the religion, because I think it's the thing that most separates Ryukyuan culture from the mainland, more than food or karate.



Herman

I agree, and it's the least visible to a visitor. Ryukyuan religion is animistic with Shinto and Buddhist influences, centered on ancestor and deity worship, and — this is the key — performed mainly by women, who are held to be spiritually stronger. In the kingdom, priestesses held real institutional power. The creation goddess Amamikyu bore three children who became, in order, the first king, the first head priestess, and the first farmer. Note the ranking: political power, spiritual power, food. The physical sites are the utaki — sacred groves — and the institutional remnant is the noro priestess system, which



Herman (continued)

functioned into the twentieth century. Mainland Japanese visitors find this foreign, because it is. You can stand at Sefa-utaki and understand more about Ryukyuan distinctness than from any museum.



Corn

So — the trip. Hannah asked for a real one, with ferries and nights, not "spend time in each island group."



Herman

Here's how I'd build it. Three weeks, or a solid two if you cut hard. Start in Naha — three nights. That covers the Karate Kaikan and Hokama's museum, Makishi market, Shuri Castle, and a full day south to Itoman for Himeyuri, the Peace Memorial Park, the Nakamura House, and the dyeing course. Then one night on a Kerama island — Tokashiki or Zamami, forty to seventy minutes out from Tomari. If it's January to April, you do the whale trip, and you time it to the scout's radios, not your own optimism.



Corn

Naha then Kerama — I'd have gone the other way, beach last, culture first while you still have attention.



Herman

There's an argument for that. But the Kerama hop is a warm-up ferry — cheap, short, forgiving. It teaches you the system before the long crossings. Then fly Naha to Miyako, fifty minutes, three nights. That's Paantu country, the cultural-property density, the Hari boat race if the lunar calendar cooperates, and empty beaches, because Miyako gets the Japanese honeymoon crowd and almost no one else.



Corn

Then the Yaeyama stage.



Herman

Fly Miyako to Ishigaki, another short hop, and base yourself on Ishigaki for five or six nights with day trips out. Taketomi for half a day — buffalo cart, limestone walls, bicycle. Iriomote for a full day or an overnight — the jungle, the yamaneko conservation center, the Panari pottery at the north tip. Kuroshima for the cows and the cycling if you have a spare half day, Hateruma for the southernmost point and the Blue. Kabira Bay on Ishigaki itself — the glass-bottom boat is about seventeen hundred yen for thirty minutes and it's the one tourist thing on Ishigaki that earns its queue. Plus the distillery, the Yachimun-kan workshop, the Gushiken boxing museum. Then the optional extension: Yonaguni, three flights a day from Ishigaki or a twice-weekly four-hour ferry, two nights — the monument dive, the hammerheads, the westernmost point. And then the leg everyone skips: fly Ishigaki to Amami via Naha or via Kagoshima, four nights — the tsumugi village, the shima-uta, the rainforest, the shochu — and then Amami to Kagoshima or straight home. That's the full arc, north to south or south to north, roughly sixteen to eighteen days at a human pace.



Corn

Timing constraints?



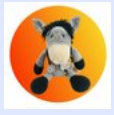
Herman

Typhoon season runs June through October — that's the one hard no. January is the counterintuitive sweet spot for the Yaeyamas: highs around twenty-one degrees, water at twenty-two, which is swimmable if you're brave and diveable regardless. And the ferry dry-dock windows mean any leg depending on a specific boat needs a fallback. Also the Winter League, if you want the baseball — November into December, and it's running right now.



Corn

Question I want to push on before we wrap the route. You've put Amami in as the deliberate detour, four nights, two flights to reach. Is it worth it for someone whose trip is already three weeks? Because I'd argue yes, and I want you to argue it.



Herman

I'd argue it precisely because it's the detour. Everything else on the route is Okinawa Prefecture — one administrative brand, however varied. Amami is the proof the culture survives the boundary. Different sanshin, different silk, different songs, brown sugar shochu you can't get made the same way anywhere else. If you want to see the region rather than the prefecture, Amami is the region's second half.



Corn

What would you cut if you only had two weeks?



Herman

Yonaguni, regretfully — it's the most time-expensive island per reward. And the Kerama night becomes a day trip, which loses the quiet-after-the-day-trippers-leave hour that is the actual point of small islands. Hmm. No — I'd cut Kuroshima and keep the Kerama overnight. Two weeks without a single island morning and evening isn't a Ryukyu trip, it's a commute.



Hilbert

The distillery is the reason to stay on Ishigaki, not the day trips.



Herman

You say that like everyone's skipping it — we put it in the itinerary.



Hilbert

You put it in as a stop, Herman. It's an afternoon of your life. I stood in that glass corridor at Takamine for what the staff would call an unreasonable amount of time, watching the stills, and nobody asked me to leave. Seventy years they've been running that floor. The three-year Omoto is the only one worth the trip, and the bottles don't leave the island — that's the point of the place, and also my grievance, because I've been trying to get a case shipped off Ishigaki for years and the shopkeeper won't do it. Corn would appreciate the shopkeeper. Same temperament.



Corn

I've never met him and I already side with him.



Hilbert

He's right, technically. There's an email address for enquiries and it takes a week to get a no. I've been collecting the nos. I also don't drink awamori out of anything but my own glass — small one, holds about sixty milliliters, travels in a sock — and I have a map of the Ishigaki distillery quarter I drew in pencil on the ferry back. Better than the published ones, I think. First time I've said that out loud. There's a level on channel two that wants a two-decibel trim, Corn, your pauses go quiet, and then we're back — the ferry drawing took two crossings, and I got the awamori home in the end by drinking it there. Glass and all.



Herman

The map. You drew a map of the distillery district, in pencil, on a ferry.



Hilbert

The published maps put the wrong entrance on Takamine. Mine has the right one, and a note about parking. That's mostly what I came out to say. Herman, your whale scout was good radio.



Herman

So the man's been to Ishigaki, kept a running dispute with a shopkeeper over shipping law, drinks his awamori from a glass that travels in a sock, and has corrected the cartography. And he's never mentioned any of this at the desk in — how long have we worked together?



Hilbert

Longer than the ferry takes.



Corn

The detail I can't get past is the sock. He has a designated awamori sock. Somewhere in that flat is a drawer with one sock in it and a purpose.



Herman

What I take from it, for the itinerary, is the Omoto point — if the bottles only sell on the island, then the itinerary needs slack on Ishigaki specifically. A morning that exists to go back to the distillery a second time, because the first bottle won't survive the trip home. That's a real constraint Daniel would hit on day one.



Corn

He'd hit it and then keep hitting it on every island. Takamine's bottles only, Panari ware from one studio at the north tip of Iriomote, tsumugi that takes two months a bolt. The whole chain is an economy of things you can only get by being there.



Herman

Which is honestly the argument for going slow rather than far. Three weeks, and half of it on boats under a hundred passengers.



Corn

And that leaves the question I'd want Hannah and Daniel to sit with on the flight over. The Taiwan ferry started this year, Makishi rebuilt itself into a three-storey building, the Winter League is shipping scouts in by the dozen — everything we've described as "the less-touristed side" is infrastructure for finding it. Every year the phrase describes slightly fewer islands. The Ryukyus have absorbed a kingdom, an annexation, and twenty-seven years of American administration, so I wouldn't bet against them — but the interesting question isn't whether the culture survives. It's whether it stays findable.



Herman

The Yonaguni Monument is almost the emblem of that. A place whose meaning is contested between the man who dived past it, the geologists who measured it, the prefecture that declined to certify it, and the tourists who want it to be a lost civilization. Everyone gets the island they came for.



Corn

Our thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode seven, Building Custom ASR Tools; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode nineteen, AI Images. This has been My Weird Prompts, where no question is too obscure and no rabbit hole too deep. If you enjoyed this one, leave us a review wherever you listen — it helps. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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