It was around the end of August, which meant toward the end of the summer vacation for my 12-year-old daughter. My family was trying to get the last chance to enjoy the summer. The best place for this purpose must be Okinawa, we decided. Scuba diving in the tropical ocean, the huge aquarium, and Okinawan noodles were going to be the big events for us.

That decision was right. The sky was wide, bright and blue, as if it had been just squeezed out of the tube of watercolor with the label ‘blue.’ The ocean was full of variant shades from brilliant turquoise to deep indigo. Maybe the combination of the strong sunbeams, the clear water, and the coral under the water were making them. Vivid colored fish were dancing around us. The air out above the water was hot and pricked the skin of our necks and arms, and the gentle crisp wind saved us from sticky sweat. A true summer was there.

My family had just eaten Okinawan noodles called sohki-soba with thick slices of juicy sweet pork that melted on our tongues. We were driving along the wide and straight road to the famous huge aquarium, Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium, along which we could see nothing but U.S. Army Camps on one side, and some restaurants advertising American food like steak, signs of sightseeing spots, and shabby local shops on the other side.

My husband behind the wheel was trying to catch the airwaves of Okinawa on the radio. English words filled the car. ‘Listen, that’s the commercial we heard on ESPN Radio in the United States.’ A commercial for car insurance was the one we heard in New Orleans, where we stayed two years ago. My husband worked as a researcher in a lab, and I studied some Mayan languages at the same university in New Orleans. My daughter struggled to survive in a school with two different languages, English and Spanish, and different cultures. My mother enjoyed Mardi Gras collecting beads thrown from heavily decorated floats.

It was fun to listen to the radio in English, far away from the United States. But those words were not for us, but for the soldiers of the camp. ‘Let’s try some other radio stations.’ I turned the channel of the radio. A girl’s voice came to our ears. Maybe she was around the same age as my daughter, the only child who was always attracting all the attention in our family. All of us became silent trying to catch what the girl on the radio was saying. After a few minutes, my husband sighed, ‘What is this? I can’t hear a word.’ It was just a voice to us, conveying no meaning. It must be some language, but not English for the soldiers or Japanese for us. What kind of language was she using here in Japan?

Another voice came from the radio. It sounded like an elderly woman around the same age as my mother, who was sitting silently in the back seat of the car. The woman talked perhaps in the same language as the girl, and then made a comment on the girl’s speech in ordinary Japanese I’m familiar with. The announcer praised the girl in a happy high voice. ‘She’s great. She can speak three languages, Uchinah-Guchi, Yamatu-Guchi, and English!’ It was a language program of the Okinawan language, Uchinah-Guchi.

‘Sounds of the Wind.’ Hitoko Yamada.

This is Okinawa. A little girl speaks three languages here. The Japanese I know is called Yamatu-Guchi here, to be distinguished from their native language, Uchinah-Guchi. Although I knew that the way the native people in Okinawa spoke was very different from the way the people in the mainland spoke, I didn’t understand it was so different that I couldn’t call it a dialect of Japanese. It surely was different. The girl’s talk on the radio was my first encounter with another version of Japan.

More than one hundred years ago, Ryukyu was an independent nation, located in the district that is called Okinawa nowadays. The people in Ryukyu were peacefully trading with the people in China and with the people in the mainland of Japan, especially the Satsuma Domain. Maybe I had heard these facts from my elder sister when I was a child, or from some drama or documentary program of NHK after I was grown. But they had been like old fairy tales to me. Okinawa was just a region of Japan for me like any other part of Japan before I heard that girl’s voice from the radio. Their language, Uchinah-Guchi, made me remember the independent history of Ryukyu before they were integrated into the nation of Japan.

Language is, of course, a tool for communication. But maybe it is more than that. Without the language of Japanese I wouldn’t be myself. I would feel like a child, who lost her mother in the crowd on the street. The people of Okinawa were deprived of their language under the rule of Japan at the end of 19th century. Their mother language was degraded as an inferior dialect of Japanese. They were forced to learn ‘standard’ Japanese. And after Japan lost World War II in the middle of 20th century, Okinawa was under the rule of the United States, and many Okinawan people learned English in order to work in the base camps for good salaries. The loss of their language meant the loss of their pride as the legitimate people of a kingdom. But now, some people in Okinawa have found a little light of hope to live with pride using their own language. The radio program I heard was one of the results of their efforts. They are trying to retrieve their language, their identities, and their pride.

When I visited the other end of Japan, Hokkaido, for the conference of Japanese Linguistics a couple of months later, I found the same kind of efforts going on in the community of Ainu, the native tribe in Hokkaido.

It was the middle of October. In Tokushima on Shikoku Island, where I live, it was still warm and I could be comfortable without a jacket, no question about a coat or a scarf. Leaves on the trees were still green, rustling in the bright sunlight. But the view from the airplane over the land of Hokkaido was that of shining scarlet and yellow leaves.

I had only half a day before the conference, and took a train directly from Shin-Chitose Airport to Shiraoi, where the Ainu village, Porotokotan, is preserved. Maybe the experience in Okinawa reminded me of Ainu when I saw the poster of the conference held in Hokkaido. It seemed impossible for me not to make my way to some place where I might learn about Ainu, the people and the language. I googled for appropriate destinations with the keyword ‘Ainu’ and I hit on Porotokotan in Shiraoi.

From the station of Shiraoi, I hurried holding my high-collared coat tight, with wool gloves on my hands. The road was wide but not so many cars passed by. On the sidewalk, nobody was walking except me. Following the direction of the map on my iPhone, I turned a corner and crossed a railroad, where nogiku blossomed. The
flowers were light purple like those I saw on the mainland, but they were more than five times higher with thicker stalks. Nogiku on the mainland has thin stalks and sways to a breath of air, and has the image of an innocent frail young girl like the heroine of the novel titled Nogiku-no Haka, Grave of the Wild Chrysanthemums, but this one at the railroad crossing stood straight in the freezing wind, and reminded me of an Ainu woman who had endured hardships, severe cold winters and discrimination from the Japanese on the mainland.

When I came to the next crossroad, I saw a few taxis and some buses for sightseers far on the right street. After a few minutes’ walk beside chestnut trees, I finally arrived at the entrance of Porotokotan. When I was buying the ticket, an announcement came from the back, ‘A performance of traditional Ainu folk dance and music will start soon in Saun-Chise!’ I ran to the building called Saun-Chise.

The steeply-pitched roof and the walls of that house were all thickly thatched with reeds like a robust hairy man who protects his family from the frozen outer world. Inside the house was a big room with no dividing walls. I sat on a bench in front of the stage. A row of dried salmon hung from the high ceiling. A Chinese couple, the only other guests there, were taking pictures of the fish and the stage with a fireplace. The leaflet told me that Saun-Chise meant a ‘fore house’ in the Ainu language. Chise meant a ‘house.’ A man with a headband and a short kimono appeared on the stage and talked about the traditional life-style of Ainu. The black, white and red geometrical figures dyed on the headband and the robe were Ainu symbols to protect them from evil spirits and to pray for their luck and prosperity. He introduced a group of performers. Long black-haired women with similar attire played songs and dances. Their songs were the songs of birds and howls of animals in the dark. Their dances were the dances of birds with big and wide wings and of animals jumping in the field. The tunes of the Ainu musical instruments, the mouth harp mukkuri and five-stringed tonkori, were the sounds of winds and waves. They moved my heart and soul into the wilderness of the huge landscape of the northern land.

Porotokotan is an Ainu word and means ‘a village on a big lake,’ and it is actually located on a big beautiful lake. It is not a real village to live in, but a base for the Ainu people and their supporters who try to preserve the Ainu culture. Now it seems to be a famous sightseeing spot for Japanese from the mainland and for tourists from other Asian countries. Out of the Saun-Chise, many Asian people were exploring the world of Ainu, speaking in Chinese or in Thai.

The village has five chise and a little museum, which exhibits the traditional tools for their lives, a variety of crafts, cultural activities, epics and stories, and songs and dances. The canoes and harpoons for fishing and bows and arrows for hunting are not big. They do not catch too many animals and allow human beings and animals to live together, respecting each other. At the museum shop, I bought some little carved wooden figures of owls for my family, a book of Ainu epics, and one mukkuri mouth harp.

On the wall near the museum shop, a recruiting poster encouraged students of Ainu language courses to enrol. But it was impossible for visitors living outside Hokkaido like me to take them. Ainu language, called as Ainu itak, is acknowledged as an endangered one, and it is in even more danger than the Okinawan language. While Okinawan Uchinah-guchi is genealogically related to Japanese, Ainu itak is an independent language that has no such relation with any other language. And since
Ainu itak has no letters besides borrowed ones like Japanese or the Roman alphabet, this language needs people who can speak it to stay alive. Some months ago, I heard a news story that a politician in Hokkaido said we had no Ainu in Hokkaido. It was a rude and inconsiderate remark, but I cannot deny the fact that it’s hard to find an Ainu person who is fluent in Ainu itak and keeps the Ainu way of life. People from the mainland of Japan have deprived the Ainu people of their language and culture, and their pride as a united people. Now it seems to be difficult to restore them as they used to have.

The campus for the conference was huge and beautiful, unlike most campuses on the mainland, but more like those in the United States. Red, yellow and brown leaves were scattered on the sloping green lawns, through which ran clear-water brooks, with some wild ducks on them. Boys and girls from the neighbourhood were playing around, a couple of young foreigners were lying on top of the coloured leaves, and the elderly and families were walking under the brown leafy poplars and golden-leaved gingko. But in a second-hand bookstore close to the campus, I found an old discoloured journal with an article, which said some bones of Ainu had been dug out from under the campus. The campus had been built on old Ainu villages.

I remembered that I heard in a class of Mayan studies that the temples for Mayan people were buried under the Christian churches built for Europeans. Intruders, Japanese in Hokkaido and Europeans in America, had unlimited land for their use, because they didn’t see any other human beings there. Natives were no one to them, or they were regarded as potential slaves for them. The intruders used as much land as they wanted to build their churches and universities. That beautiful campus at which I enjoyed the golden leaves suddenly turned into a dark grave of Ainu in my mind.

I searched again through the program of the conference, for any reports on the Ainu language, but the program was full of dialects and old versions of Japanese, with no Ainu itak nor Okinawan Uchinah-Guchi. Maybe this conference is for Japanese, but since it is held in Hokkaido, it could have been an appropriate place to discuss Ainu itak.

In the United States, I met a lot of researchers of indigenous languages spoken in the continents of America, and linguists who usually study on English seemed to have some knowledge about those languages. But in Japan, I have never seen a linguist of Ainu itak or Uchinah-Guchi, other than a few I saw on TV or read about in books. Many linguists I know are working on Japanese or English, and a few on Chinese, German and French. Not many universities in Japan have courses on other languages.

When I was a little girl, I found some books containing Ainu epics in the small library room of my elementary school. The words on the pages had the mythical rhythm of oral stories. Various birds and animals lived like human beings, manifesting as various characters with many thoughts. Owls act nobly as gods, while foxes play foolishly. Even salmon think and speak like human beings. They talk, help, and play tricks on people. There was no definite barrier between animals and people. I was fascinated with that other world. This memory had been buried under multiple layers of my other memories.

Back in my room in Tokushima, I picked up the mukkuri from my desk and pulled a string as the lady at the cashier of the museum shop had shown me. The bamboo strip didn’t make the sound of furious wind in winter as I heard in the Saun-Chise, but produced a buzzing sound of bees on the spring breeze.

‘Sounds of the Wind.’ Hitoko Yamada.
