

Newsletter from Ambassador in charge of Okinawan Affairs
No.9: History and Culture of Okinawa

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Tsushima-maru Memorial Service
(22 August 2026, Kozakura-no-To monument, Naha City)

I experienced August in Okinawa for the first time. The strong sun beat down on the beaches, making it feel like the height of summer, while occasional rain and typhoons caused disruptions. As I went about my daily work, watching many tourists in Naha, the last day of August arrived before I knew it.

Looking back, I had many chances to attend events that made me feel and think about Okinawa's history and culture. In particular, at the Tsushima-maru memorial service on 22 August, I reflected on the children and their families who were lost when the evacuation ship was sunk, and I renewed my commitment to peace. I also attended the Okinawa Karate World Festival demonstration, the opening ceremony for a program for trainees of Okinawan descent, the Yonabaru Great Tug-of-War, and the Toyohara (Nago City) summer festival. Through these events, I felt how traditions and culture have been passed down over many years and shared by many people.

In this issue of the Newsletter from Ambassador in charge of Okinawan Affairs, I share my reflections on Okinawa's history and culture, drawing on a series of events I attended this month.



Release of Paper Kite Butterflies at the Tsushima-maru Memorial Service
(22 August 2026, Kozakura-no-To monument, Naha City)

● Tsushima-maru Memorial Service

On 22 August 1944, the evacuation ship Tsushima Maru, carrying schoolchildren, was sunk by torpedoes from a U.S. submarine. A total of 1,484 lives were lost, including 784 schoolchildren (1,040 were children aged 15 or younger). On 22 August this year, to pray for the repose of the victims and for lasting world peace, the 2026 Tsushima-maru Memorial Service was held at the Kozakura-no-To monument in Asahigaoka Park, Naha City.

After a moment of silence, the Tsushima-maru Bereaved Families Association and a children's choir released paper kite butterflies. Some of the butterflies lingered near the monument, as if reluctant to leave. We then listened to sutra chanting and choral singing, a memorial address by the head of the Tsushima Maru Memorial Association, and condolence messages from honored guests,

followed by incense offerings. Even 82 years after this tragic event in which so many children were lost, I was deeply struck that so many people still came to the Kozakura-no-To monument to offer incense.

After the service, I visited the Tsushima-maru Memorial Museum again, studied the history, and renewed my commitment to peace. Honoring the dedication of those who have passed down the story of the Tsushima-maru to this day, I intend to work every day from here in Okinawa—amid the most severe and complex security environment since the war—through diplomacy to help realize peace for Japan, the region, and the world.



3rd Okinawa Karate World Festival
(2 August 2026, Okinawa Convention Center, Ginowan City)

● Okinawa Karate World Festival

Okinawa karate is one of the best-known cultural traditions born in Okinawa and spread worldwide. From 30 July to 2 August, the 3rd Okinawa Karate World Festival was held at the Okinawa Convention Center in Ginowan City. Starting with this edition, the youth competition and the general demonstration were

combined into a single event held every four years. About 3,000 karate enthusiasts from 49 countries and regions took part.

Invited by the Executive Committee, I attended the demonstration on the final day, 2 August. Youth and adult practitioners from various schools of Okinawa karate and kobudo (classical weapons) took the stage one after another to perform different kata. Many participants were from overseas, giving the event a strong international flavor. I was also deeply moved to see wheelchair users performing kata together on stage.

I believe many people come to appreciate Japan and visit through Okinawa karate. By sharing the many attractions of Okinawa's unique culture with the world, we can further broaden Japan's international exchange.

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Informal gathering after the opening ceremony
of the 38th Ginozanchu Global Youth Trainee Program
(3 August 2026, Ginoza Village Community Center)

● Ginozanchu Global Youth Trainee Program

On 3 August in Ginoza Village, the opening ceremony for the 38th intake of the Ginozanchu Global Youth Trainee Program was held, and I attended as an invited guest. The venue was filled with many residents, including Ginoza Village Mayor Toma Atsushi, village staff, assembly members, instructors, relatives of the trainees, and international exchange coordinators. The four trainees from Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and the United States (Hawaii) had already studied Japanese in their home countries and confidently introduced themselves in Japanese, referring to notes.

I learned that Ginoza launched this program in 1986, ahead of other municipalities in Okinawa. I gave welcome remarks at the ceremony and then spoke informally with the trainees. They are all young professionals with their own research or learning themes and are making proactive use of this opportunity. Over the next three months, they will take Japanese language classes, cultural

training, and Ryukyuan dance lessons; go on study visits inside and outside the village; interact with local elementary and junior high schools; and present the results of their training at events such as the village festival. I hope the program will be fulfilling again this year.



Yonabaru Great Tug-of-War
(August 16, 2026, Udun-yama Youth Square, Yonabaru Town)

● Yonabaru Great Tug-of War

On August 16, the Yonabaru Great Tug-of-War, a tradition with over 450 years of history, was held, and I watched it for the first time. The procession entered from the east and west gates, led by teams carrying tall banners, with several performers riding atop the massive rope. The square soon filled to capacity. A lively pre-dance to the beat of gongs and conch horns energized the crowd. The two halves of the rope were then joined with a wooden pin, and the tug-of-war began. After a few intense minutes, the East won the first official round and the West won the second. I watched for just over an hour in the charged atmosphere and was deeply impressed by the power and beauty of this tradition.

It is a town-wide event. For example, local junior high school students take part in the pre-dance, and the master of ceremonies role has been passed down in one family for three generations. Because the whole town shares many roles, the event has strong cohesion and pull.

The rope used this time was finished late the night before using traditional methods, and I heard it will also be used for the Great Tug-of-War at the Kumejima Festival in September. In Okinawa, the Itoman Great Tug-of-War in September and the Naha Great Tug-of-War in October are also famous, and I hope to see them and compare.



Bubble Performance at the Toyohara Summer Festival
(15 August 2026, Toyohara Multipurpose Square, Nago City)

● Toyohara Summer Festival

On 15 August, the same weekend, the Toyohara District in Nago City held its summer festival. The program included greetings from District Chief Miyagi Naomi and Nago Mayor Toguchi Taketoyo, a children's lion dance and Eisa, a bubble performance by LinoLino (active mainly in northern Okinawa), a beer

drinking contest, a karaoke contest, and a fireworks display. The festival ended with a Bon dance and Kachashi, followed by three cheers of banzai.

Local residents of Toyohara took part, along with people from the nearby Henoko and Kushi districts, Nago City, the Okinawa Defense Bureau, the U.S. Forces in Okinawa, and others. I was also invited and joined the event from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Okinawa Liaison Office, and enjoyed the dances and activities while building connections.

I grew up in Tokyo and Yokohama, and perhaps because they are large cities, I hardly remember joining local events. Taking part in the Toyohara summer festival, I was impressed to see children and seniors enjoying the same activities together and to feel the welcoming culture that continues today.



America 250 Commemorative Japan–U.S. Joint Cleanup on Gate 2 Street
(2 August 2026, Koza Music Town)

● Learning, sharing, and leveraging Okinawa's history and culture

In addition to events related to Okinawa's history and culture, we continue to hold exchanges of views with U.S. Forces stationed in Okinawa and municipal leaders, and to work on Japan–U.S. exchange initiatives. On 2 August, I joined a joint cleanup on Gate 2 Street in Okinawa City with local residents and U.S. military personnel supported by the Center Neighborhood Association. The weekly

activity was boosted this time as a celebration of the United States' 250th anniversary, with U.S. Consul General in Okinawa Andrew Ou, Okinawa City Mayor Hanashiro Daisuke, and participants of the "Thinking of Okinawa's Future in the U.S." (TOFU) program. Wearing commemorative T-shirts and caps, we carried out the cleanup and the exchange session for participants followed.

I believe that learning about and deepening understanding of Okinawan history and culture is fundamental to the work of the Okinawa Liaison Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I will continue to seize opportunities to join various events, share Okinawa's many attractions with the world, and bring a steadfast commitment to peace to our daily activities.

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