

## From Yabu to Yabe

From November 9 through November 12, 2006, Mari, Miki and I visited the *honke* (main branch) Yabu family who still live at the same location in Yamakawa-cho in the Shuri area of Naha-shi, Okinawa, that our ancestors have occupied for some 300 years.

The home that Kenjiro and Shigeko Yabu live in now was built after WWII, when their former home was bombed into rubble by land, air and sea forces of the United States in the Battle of Okinawa. But their house is built on the same site that once experienced the life and times of many of our Okinawa forebears, including Kentsu, Kenden and Kenshiro Yabu.

As we sat down to dinner in the Kenjiro Yabu home for a typical Okinawan meal, Kenjiro explained how the Yabu became Yabe. The story goes like this:

Yabu is the classical pronunciation of the *kanji* for our family surname in Okinawa. It is not necessarily the *on yomi* (Chinese reading) — we did not discuss whether or not it is *on yomi* or *kun yomi* (Japanese reading), so this point may merit further discussion at another time with Kenjiro.

The *Ya* kanji, which is the first of two kanji in our surname, is written and read as in the “*ya*” in *yane*, which means “roof”. There are other possible combinations, meanings and connotations, but this is beyond the scope of this discussion — as well as being far, far, far beyond my understanding of Japanese.

Now, said Kenjiro, the second kanji in our surname can be pronounced in two ways: the Okinawan pronunciation, which is “*bu*” — but which the *Naichi* (folks from the 4 main islands of Japan) pronounce as “*be*”. The two kanji characters that make up our surname are exactly the same in both cases — only the pronunciation has changed; and both of them are correct, depending upon which locality the reader comes from.

So when Kenden YABU was living in Okinawa, his last name was pronounced YABU, which was correct for the time and place.

But then he emigrated to Hawaii around 1906, and there he was exposed to *Nipponjin* (Japanese) from both the main islands of Japan and from Okinawa, which had only recently been created as another Prefecture of Japan in 1879. Although there were many emigrants from Okinawa in Hawaii in 1906, most of the Japanese were from Naichi Japan. We don't know which pronunciation of the family name he used in the Islands.

When Kenden moved to the mainland of America in 1912, the huge preponderance of Japanese immigrants there were Naichi, and it is supposed — speculated — that he then changed the pronunciation of his name to Kenden YABE

As Kenjiro put it — “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” — and in mainland America in 1912, the Japanese “Romans” were the Naichi.

So, we THINK, that's how the Yabu became the Yabe in the United States.

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Homer Yasui

November 18, 2006

More stories coming later from Miki (Miyuki) and me

The story goes like this:

Yabu is the classical pronunciation of the kanji for our family surname in Okinawa. It is not necessarily the on yom (Chinese reading) — we did not discuss whether or not it is on yom or kun yom (Japanese reading), so this point may merit further discussion at another time with Kenjiro.

The Ya kanji, which is the first of two kanji in our surname, is written and read as in the “ya” in yane, which means “roof”. There are other possible combinations, meanings and connotations, but this is beyond the scope of this discussion — as well as being far far beyond my understanding of Japanese.

Now, said Kenjiro, the second kanji in our surname can be pronounced in two ways: the Okinawa pronunciation, which is “yu” — but which the Waichu (folks from the 4 main islands of Japan) pronounce as “ye”. The two kanji characters that make up our surname are exactly the same in both cases — only the pronunciation has changed; and both of them are correct, depending upon which locality the reader comes from.

So when Kenden YABU was living in Okinawa, his last name was pronounced YABU, which was correct for the time and place.

But then he emigrated to Hawaii around 1906, and there he was exposed to Nipponjin (Japanese) from both the main islands of Japan and from Okinawa, which had only recently been created as another Prefecture of Japan in 1879. Although there were many emigrants from Okinawa in Hawaii in 1906, most of the Japanese were from Naichi Japan. We don't know which pronunciation of the family name he used in the islands.

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