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On the Ryukyuan word for “sun”:

Is **teda* really unique?

One of the hallmarks of the Ryukyuan languages and dialects is said to be their unique phonology, morphology and vocabulary not shared with dialects of Japanese. And one of the most oft-cited examples of a term unified within the Ryukyu Islands but with no apparent cognate in Japanese is **teda*, meaning “sun”, whose reflex in Okinawan is *tida* and *tiida*. The term observes very little variation across the Ryukyuan dialects and the phonology of all dialects seems to agree with **teda* as being the origin.

However, one problem arises from this: we now have a common term unified across such a vast geographical area, but with supposedly no Japanese cognate whatsoever. This seems problematic considering the fact that most terms in Ryukyuan variants share immediate cognates with Japanese or are segmentable into smaller morphemes that reveal their origin. Terms that have almost no semblance to those of Japanese are few and most often represent concepts or realities that do not have equivalents elsewhere in Japan. So why then is the term for “sun”, a rather basic concept, so different?

To be able to accurately answer this question, we would need to analyze the Japanese stratum more carefully and consider all possible variants and synonyms. Accordingly, we can establish the following:

Term	Variants	Meaning
日 /hi/	(<i>rendaku</i>) /bi/ (<i>honorific</i>) /ohi/	sun; day
日様 /hisama/	/ohisama/	(<i>honorific</i>) sun
日殿 /hidono/		(<i>honorific</i>) sun
太陽 /taijo:/		sun
天道 /tendo:/	/tento:/	sun; god of heaven and earth; (<i>Buddhism</i>) deva realm

Looking at the above, it becomes apparent that neither /hi/ nor its honorific derivatives, /hisama/ and /hidono/, are related to the Ryukyuan form. In fact, the native Japonic word *hi does occur in Ryukyuan, but it is not used as a basic term to signify “sun”, but rather “day”. The terms *taiyou* and *tendou* are a little more interesting for two reasons. Phonologically, they both begin with an alveolar stop and both consist of two syllables. Etymologically, they both stem from Chinese. Using the Japanese data alone, we could reconstruct the Classical Japanese forms **taiyau~taiyan* and **tendau~tendan*. The modern Mandarin forms *tàiyáng* and *tiāndào* appear to be in agreement with such a historical form.

****taiyau~taiyan***

Parting in reverse, we could construct a potential reflex of **taiyau~taiyan* as being **teeya* in Okinawan. This, based on the fact that Okinawan coalesces the sequence /ai/ into /e:/, and that words of Sinitic origin ending in *-au~an* are reduced to *-a* (cf. Japanese *bashou*, Northern Ryukyuan *basha*, and Mandarin *bājiāo* “banana”; Japanese *satou*, Northern Ryukyuan *sata*, and [rare] Mandarin *shātáng* “sugar”). However, assuming **teeya* as the possible source for the modern term *tida* is problematic for a few reasons.

First of all, *tida* generally has a short, high vowel, not a long mid one. Yonaguni tends not to coalesce the sequence **ai* either, so we would expect something like **taiya* or **taida* there, which is not the case (cf. Yonaguni *aidi*, Okinawan *eeji* and Japanese *aizu* “signal”). Second of all, the second syllable in *tida* possesses an alveolar stop, not a palatal glide. Only Yonaguni exhibits fortition of the palatal glide, and this, mostly only in word-initial position (cf. *da(a)* “house” and *chimu·nu·ya* “kitchen (house)”).

Even if we assumed it was somehow an exception and that the vowel sequence coalesced, raised and shortened, and that the palatal glide was subsequently subject to fortition, we would have to explain how the term spread so quickly from Yonaguni, the most western island and not a cultural center, to the rest of the Ryukyu Islands in fairly recent times. Therefore, considering all these issues, it does not seem possible or even reasonable to assume that the Japanese term *taiyou* and Ryukyuan **tida* are related.

**tendau~tendan*

This leaves us with the Japanese cognate *tendou* and its variant *tentou*. What is interesting about *tendou* and *tentou* is that they constitute the basic term for “sun” in the Tokara Islands, which are situated right above the Amami Islands and below the mainland of Kagoshima. It is also worth noting that the term is also used in Kagoshima, where its form is realized as *tendo* (honorific: *tendosa*, from *tendou·sama*), which is in competition with *hi*, *ohisa* (from *o·hi·sama*) and *hidon* (from *hi·dono*).

Considering this, it may be possible for the common Ryukyuan form **teda* to be related to the Japanese term *tendou*, something that has also been suggested by other authors such as Gregory Smits (2000) and Sakima Toshikatsu (1991). Thus, parting from the historical form **tendau~tendan*, the expected reflex in modern Okinawan would presumably be **tinda* as a result of vowel raising and reduction of the ending *-au~an* (cf. “banana” and “sugar”, and some native morphology such as the volitional ending *-a*, from **an*, historically **amu*). Interestingly, the shape of **tinda* is quite similar to Okinawan’s actual word *tida* (Shuri *tiida*).

The only possible issue would be to explain how the first *-n* was clipped. In this case, it could be a matter of analogy or a result of assimilation: **(nt) → *nd → d*. As almost no Ryukyuan variants feature this medial *-n*, the change would have to have been considerably old. Knowing the very final *-n* is dropped uniformly in other vocabulary of Sinitic as well as Japonic origin, dropping the medial one does not appear to be a major issue. Comparisons with other vocabulary could likely shed some more light on the phenomenon, but some terms do seemingly express this change: compare Japanese *namida* to Kagoshima *nanda* to Shuri Okinawan *naada* “tears”.

It is also worth noting that Okinawan does seemingly exhibit the change **nd → d* uniformly in its verbal morphology. For instance, the participle form of *tubun* “fly” is *tudi*, which is subsequently cognate to the Japanese verb *tobu* “fly” and its participle form *tonde*. The difference between *tudi* (historically **tode*) and **tonde* reveals the possibility for assimilation. It is also worth noting that dialects of Kyushu and parts of Western Japan also exhibit vocalization of the *-n*, resulting in *toude*, which is reduced to *tode* in Kagoshima. Unlike them, however, the Okinawan form hints at a historically short vowel, suggesting **tonde* directly became **tode*. This lends support to the

plausibility that **tendan* later became **teda*, the source for most of the modern Ryukyuan forms.

To further support this reconstruction, many Ryukyuan dialects exhibit vowel lengthening on the first syllable (cf. Shuri *tiida*), which may or may not be due to compensatory vowel lengthening resulting from dropping the *-n* which would otherwise represent a full mora. Interestingly, the dialect of Kobama apparently has the cognate *cinda* (Thorpe 337) and Yonaguni features the variant *tidan*. It would be useful to analyze a greater vocabulary set to see whether these are local innovations or rather retentions of older forms. For Yonaguni at least, the words for “banana” and “sugar” might provide a suitable comparative basis with regards to the final *-n*.

Historical meaning

Putting phonology aside, the original Ryukyuan word **teda* did not solely bear the meaning of “sun”, but was also used in reference to religious deities. We find in the Omoro Sōshi such occurrences like the following which exemplify that **teda* was used on its own to refer to the goddess of the sun:

1. **kamiteda* *no* *sorote* *hokoriyowachiwe...* (OS 282)
the sun goddess NOM gather rejoice.HOR
‘The sun goddess (and the king) gather together and rejoice...’
2. *teda* *ga* *hokoriyowachiwe...* (OS 283)
the sun goddess NOM rejoice.HOR
‘The sun goddess rejoices...’ (Shinzato 11)

In addition to the fact that **teda* was used in reference to religious deities, Smits points out that the concept was further used in the ideology that the king was a descendent of the sun itself. He remarks that the sun occupied such an important place within Ryukyuan religion that one of the functions of the High Priestess was to act “as an avatar of the sun-as-deity (*tedashiro* 太陽代)” (Smits 99). These notions align particularly well with the subsequent definitions of the Japanese word *tendou*: “god of heaven and earth” (Denshi Jisho) and “ruler of heaven and earth” (Smits 99).

In Japan, the sun occupied a central role within mythology and especially Shintoism. In the *Nihon Shiki* and many later works, we find the deity Amaterasu, who is believed to be the ruler of the sun and the heavens. As a sun goddess, she also had her counterpart: her brother Tsukuyomi was regarded as the god of the moon and of the night. This contrasting definition likely means that the very concept of the sun was tied to those of the day and the sky, which, by extension, was seen as a gateway to the heavens (consider also the Chinese loan 天 *ten*, used to mean both “sky” and “heavens”). It is also from Amaterasu that the emperor of Japan is said to be directly descended.

The parallelism between the two concepts in Japan and the Ryukyu Islands is thus uncanny and it is probable that the ideology was borrowed to the Ryukyu Islands from Japan considering its historical attestation. Along with this borrowing may have come the term **tendau~tendan* itself through the intermediary of religion. I suspect that more thorough analyses of the Omoro Sōshi might reveal that the original Ryukyuan word for “sun” was actually **phi* (**pi*) and not entirely **teda*. The latter would have gradually been promoted through the influence of religion and authority, which is why its reflexes in the various Ryukyuan languages and dialects are so similar.

Conclusion

All things considered, it does not seem plausible for a word as widespread as **teda* to have absolutely no known cognate in any dialect of Japanese or no recognizable morphemes to decompose its origin. A broader analysis of Japanese reveals a set of synonyms used to denote the sun, some of which are the basic terms used in specific dialects. Most notably, *tendou* is used in the Tokara Islands located just north of the Amami Islands. Its classical Japanese form would have resembled **tendau* or **tendan*, which would expectantly have the Ryukyuan cognate as **tenda*, with the final *-n* deleted. It is quite likely that assimilation was observed early on, resulting in the common form **teda*. The evidence in favour of this is fairly considerable and further analyses of the Kobama and Yonaguni dialects may help provide much more concrete data to support this. In any case, *tendou* provides the most definite Japanese cognate for the word “sun” in Ryukyuan, both phonologically and semantically, and thus lends to the Proto-Ryukyuan form **tendau* or **tendan* rather than **teda*, stipulated by other authors.

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