

Title:

Endangered Languages and Picture books: a Tale of Preservation and Diversity

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Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the Oxford International Centre for Publishing's new podcast series in which we discuss topics related to children's and YA publishing.

I'm Meri, and today on the 24th of October, 2022, we are going to talk about how picture books for children written in endangered languages can not only be used to document and preserve ancestral knowledge but also to educate emerging, young readers about the importance of heritage and diversity.

In this episode, I will focus on publisher-led initiatives to preserve the Ryukyuan languages, native to Okinawa, Japan, so if you are interested in learning more about the subject, make sure to stay with me until the end as you may get some book recommendations that would make a great present or add to your personal collection, all for a good cause.

So, without further ado, let's begin telling this story!

Once upon a time, in 1996, UNESCO released the Atlas of the World's Endangered Languages to raise awareness about language endangerment and the need to safeguard the world's linguistic diversity.

But, "why should we care about preserving linguistic diversity?", you may ask.

As Romanian Philosopher Emil Cioran once said, "One does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language". Echoing this sentiment, UNESCO highlights that "Languages are vehicles of our cultures, collective memory and values. They are an essential component of our identities, and a building block of our diversity and living heritage. Yet, about half of some 6,000 languages spoken today are in danger of disappearing. However, this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible".

You guessed it! Picture books have a key, main character role to fulfil.

A study conducted by researchers Ganea, Pickard, & DeLoache in 2008 confirmed that "Infants can start learning specific words from stories shortly after their first birthday; and a little later, they can learn new actions from a book as well".

Reading Partner's Sarah Balcazar (2019) describes how "picture books also help children build language skills, identify sequences, improve comprehension, spark a love for reading, and boost social-emotional learning. The subject matter in picture books can introduce social cues and cultural differences that encourage social-emotional development".

This means that picture books can be used to teach valuable lessons in an age-appropriate, fun way, and can be a great conversation-starter to talk about diversity, heritage, identity, difference, privilege, respect, empathy and inclusivity (Lane, 2021).

In today's global landscape, teaching children to appreciate and celebrate diversity is as much of a necessity as it is to teach them about their own roots. However, for communities undergoing language shift, this is easier said than done, as endangered languages are no longer intergenerationally transmitted or taught in schools.

Publishers have realized how much they can do to contribute to both language preservation and children's education and some have taken it upon themselves to diversify their portfolio for the cause. It is worth noting the case of Bess Press, in Hawaii (home of several thousand children of Okinawan descent), traditionally a Hawaiian and Pacific history and culture publisher, that is now publishing children's titles in endangered languages; and the case of

Hitsuji Shobou, a publisher of Japanese linguistics books, in mainland Japan, now publishing books and folk tales in Ryukyuan languages, in collaboration with scholars and artists advocating for the preservation of their language and culture.

If you are curious to know some of the amazing books they have published so far, I will provide you with my top 2 picks. Here they are:

1. *Okinawan Princess, the legend of the Hajichi Tattos* by Lee Tonouchi and illustrated by Laura Kina

This local feminist fairy tale is written by the self-proclaimed Da Pidgin Guerilla and follows the story of a young Hawaiian girl of Okinawan descent who feels ugly and different. She wants to be fair-skinned, slim and blond as actresses on tv as she feels powerless and insignificant in her own skin. However, to teach her just how special and beautiful she is, her grandma shares with her the legend of an Okinawan Princess; who tattoos her hands to escape from a Japanese conqueror, outsmarting him and reclaiming her stance [1]. This book is written in Uchinaguchi (Okinawan), Japanese, and Hawaiian Pidgin English.

2. *The tale of the Star Sand*, by Sumi Uchimori, Fumi Yamamoto, and Natsuko Nakagawa

This picture book is perfect to teach children about the magic of the natural world and how it is believed to be connected to the gods, as it covers the tale of the star gods and how they chose the island of Takemomi to give birth to their offspring. This passed down local legend explains the origin of Taketomi Island's famous and mysterious star-shape sand [2]. It is written in the Yaeyaman language with translations in both standard English and Japanese. It is part of a 4-books collection of folk tales from small islands within the Ryukyu archipelago and is the result of a community-led crowdsourcing initiative to document and preserve their endangered languages.

So, here you have it! That was all for today's episode. Thank you for listening and I hope your learned something new. Please feel free to check out the publishers and authors' websites for more information or to contribute to their cause.

Have a great day!

Links to organisations mentioned in this podcast:

Bess Press: <https://besspress.com/>

Hitsuji Shobou: <https://www.hituzi.co.jp/>

UNESCO: <https://www.unesco.org/en>

Links to picture books mentioned in this podcast:

Okinawan Princess, the legend of the Hajichi Tattos by Lee Tonouchi and illustrated by Laura Kina:

<https://besspress.com/collections/by-lee-tonouchi>

The tale of the Star Sand, by Sumi Uchimori, Fumi Yamamoto, and Natsuko Nakagawa:

<https://www.hituzi.co.jp/hituzibooks/ISBN978-4-8234-1051-2.htm>

References

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Lane, A (2021). *25 Wonderful Children's Books That Celebrate Diversity*. Available at: <https://www.thebump.com/a/childrens-books-about-diversity> (Accessed: 22 October 2022).

LoBue, V. (2019). *The Importance of Picture Books*. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-baby-scientist/201908/the-importance-picture-books> (Accessed: 24 October 2022).

UNESCO (2010). *Atlas of the world's languages in danger*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026> (Accessed: 24 October 2022).