

## The islands of Kagoshima : culture, society, industry and nature

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## Chapter 9

# A Guide for the Study of Kinship and Social Organization in the Amami Islands

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### 1. Pioneering studies in the 1950s

In the 1950s when the Amami Islands were returned to Japan, a joint survey was conducted by the members of nine Japanese academic associations (*Kyu Gakkai Rengo*). From 1955 to 1958, a total of 100 researchers participated in the survey of five of the Amami Islands. Researchers in the fields of ethnology and sociology were interested in kinship relations, locally called *hara*, *haroji*, and *hiki*, because they seemed to play central roles in the lives of the people of the Amami Islands.

Several papers based on the survey were published in the journal "*Jinrui Kagaku* (Human Science)" and in a book titled "*Amami Shizen to Bunka* (Amami: Nature and Culture)" (OYAMA *et al.* 1956, GAMOU 1956, 1959, SEKI 1957, SEKI *et al.* 1959). In these pioneering studies, OYAMA, GAMOU, and SEKI discuss the kinship systems and their function in the communities they had studied respectively in Yoronjima Is., Kikaijima Is., Amami-Oshima Is., and Okinoerabujima Is.

*Hara*, *haroji*, and *hiki* characterized the social relations in the Amami Islands, although the terms were used differently in each community. OYAMA, based on a case study in Yoronjima Is., mentions that *hara* was locally said to be a kinship group whose members gather at an ancestral ritual. He explains that *hara* is a group of consanguine whose members can be traced bilaterally, whereas *hiki* consists of patrilineal descendants. An individual belongs to both maternal and paternal *haras*. He attends ancestral rituals in his father's house, his mother's parental house, his paternal grandmother's parental house, and his maternal grandmother's parental house. The bilateralism of *hara* and its importance in the daily lives of people led him to the inference that the village structure in the Amami Islands was much older than that in

the Tohoku region of northern Japan, where *douzoku*, a patrilineal family-kin network was dominant. OYAMA's study in Yoronjima Is. was finally published in the book "*Nanseisyoto no Kazoku no Kenkyu* (A Study of Family Systems in the Nansei Islands)" (OYAMA 1960).

In the 1950s, Japanese ethnologists were eager to identify the original form or roots of Japanese culture. Rural communities of Amami were studied in comparison with those of mainland Japan. GAMOU, who did his fieldwork in Kikaijima Is. and focused on the kinship system called *haroji*, pointed out three characteristics of *haroji*.

1: The membership of *haroji* could be traced bilaterally. Paternal uncles and maternal uncles were referred to by the same kinship term and played equivalent roles in many rituals. Brothers and sisters were equally positioned. Their children were addressed by the same kinship terms. There was no indication that the children of sons were considered as a family members of own kin and that those of daughters were seen as other kin.

2: First and second cousins were addressed as "brother" or "sister." There was no hierarchy among the people in the same generation. On the contrary, the difference of generations was clearly shown by the kinship terms and the marriage prescriptions, that is, marriages between an uncle and his niece or between an aunt and her nephew were prohibited. This means that *haroji* is organized based on the generation and age of the individual members. Its principles contrasted with those of *douzoku*, a unilineal descent group that fixes hierarchical relations between a main family and branch families based on genealogy.

3: *Haroji* is a group that includes people of three generations back and forth. An affiliation of *haroji* is determined by a direct blood relationship,

whereas that of *douzoku* is based on *ie* as a unit of cohabitation.

Regarding the functions of *haroji*, GAMOU suggests that *haroji* worked as a joint labor organization in agriculture. For example, the processing of sugar cane, a main product of Kikaijima Is., needs intensive labor and animal power. It had been conducted jointly by members of *haroji*. These days, animals have been replaced by machines, which are also purchased jointly by the members. *Haroji* still plays a central role in uniting different families and households. Another important aspect is the frequency of intra-*haroji* marriage, such as cousin marriage. In Kikaijima Is., it was a customary practice for a daughter to be given a piece of land as a dowry when she married out. Marriage between cousins was probably preferred because it would prevent the land from passing into the hands of nonkin. In cases of cousin marriage, land was given to a different family in the same *haroji*. Then it did not create any inconvenience in terms of work and labor because the cultivation was jointly done by members of the *haroji*. GAMOU argues that, as a result of repeated intra-*haroji* marriages, there was no hierarchy between families within the *haroji*, and that the *haroji* was aggregated into a relatively closed group.

According to GAMOU, the rural society in Kikaijima Is. was characterized by the equality between families, each of which was independent. There was no obligation forcing families to bond with other families. They, however, voluntarily united and worked together in joint ventures, such as sugarcane cultivation, re-thatching of straw roofs, and rituals and festivals. The mobilization of people for joint ventures is in most occasions based on *haroji*. GAMOU concluded that we could not know about the rural community without understanding *haroji*. This is very different from the social system found in mainland Japan, where in some villages, solidarity is based on the vertical family network of *douzoku*; whereas, in other villages, people of the same age are horizontally united into a particular group: for the young, for women, or for the old. In both cases, participation in joint ventures was facilitated by a certain mechanism, such as the authority of a leader or the

collection of fees.

SEKI studied rural communities in Amami-Oshima Is. and in Okinoerabujima Is. He explains that either *hiki* or *hara* was used for kinship relations in the Amami Islands, and that *haroji* was recognized as another category that coexisted with either one. In Amami-Oshima Is., a kin group in which the members share a common ancestor was called *hiki*. Men's wives were not included in their *hiki*; however, the wives were recognized as *haroji*. SEKI makes a distinction between *hiki* and *haroji*. The former is a category of people lineally related to a common ancestor, and the latter is a category which centers ego and traced bilaterally. The former is recognized as a group that practices ancestor worship; the latter, as a group for joint labor in agriculture. In Okinoerabujima Is., *hara* were used in place of *hiki*. In the community SEKI studied, the social status and authority of an individual were mainly derived from his *hara*, but the aggregation of *haras* and the formation of powerful groups were not observed. SEKI explains that the reasons for the nonhierarchical relationships among different *haras* are partly related to economics: there was little difference in terms of land ownership among families. In addition, the nature of the relationships is also related to a local practice: the practice called *Ichiju-ishho*, which means a tired food box and a bottle of wine, was widely observed in the Amami Islands and all participants, on several occasions, brought food and drinks for eating together. Such occasions solidify the social relations in the community where all members have equal rights and obligations, regardless of one's family and kinship status.

These pioneering studies explored kinship systems and their important functions as social, economic, and religious organizations in the Amami Islands. Based on these studies, two questions can be posited.

1: What does *bilateralism* mean? Although it was discussed as a special characteristic of the kinship system in Amami, its definition remains ambiguous. Bilateral descent does not have a fixed boundary, and members' statuses change according to situations. How does bilateral kinship work in daily lives?

2: Can we consider the characteristics of the kinship systems observed in relatively closed communities as original forms of Amami culture that were unaffected by the Ryukyu and the Shimadzu colonization. How can we understand the regional differences in kinship systems observed in different communities of the Amami Islands?

## 2. Comparative studies in the 1960s and the 1970s

NAKANE's (1964) study on *hiki* in Amami-Oshima Is. can answer the first question. She analyzed a genealogy recorded by a man and found that among all the names, in total, 1,723 people were members of a *hiki* traced from an ancestor called Ijiro OHARA. The genealogy, according to her, suggests two important characteristics of the kinship systems in Amami. One there is a clear difference between cognates and affines in the kin universe of Amami. This means that it lacks the concept of *ie*, which is an important kin unit in mainland Japan. Another characteristic she mentions is that *hiki* is a pedigree based on bilateralism. The names of female descendants are recorded in the genealogy along with those of male descendants; even after their marriages, they remain members of the same *hiki*. This clearly shows that *hiki* as a genealogical category is bilateral, but people have to choose either one of their father's or mother's *hiki* at some stage in life. The one that is more important for them will become their *hiki*. For example, people can choose a powerful *hiki* that has socially important ancestors. They may choose a *hiki* that originated in Amami if the other *hiki* comes from outside. In this way, a particular *hiki* functions as an ambilateral descent group. NAKANE argues that neighborhoods in Amami had minimal functions as cooperative groups because *hiki* played that role. She concluded that society in Amami was *hiki* society, which placed importance on blood relations; whereas, mainland Japan was an *ie* society, where *ie* as a unit of habitation was decisive in organizing social relations. Further, she suggests that the kinship system in Okinawa was originally bilateral, as it was in Amami, and that the *monchu*, a patrilineal kinship system, was later brought into Okinawa from China. Thus, the study

of *hiki* in Amami gave NAKANE a broad perspective in terms of comparing kinship systems between mainland Japan, Okinawa, Korea, and China (NAKANE 1972).

After the joint survey in the Amami Islands, the main focus for kinship studies shifted to Okinawa. Numerous studies on the patrilineal clan called *monchu* have been conducted in Okinawa, while the study of kinship in Amami had to wait for the second wave of intensive research in the late 1970s, after an interval of twenty years, when joint research by nine academic associations was again conducted. The book "*Amami: Shizen Bunka Shakai* (Amami: its Nature, Culture and Society)" published as a result of the joint survey, explains how the second survey was planned (KUBO *et al.* 1982). It was a response to strong voices from the members of academic associations requesting the resurveying of the Amami Islands in order to understand recent social changes. It was expected that the essence of Amami society could be seen overtly in its changing form. Another important purpose was to compare data of the Amami Islands with those of Okinawa, which had been collected in last ten years. Located on the route that connects Okinawa to main land Japan, the Amami Islands had special importance, geographically and historically, for Japanese researchers.

The book includes a paper by GAMOU and UENO (1982) about the changes in social structure in the Amami Islands, based on the field research from 1977 to 1979. How has the community in Amami changed in the last 20 years? In the changing society, how have the basic principles that structure social relations been maintained? In order to answer these questions, empirical data were collected from the community in Kikaijima Is. that Gamou had surveyed in the 1950s.

In the late 1970s, most of the communities in the Amami Islands showed a tendency toward depopulation. The average family size was small, and members were ageing. Many families either perished or migrated. In these situations, a remarkable change was seen regarding those who were taking care of their ancestors' memorial tablets and graves and conducting worship. Traditionally, care of the ancestors' remains was handed over to a

patrilineal descendent, but in the late 1970s, many families took care of both maternal and paternal ancestors. Through ancestor worship, matrilineal relations became stronger. This change, according to GAMOU, indicates that the traditional principle of bilateralism in Amami society became overt in the period of instability. In the paper (GAMOU and UENO 1982), it was shown that the *haroji*, a kinship organization in the community, had lost its function as an organization for production and labor, but it still had importance for organizing people for ritual purposes, such as marriage, ancestor worship, and so on. GAMOU concludes that the forms of the family and the community in Kikaijima Is. have undergone dynamic changes, but the structural principle of *haroji* has not changed.

### 3. Descriptive studies in the 1980s and later decline

From the 1970s to the early 1980s, several studies on kinship and social organization in the Amami Islands were conducted. For example, a group of students of the Atomi Women's University were involved with surveys in Amami-Oshima Is. Following GAMOU's interests, many papers focused on kinship and ancestor worship were published in the journal "*Minzoku Bunka* (Folklore Culture)" (Asahara 1980, 1981, Inoue 1979, 1980, Kanamori 1981, Nishizawa 1986, Uzuki 1986). However, the overall academic interest in kinship study has declined since the late 1980s. This is partly attributable to the development of theoretical anthropology and possibly to the structural change of the society through which kinship organization lost its importance in the daily lives of the people of Amami.

"*Amami Yorontou no Syakai Soshiki* (Social Organization in Amami Yoronjima Is.)" by KATO was published in 1999. This book consisting of his papers written in the 1970s is based on his survey in 1972. The aim of the book is to describe how bilateral kinship determines the behaviors of individuals in several different occasions where people who are related gather. The book covers all of the topics that the kinship studies in Amami have discussed: for example, household composition, inheritance and succession, branch family, adop-

tion, ancestor worship, kinship terms, networks and local community, production relations, and marriage. The book is rich in data, but it is too descriptive, and it is difficult to understand how the study contributes to answering the questions first raised in the 1950s about regional differences and the historical development of the kinship system in the Amami Islands.

Kinship studies in Amami have so far given us opportunities to understand the bilateral system, and to consider a society neither of unilineal descent nor based on co-habitation unit of *ie*. Kinship studies aiming to determine the structural principles of societies have declined in number. However, it is now important to recognize the changes in kinship and family systems brought about by modernization and globalization. The data collected in the Amami Islands can be used in comparative studies about such transformation of kinship and family.

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