

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

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Chapter 1

Culture and Society in the Islands of Kagoshima

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1. The islands of Kagoshima

Japan extends roughly 4,000 km from northeast to southwest along the northeastern coast of the Eurasian mainland, and comprises five main islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Okinawa, along with many “*rito*” - remote (or small) islands.¹ According to the report *The Present State of Maritime Security*, published by the Japan Coast Guard in 1987, “*rito*” is defined as having a coast of more than 100 m in circumference. According to this definition, the Japanese archipelago consists of 6,852 islands, of which 421 are inhabited and more than 90 % uninhabited (*Nihon Rito* Center 1996: 1-2).

Despite ranking only 61st in the world in terms of land territory (380,000 km²), Japan’s territorial waters and EEZ combined are 12 times as large (4,470,000 km²) as its land area, placing it 6th in the world.² Surrounded on all sides by wide expanses of sea, Japan is a nation that has extensive maritime territory and enjoys the benefits of the sea in the form of maritime trade and fishing.

In 1952, the Japanese government implemented a development policy for remote islands. Most of the remote islands had been left underdeveloped in the pre-War period. In consequence, the socio-economic gap between the remote islands and mainland Japan widened, and thus, ‘The Remote Islands Development Act’ was enacted. The aim of this Act was to “eliminate backwardness” in remote islands. However, this Act was not applied to the Amami, Okinawa, and Ogasawara

Islands because these islands remained under US military control at this time. Instead, due to the delayed reversion of these islands to Japan, Special Development Acts were enacted for these islands in order to reduce the gap in income level between the mainland and these islands (KUWAHARA 2012).

Kagoshima Prefecture, which is located in the southern end of Kyushu, stretches for 600 km from its northernmost to southernmost end. Within the distance, there are 605 islands including 28 inhabited ones. The population of Kagoshima Prefecture is about 1.8 million, while that of all the islands in Kagoshima is about 180,000, which is about 10 % of the prefectural population. Thus, Kagoshima is one of the foremost island prefectures in Japan.³

The islands of Kagoshima are categorized into four groups of islands: the Koshiki, Osumi, Tokara and Amami Islands, the last three of which together with the Ryukyu Islands comprise the Nansei (Southwest) Islands. There are different ways of referring to a group of islands in Japanese. The word “*shoto*” is used when a scattering of islands are taken as an area which comprises main islands and other surrounded islands. The Osumi Islands are such an aggregation and are called Osumi *shoto*. The word “*gunto*” is used when a cluster of islands are taken as an area and often refers to uninhabited islands. The Amami Islands fall under this category. The word “*retto*” is used when islands form a chain with a narrow distance between them. The Tokara Islands meet this definition.

The Osumi Islands comprise 7 islands: Tane-

1. The equivalent word of small islands in Japanese is “*shoutou*” or “*kojima*.” However, the word “*rito*” which means “remote island” is a commonly-used word.

2. The first is the US, the second Australia, the third Indonesia, the fourth New Zealand, the fifth Canada (Japan Institute of Construction Engineering: http://www.jice.or.jp/quiz/kaisetsu_04.html#02.)

3. The website “*Nihon No Shima He Ikou*”: <http://imagic.qee.jp/sima4/kagosima/kagosima.html>

gashima Is., Yakushima Is., Kuchinoerabujima Is., Mageshima Is., Takeshima Is., Iowjima Is., and Kuroshima Is. Among them, Yakushima Is. is the best known and most popular island because of its World Natural Heritage registration, achieved in 1993. About 300,000 tourists visit Yakushima Is. every year to see attractions such as the famous ancient “*Jomonsugi*” (Jomon cedar tree). On the other hand, Tanegashima Is. is well known as the island where guns and Christianity were first introduced by Portuguese in mid-16th century. The island is also famous for rocket launching and the space center. Thus there can be seen a sharp contrast between Yakushima and Tanegashima Is. The former symbolizes nature, while the latter symbolizes technology and science. Mageshima Is. is a tiny uninhabited island, but gathered nationwide attention because the Japanese government proposed the island as the location for a Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP) facility for the US Navy. People in Tanegashima Is. and Kagoshima Prefecture expressed strong opposition to this, and launched a campaign against FCLP.⁴ Iowjima Is. is known as an island with an active volcano and a historical legend which has often been performed in Kabuki.

The Tokara Retto comprise 12 small islands, of which 7 islands are inhabited. The “*retto*” comprises a village called Toshima-mura, which extends about 160 km from north to south, thus, the village is said to be the longest one in Japan. The highest peak is 979 m in Nakanoshima Is., the 10th in Kagoshima Prefecture. Out of the 7 inhabited islands, three islands have active volcanos. The total population of the village was 663 people and 365 households in 2004.⁵ The main industry is agriculture, especially animal husbandry. Most of the islanders keep cattle. The Tokara Islands are also very distinctive in history and culture, especially the masked deity Boze of Akusekijima Is. is well known through its annual Autumn festival.

The southernmost island group of Kagoshima is the Amami Islands, which consist of 8 inhabited islands with the total population of about 110,000.

Among them, Amami-Oshima Is. is a main and the largest island with population of 50,000, and thus, the islands form a “*gunto*.” Because of the semi-tropical climate and a distinctive historical experience, the islands are rich and diverse in nature and culture. The key agricultural product is sugar cane, with Tokunoshima and Kikajima Is. having the most extensive cultivation of the crop. Okinoerabujima Is. has long been known as an island of agriculture, with its farmers successful in growing flowers and vegetables. Yoronjima Is. is a small island with a population of about 5,500 and has a tourism focus. The island experienced a tourism boom in the late 1970s but despite the number of annual tourist visitations gradually decreasing from around 150,000 to 50,000 during the last 30 years, this industry is still the island’s main focus.

In the East China Sea off the Satsuma peninsula, there is also a group of islands called *Koshikijima Retto*, which is made up of three inhabited islands, that comprise, from north to south, Kami-Koshikijima Is., Naka-Koshikijima Is. and Shimo-Koshikijima Is. The total population of the islands is about 6,000. Kami-Koshikijima Is. and Naka-Koshikijima Is. are connected by bridges, and Shimo-Koshikijima Is. is due to be bridged to Naka-Koshikijima Is. in a few years. The main industry is rice cultivation and fisheries. Koshikijima’s “*Toshidon*,” a deity which visits our world to bring blessings, is well known and was registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity with UNESCO in 2009.

As we see above, the islands of Kagoshima are important not only in their natural and cultural diversities, but also as the islands at the national frontier.

2. Summary of this section

This section comprises 7 articles, which are categorized into four main themes, that is, socio-religious history, education in remote areas, food culture and health and social welfare.

KUWAHARA describes how Amami society and culture have been studied, identifies Amami’s most

4. Nishinoomote City website. <http://www.city.nishinoomote.lg.jp/gyoukei/magemondai/magemondai.html>

5. Toshima Village website. <http://www.tokara.jp/profile/gaiyou.html#stats>

distinctive cultural assets and proposes potential research resources in Amami.

TAKARABE and NISHIMURA describe the religious history of Amami by dividing it into four parts, that is, introduction of folk beliefs in Ryukyu Period, the introduction of Buddhism in Satsuma Period, the introduction and missionary activities of foreign (or outside) religions in the Meiji Period, and current religions. They then point out that the distinctive aspect of Amami religion resides in a mixture of religions premised on the basis of folk religions; an aspect that was made possible by the fact that in pre-modern Amami, there were no traditional or organized religions, and thus, there was no backlash or resistance against the newly incoming religions.

HATTA discusses about the remote islands education system called “*hekichi kyouiku*” (detached education) which was developed by the Ministry of Education. Since Kagoshima Prefecture has a lot of remote islands, he describes in detail issues concerning how to teach science in a junior high school in remote areas in Kagoshima.

HAYWARD and KUWAHARA discuss on the cycad (or “*sotetsu*” in Japanese). They show how the plant has been represented negatively over the last century and then demonstrate that these negative discourses are problematic. To counter them, they attempt to remove the stigma attached to “*sotetsu*” by uncovering more positive interpretations and stories based on their field research in Tokunoshima Is.

YAMAMOTO’s article on chili peppers is based on his field research on local names and usage of chili peppers in Amami-Oshima Is. He shows that chili fruits have been used as a medicine for stomach discomfort and diseases and for pregnant women in the Amami Islands. He then compares the usages of chili pepper in Amami Islands with

those of Southeast Asia, Micronesia and East Asia.

TAKEZAKI, NIIMURA and KUWABARA discuss special health and medical issues in Amami Islands which concern the relatively high proportion of the population with age longevity and factors related to shorter life spans in males. They identify that relatively rapid changes of lifestyle have increased the mortality rate in middle-aged males in Amami, while the lifestyles of the older population have been relatively stable in cases where appropriate environment and social background persist. Thus, they argue that the prevention of lifestyle-related diseases for young and middle-aged people merits more attention.

NODA’s article discusses the problems of water resources from the case studies on Suwanosejima Is., Kikaijima Is., Okinoerabujima Is. and Yoronjima Is., He then discusses noxious animals such as poisonous snakes and blood sucking insects peculiar to the islands from the case studies on Kuroshima Is., Nakanoshima Is., Amami-Oshima Is. and Yoronjima Is. He also refers to an interesting legend which is related to the black fly in Nakanoshima Is., and shows how injurious insects are interwoven with a legend to create an aspect of island culture in the Tokara Islands.

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