

The making of urban Amami:

Past and present of the city of Amami, Naze

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Naze is the largest city in the Amami Islands. As of 2021 the population of the city area of Naze was approximately 35,500 people; more than one-third of the Amami Islands' total population. The city is one of the largest ten cities within the Kagoshima Prefecture now. The history of the town of Naze is surprisingly complex.

There is a theory that “Naze” is a corruption of the archaic word *Naji*, meaning vacant lot, and when looking at provincial maps of Japan, “Ryuku Kingdom, Oshima,” of the Genroku / Tempo-period (1696-1702, 1835-1838), the area where Naze is currently located is indeed blank. The origin of Naze's development as the center of the archipelago was due to the relocation of temporary residences and other facilities of the local magistrate to Kaneku village, in Naze Magiri in 1801, so it is not a particularly old development.

In 1875, the administrative division system came into effect, creating Oshima District within Kagoshima Prefecture, and the Oshima branch office was moved from its earlier site, and opened in what is now the center of Naze. The branch office subsequently changed its name and relocated several times, finally settling in 1907 at its current location as the prefectural Oshima branch office.

Under the Oshima Development Concept (1865) proposed jointly between the Satsuma Domain and the Glover Trading Company, Kaneku village developed as a domestic and international distribution base, becoming a port of call on the Kagoshima-Okinawa-Taiwan-Shanghai route. From the mid-1870s, merchants from Kagoshima, Nagasaki, Osaka and other cities contributed to the expansion of commercial and residential areas along the coast. Around 1891, a notation in a map compiled in the *Amami Chronicle (Shidan)* indicated that “there is an island office, court, police station, prison, school, and restaurants. There are rows of crowded shops ... it is a small metropolis.” In 1910, restaurants for visiting merchants “were relocated to the designated area in Western Yanigawa,” and Yanigawa was created as a planned entertainment district, under the supervision of the police.

Concurrently, the Oshima Tsumugi silk industry was developing, and the number of Tsumugi (silk) factories expanded, into the remaining fields of Itsubu village. During the Taisho era, the Tsumugi industry surpassed the traditional sugar cane industry, and the roots of Naze as an industrial city based on the commerce of Kaneku and the manufacturing of Itsubu were planted. The population increased with the development of industry, and a market was formed near Nagatabashi-bridge—a key point on both sea and land routes. The public Nagatabashi market was opened in 1931.

Roads were gradually built near Naze as the population increased, and were classed under prefectural management from the mid-1870s onwards. River repairs and estuary reclamation also progressed, and sewers were installed in the Taisho era. By 1932, a budget

request was made for projects such as port repair, roads, and land improvement. In 1940, the first legal city plan known as the Naze City Plan was drafted.

The Navy Oshima Base Corps and Koniya Air Base were established in Amami Oshima during World War II, subjecting it to intense attacks by the U.S. military at the end of the war. The attacks “moving as loudly as possible to give the impression of a large fleet approaching” (U.S. Army General HALSEY, 1944) extended to even the small villages. The largest city of Naze was devastated, and excellent buildings such as the former Naze Catholic Church (construction started in 1902, completed in 1928) were lost.

After the war ended in 1946, the U.S. military government occupied the former branch office, and island administration was separated from the mainland. Aid from Government Aid and Relief in Occupied Areas (GARIOA) did not lead to full-scale reconstruction, and the burnt remains of Naze were lined with huts built from split beechwood and corrugated cardboard released by the U.S. military. In December 1953 the island was returned to Japan, and just as promotion plans such as port renovations and public facility development were resumed under the Amami Islands Reconstruction Special Measures Act (1954), the city of Naze burnt down twice over, following the Great Sakaemachi Fire (October 1955) and the Great Irifunecho Fire (February 1955).

Although the War Damage Reconstruction City Plans had been in progress on the mainland since 1946, these were delayed in Naze where full-scale urban remodeling began from 1956 as part of the “Fire Reconstruction City Plan.” Having built up expertise through executing the War Damage Reconstruction City Plans on the mainland, Kagoshima Prefecture applied this knowledge to expedite the rehabilitation of businesses in anticipation of the expiration date of the Special Measures Act and the city of Naze entered a period of high growth with this momentum.

Even now, land readjustment projects are underway in the Suehiro / Minato districts in Naze, and progress has been seen in the development of a marine town. Since the mid-1950s, there has always been a city planning project occurring in Naze. It will not be long before the painting of the *Naji* will be complete. However, the city must mature in order to become a comfortable place to live. Perhaps it is time to set aside the paintbrush, walk around and examine the progress of the city, and switch to a small brush to finalize the work.



Naze City Plan – Naze Fire Reconstruction Land Readjustment Plan (1st Implementantation Area, Amami City Hall Collection)