

Towards research for exploring together

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For all participants, “please take three minutes to discuss with those around you what you think is the difference between traditional events and ordinary events. ... Okay, three minutes have passed. What are some of your opinions?”

This statement is the introduction of a scene from a symposium that I am responsible for planning. I think that people have the image of just unilaterally listening to a speaker. From the perspective of my social education specialization, I am conscious of shifting the fixed relationship of the teacher and the taught.

The reason for this is because I believe that it is more important to have opportunities for dialogue that share and consider mutual knowledge and experience rather than obtaining new knowledge; and also, because many of the “problems” to be solved also require discovering rather than obtaining.

I have been working in a group called the Kagoshima University Kagoshima Environmental Studies Research Group (henceforth, “university”) on the themes of Amami’s feral cat problem and environmental culture. One characteristic is that it has involved thinking about the problem alongside those involved with the problem. I want to consider the meaning of this research style by taking the question asked in the introduction as an example.

This question was posed at the “Symposium: Thinking about Island Life (Environmental Culture),” held in Yamato village in January 2019. The university prepared this symposium with the support of the Ministry of the Environment, and together with discussions alongside the village leaders of Akina / Ikusato in Tatsugo town, Ichi in former Sumiyo town, and Kuninao in Yamato village. The true opinions of the village leaders towards the university, who were considering plans based on the theme of “environmental culture,” that “inheriting traditional events is a more pressing issue than environmental culture.”

As is well-known, the Island has many traditional events that the people of the island hold dear, such as the *Hachigatu-odori* (dance of the crop celebration in August), *Honensai* (harvest festival), and *Hamaore* (event to pray for a bountiful grain harvest). However, a common theme across all of them is that inheriting these traditions has become difficult due to a declining birthrate and aging population. Therefore, respecting the wishes of the village leaders, we took up the theme of the future of traditional events on the island and compared traditional and regular events, as introduced in the beginning of this article.

There were many interesting opinions. For example, traditional events were characterized as “having a deep connection with the gods,” “a fixed date on the lunar calendar,” “deeper bonds between youth and elders,” and “sad when it comes to end.” When the content of “traditional events” becomes specific in this way, it becomes easier to investigate not only what is inherited, such as whether involvement with the gods is still held in high regard or the lunar dates are followed, but also why these should be inherited.

Meanwhile, we also began to see the relationship between the lives of the island people and nature that are related to “environmental culture.” The relationship with god leads to a sense of awe towards nature and ancestors, and the date on the lunar calendar expresses living with the rhythm of nature, such as the waxing and waning of the moon, the ebb and flow of the tide, and the four seasons, as seen in the example of “the moon on the *Jugo-ya* (August 15 in the old lunar calendar) is a perfect circle.” We can see with regards to the bonds of the villages that the wisdom of the group was needed to face nature and live without advanced technology.

We were able to see action goals by respecting the opinions of the village leaders and others. What if we had placed “environmental culture” at the forefront, or had experts define and speak about “what are traditional events?” Our audience may have said that it was “interesting,” but this most likely would not have led to a force for changing reality. Even if the opinions of experts were valuable, these are not enough to solve problems.

As seen with the problem of inheriting traditional events, there are many phenomena around us where the relationship between cause and effect is complicated and diverse, making it difficult to identify the “problem.” For these kinds of problems, it is more effective not to come up with a universal and absolute correct answer, but to search for an “acceptable” correct answer that can be valid for specific current situations, without distinguishing between experts and non-experts. I would like to expand this kind of research style, which has the character of collaborative practice, from Amami.



Preparatory meetings, including on-site inspections and remote conferences, were held multiple times with officials from Akina / Ikusato village, Ichi village, Kuninao village, Ministry of the Environment, and Kagoshima University.