

Chapter 6

The Galapagos of the Orient

Amami Oshima

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Husband and wife in a taro field

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The string of islands from the southern tip of Kyushu to Taiwan is called the Ryukyu Arc. Within the Ryukyu Arc, the Amami Islands are the row of eight inhabited islands from 27 degrees to 29 degrees north latitude. The eight Amami Islands are called Amami Oshima, Kakeroma, Uke, Yoro, Kikai, Tokunoshima, Okinoerabu and Yoron. The Amami Islands have a total population of about 130,000 people and consist of one city and ten towns or villages.

Amami Oshima has an area of 719.5 square kilometers and a population of 74,000 people. Combined with Kakeroma, Uke and Yoro, which are its three small neighboring islands, the total area is 818 square kilometers. Next to Okinawa and Sadogashima, Amami Oshima is the third largest of Japan's remote islands.

Mountains over 400 meters in height

run north and south on the island, with Mt. Yuwan at a height of 694 meters as the main peak. Zigzagging shorelines which hug the mountains provide the coasts of Amami Oshima with many good harbors. Interspersed in the many small areas of flatland found in zigzagging bay areas around the island are isolated communities with many differences in language and folk customs.

The Nansei Islands were part of the Asian continent about ten million years ago. Innumerable mainland animals then inhabited this area. But about one and a half million years ago, the Tokara Islands of today broke away from the continent and isolated the animals.

About one million years ago, the Nansei Islands were divided into several large areas and the land kept repeatedly rising and subsiding as a result of active diastrophism,

which is movement in the earth's crust. The low areas then subsided into the ocean and the high areas became islands, which include Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima, Okinawa, Ishigaki and Iriomote. Coral reefs then developed in the low areas that subsided in the ocean but later were uplifted to become the coral reef islands named Kikai, Okinoerabu and Yoron.

Amami Oshima had been part of the Asian continent for a long time, and because it did not sink into the ocean after the separation, it is still the habitat of numerous mainland Asian plants and animals. But it underwent a peculiar evolution as a result of being isolated by the ocean since the separation. The peculiar animals on Amami Oshima are like living fossils.

One example is the Amami rabbit (also called Amami hare), which is on Japan's protected species list. Another example is the Lidth's jay, which is also on

the list. The Lidth's jay is the emblematic bird of Kagoshima Prefecture. Lidth's jays are endemic to Amami Oshima. As with the Amami rabbit and the Anderson's newt, the Lidth's jay is a species that survived from the age when the islands were part of the continent, but it has evolved to adapt to the peculiar ecosystem of Amami Oshima.

Numerous other wild birds such as the Ryukyu robin and the white-backed woodpecker are found almost exclusively on Amami Oshima. So are numerous other Nansei Islands endemic species such as the *kenaga* mouse (*Diplothrix legata*) and the Ryukyu sweetfish (*Plecoglossus altivelis ryukyuensis*). Amami Oshima also has the second largest acreage of primeval mangrove forest in Japan. Amami Oshima is a treasure trove of plants and animals that are uncommon to the rest of Japan and to the world. That is why it is often called the "Galapagos of the Orient."

Kinsakubaru: Amami Oshima's Last Sanctuary

A myriad of wild fowl species inhabits a primeval forest area on Amami Oshima called Kinsakubaru, which is the last sanctuary for the wildlife of the island. It is said that almost three hundred species here have been recorded so far, many of which have already been recorded in reference listings. This means that over half of

the 560 recorded species of wild fowl in Japan are on Amami Oshima. The many birds that visit briefly while migrating and the many that stray in are included in this number. This wide variety of wild fowl species is an indication of the great importance of the natural environment and peculiar ecosystem of Amami Oshima.

Lidth's jays enjoy eating acorns and have a habit of burying them in the ground in October and November to store them for the winter. In doing so, the Lidth's jays are inadvertently planting seeds for *itajii* oaks

(*Castanopsis cuspidata* var. *lutchuensis*) and Amami *arakashi* oaks and contributing to the replanting of the broadleaf forest.

Endemic subspecies such as the White's ground thrush and the white-backed woodpecker are wild fowl that especially depend on a primeval forest. With an estimated population of about one hundred, White's ground thrushes are closer to extinction than any other wild fowl. It is believed that white-backed woodpeckers also cannot easily survive without a primeval forest containing many old trees or other trees with broad trunks.

Amami Oshima used to abound with lush woods that teemed with Lidth's jays and a myriad of other wild birds and other endemic animals. The lush woods provided all the creatures with a safe and secure sanctuary. But since the end of World War II, the lush woods have been rapidly disappearing as a result of commercial developments. The only virgin forest that still remains untouched is Kinsakubaru, which

contains slightly less than half of the natural forest acreage of the past on the island.

Itajii oaks and other oaks over a hundred years old are said to grow in this forest. The Duke of Edinburgh reportedly remarked that Kinsakubaru was a marvelous sight when he came to view the island for the World Wide Fund. It is said that the production staff of the movie *Godzilla* were so impressed when they saw a poster of Kinsakubaru that they decided to make Amami Oshima their shooting location.

Since the end of World War II, much of the woods on Amami Oshima have been undergoing massive deforestation as a result of a surging trend commonly known as "Amashin" to develop the Amami Islands. Trees are chopped down, crisscrossing forest roads are paved, tunnels are dug, and mountainsides are shaved. Man's presence is felt even in the depths of the woods.

An incident occurred recently that typified man's clash with the animals in the woods. A dispute over the construction of a

golf course broke out and gave rise to an unprecedented lawsuit known as the "Amami rabbit case." The dispute divided the islanders into two factions supporting either commercial development or nature conservation.



Kinsakubaru, primeval forest area on Amami Oshima

© Naze City Office

Amami Rabbit Case

This lawsuit became the focus of attention throughout the nation because it was the first time in Japan the plaintiffs were the spokespersons for wild animals, which in this case were Amami rabbits. Here is how it started.

An area on Amami Oshima called Ichizaki was known as one of the regions inhabited by numerous Amami rabbits. The area includes a site slated to become the Sumiyo village golf course. In 1992, some people were worried that the golf site development might adversely affect the habitat of the Amami rabbits, so they went to observe the development site and the peripheral area. They found Amami rabbit droppings and other traces that proved that Amami rabbits indeed inhabit the area.

As the spokespersons for the Amami rabbits and the natural environment of Amami Oshima, one nature conservation group and its twenty-two members filed a suit against the golf site developers. However, the main point at issue in this trial was what party could be judged as qualified or not as a plaintiff within the framework of the laws in force. The trial would establish whether a corporation without juridical personality could be a spokesperson for nature itself. (The corporation was established to protect the natural environment.) At the same time, the trial would also establish whether individuals, as natural persons, with serious concern for conservation of the natural

environment could be such spokespersons.

In 1999, the court ruled that such entities were not qualified as plaintiffs. The judgment was based on the legislation and judicial precedents concerning plaintiff qualifications up to then. So the animals lost the suit in the first trial.

Since the end of World War II, harbor, road and embankment constructions and other public works have been progressing rapidly, destroying the natural environment. But on the other hand, nature conservation campaigns, environmental protection campaigns and other movements have arisen to directly oppose the large-scale development projects that destroy the valuable forest and waters of the island.

In the beginning of the 1970s, a large-scale development project planned for an island called Edateku, which is part of the village of Uken on Amami Oshima, divided the villagers and the rest of the islanders into two factions either supporting or opposing the project. The project plan was to reclaim the shore of Edateku and construct a large-scale petroleum reserve base there. However, as the result of several years of intense protest campaigns by local and outside organizations established to conserve nature or to protect the environment, the project was called off.

Since the end of World War II, Amami Oshima has been depending on large appropriations as financial aid for island development from the national administration. And because island devel-

opment destroys nature, antagonism has been extremely intense on Amami Oshima

between supporters of development and supporters of nature conservation.

Father Ferriet and Amami Life Forms

After setting foot on Amami Oshima and seeing the myriad of life forms, a Frenchman wasted no time in introducing them to Europe. The man was a Catholic priest named Father Joseph Bernard Ferriet. He was originally a missionary who was sent to Nagasaki from a Catholic mission in France in 1881. It was Ferriet who began the propagation of Catholicism on Amami Oshima when he arrived on the island at the end of December in 1891.

He first arrived to a city called Naze, which is said to have had a population of between six and seven thousand in those days. With Naze as his base, Ferriet zealously propagated the religion and created a network of converts mainly in the northern part of the island. However, he ruined his health and had no choice but to return to France in 1906 to recuperate. But the seeds of faith that he planted on the island started bearing considerable fruit after 1912 as a result of the efforts of his successors. According to a survey conducted in 1918, there were 3,799 Catholic believers, 9 churches, 2 French missionaries and 3 Japanese missionaries on Amami Oshima.

Ferriet was not only a missionary. He

was also a recognized authority as a researcher of life forms on Amami Oshima. Besides propagating Catholicism, he collected bugs and plants that were peculiar to Amami Oshima and sent them to the academic circles of his home country. It was through Ferriet that Amami Oshima first became known to the world. Ferriet devotedly collected coleopterans and sent them to Rene Oberthur, who was a famous beetle collector in France.

Ferriet's first treatise about the specimens he collected was published in 1894. The beetles that Ferriet sent to Oberthur captured the interest of academics throughout France, so in return, Oberthur sent Ferriet words of encouragement and suitable remuneration. Ferriet used the remuneration for erecting churches and evangelizing. Oberthur distributed the specimens from Ferriet to specialists, who then started mentioning them in numerous essays and treatises. Some of the specimens were passed on to academics in Britain and were recorded as specimens from Ferriet.

Ferriet was also interested in plants, especially mosses and ferns. As he did with the coleopterans, he sent samples to France for specialists to examine. It is said that Ferriet's name is affixed to the scientific names attributed to some of those species.

In 1923, jurisdiction over evangelizing activities on Amami Oshima was trans-



Farming family in a sugarcane field

© Ryo Aoyama

ferred from the mission in France to a Catholic denomination in Canada, so Japanese-Canadian missionary Motoi Yonekawa came to the island. Besides propagat-

ing Catholicism, he also operated the Oshima Girls' High School in Naze and made great endeavors in educational work on the island.

First Photographer on Amami Oshima

Before World War II, there was a Japanese photographer who wasted no time in photographing the valuable creatures on Amami Oshima and presenting them to the outside world. On April 12th, 1935, Kenji Shimomura, Japan's first natural life cameraman, arrived at the area of a *gusuku* (a ruined castle) in the village of Sumiyo on Amami Oshima.

In the *gusuku*, there was a mountain

that was thickly forested with ferns growing rampantly and tree ferns rising majestically. On the mountain, Ryukyu robins would be chirping away and white-backed woodpeckers would be busy pecking on the trees. The holes and paths used by Amami rabbits could be seen here and there.

The main reason for Shimomura's visit to Amami Oshima was to photograph some Lidth's jays, which are on the protected animal list. Shimomura was the first person to capture Amami rabbits and Lidth's jays on film. In the autumn of 1935, he exhibited a photograph of a Lidth's jay



Farming family and their tractor

© Ryo Aoyama

in an exhibition at the British Museum in London. The theme of the exhibition, which was sponsored by a company called English Country Living, was natural life photography of the world. Next to the Lidth's jay photographs were photographs

titled "Habitat of Lidth's Jays," which depicted forest scenes at the village of Sumiyo. That was the first time photographs Lidth's jays and scenes of Amami Oshima had ever been displayed at an international event.

Coexistence with Venomous Snakes

Another animal that played a role in nature conservation on Amami Oshima is the *habu* (*Trimeresurus flavoviridis*), which is a venomous snake. The islanders went through great pains fighting the habus for a long time. In the past, about three hundred people were bitten by a *habu* every year and about half of the victims died from the bite.

When bitten, a victim had to cut off

the bitten part of his or her body at once to prevent the venom from circulating throughout the whole body. So numerous victims ended up dead or crippled from the injury suffered from hacking off a bodily part using a sickle or whatever else they happened to be carrying. But nowadays, thanks to an antidote, victims rarely die from a bite.

The *habu* reportedly is nearsighted but sensitive to aerial vibration and its tongue and entire body are sensory organs that perceive approaching prey. The *habu* avoids direct sunlight, which weakens it, and takes shelter in the shade of things like

stone walls and cycads. When prey approaches, the *habu* readies itself by coiling into an S-shape. It then leaps a distance up to twice its body length and sinks the two fangs of its upper jaw into its victim.

It is said that a *habu* bite is sometimes hardly noticeable, feeling something like "a peck by a chicken." So some people die from a *habu* bite without even knowing they have been bitten. It is also said that victims die in about an hour if the bite is serious. In the Amami Islands, *habu*s are found only on Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima and are not found on Kikai, Okinoerabu or Yoron. *Habus* do not inhabit the latter three because the islands are uplifted coral reefs that had been submerged for a long time.

The venomous snakes may be a formidable menace to the islanders, but they also bring about a wide assortment of benefits to mankind. An example is the designs of Oshima pongees (a special product of Amami Oshima), which have peculiar designs that resemble the patterns on *habu* skins. No two *habus* have the same pattern on their skins even though there are so many of them. The *habus* greatly out-number the humans. Reportedly about 200,000 *habus*

inhabit the island. This great diversity of patterns is, no doubt, what influenced the designs of Oshima pongees.

Another benefit brought about by coexistence with *habus* is the protection of virgin forest and other aspects of the natural environment. The very existence of these venomous snakes kept man away from the mountains and forests for a long time. With the innumerable *habus* crawling around, the mountains and forests were terrifying places. As a result, the valuable species of plants and animals of Amami Oshima managed to survive.

Amami Oshima's peculiar topography was also a key factor in protecting the animals. With the greater part of the island occupied by steep mountains, there is very little flat land. Another factor that contributed to the protection of the natural environment was the ancient unwavering beliefs that the islanders held about nature. They feared ghostly apparitions called *kenmuns* and other phenomena that they believed haunted the forests. It was a combination of such factors that protected Amami Oshima's natural environment over the ages and preserved the island as a treasure trove of plant and animal species.

Michinoshima

Today, a combination of two Chinese characters meaning "cover" plus "beauty" is used to write "Amami." In historical

Japanese literature such as the Ancient Chronicle (*Kojiki*) of 712 and the Chronicles of Japan (*Nihonshoki*) of 720, it was written with a different combination meaning "ocean" plus "look," or with three special Chinese characters used only

phonetically.

The history of the Amami Islands can be divided into three main ages. The first age is a period in which the islanders lived in hamlets. It begins in the neolithic era and continues into the 8th and 9th centuries. The second age is the early modern period that begins when the hamlet chiefs struggled to protect and expand their domains. After that, in the same second age, comes a period of rule by the Ryukyu Kingdom, which is followed by a feudal period in which the Amami Islands were subject to the Satsuma Domain. The third age is the modern period that begins with the prewar years, which includes the Meiji Era (1868-1912), Taisho Era (1912-1926) and early Showa Era (1926-1945). The third age continues with a postwar period that includes a brief rule by the Allied Forces' General Headquarters and the present period that begins when the Amami Islands were returned to Japan.

Since the beginning of the Edo Period (1603-1867), while under rule of the

Satsuma Domain, the Amami Islands were officially named "Michinoshima," which means "route islands." From the 7th century through the first half of the 8th century, the Amami Islands had become known as Michinoshima because they were important points of marine traffic for envoy ships heading to China and for ships voyaging to mainland Kyushu from China and Ryukyu. The Amami Islands offered the ships refuge and replenishment of food and fuel.

In the beginning of the Heian Period (794-1192), relations with the Tang Dynasty waned and the Imperial Court lost interest in the south islands. So in 824, the south islands were freed from jurisdiction of the Dazaifu, which was the Kyushu branch of the central government. In name only, the islands belonged to the Osumi Domain, but in reality, they had entered a period in which they didn't belong to any domain.

Naha Reign and Yamato

Throughout their history, the Amami Islands underwent two long periods of colonization. The first was the Naha Reign, which was 340 years of rule by the Ryukyu Kingdom. And the second was the Yamato Reign, which was 260 years of rule by the

Satsuma Domain. According to folklore, the Amami Islands started paying tribute to the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1266, but in reality, it was during the 15th century.

In the mid-14th century, the main island of Okinawa consisted of three small kingdoms called Hokuzan, Chuzan and Nanzan. But in 1429, Chuzan destroyed Hokuzan and Nanzan, unifying the island. Ryukyuan culture started flowing into the Amami Islands after the unification of

those three kingdoms.

Local powerful clans in the Amami Islands or blood relatives of supreme lords were appointed as lords over the Amami Islands. *Noros* (high priestesses) were sent to each island by Her Majesty Kikoe in Shuri, the capital of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Amamian culture absorbed all facets of Ryukyuan culture including folk music, traditional dance, ceramics and musical instruments like the *jabisen*, which is a snake-skinned samisen.

In 1368, the Ming Dynasty placed an embargo on Chinese merchant vessels, prohibiting them from conducting overseas commerce. So with the Chinese merchant vessels out of action and out of the way, the Ryukyu Kingdom developed into a mighty trading power linking Japan to mainland China.

In 1609, the Satsuma Domain invaded the Ryukyu Kingdom and subjugated the Amami Islands. The Amami Islands were then taken out from the Ryukyu Kingdom and placed under direct control of the Satsuma Domain. Starting from the closest to Satsuma, the names of the islands in the Ryukyu Arc became Kuchinoshima, Michinoshima (which later became the Amami Islands), Ryukyu and Saki.

Local administrators from the Satsuma Domain came to the Amami Islands in 1613 and the new administration began. The Satsuma Domain monopolized sugar, which they sold directly in Osaka, and mercilessly demanded enormous amounts of sugar as tax payments from the islanders.

From 1753 to 1755, the Shimazu Clan received a mandate from the shogunate to undertake the difficult task of repairing the Kiso River. The clan had to borrow a great deal of money for the task and had trouble regaining good financial standing. Still worse, the extravagant lifestyle of Shigehide Shimazu, the feudal lord, drove the clan deeper into debt.

In their efforts to replenish their battered finances, the Shimazu Clan looked to the sugar on the Amami Islands as their source of revenue. The islanders were forced to convert their rice paddies into sugarcane fields and to eat potatoes instead of rice as their staple food. The Amami Islands became a colony of peasants for the Satsuma Domain's production of unrefined brown sugar.

Peasants who could not produce enough unrefined brown sugar, which was demanded as tax, became slaves called *yanchus*. It is said that one-third of the island's population became *yanchus*. An edict to emancipate the *yanchus* was issued in 1871 in the fourth year of the Meiji Era, but it wasn't until the end of the Meiji Era about forty years later that all of the *yanchus* were set free.

By slave-driving the peasants, the Satsuma Domain paid off their astronomical debts and secured a substantial financial base to operate as a powerful clan during the Meiji Restoration. It is said that the Meiji Restoration would have unfolded much differently if the Amamians had not been exploited for the unrefined brown

sugar.

Between the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Satsuma Domain, the Amami Islands tasted a bitter history of subjugation, exploitation and discrimination. But on the other hand, through the eras, the Amami Islands have carefully guarded the vestiges of an ancient culture that is no longer existent on the mainland islands of Japan.

Examples are numerous. The peculiar Amamian dialect is loaded with archaic expressions. Amamian priestesses such as *noros* (high priestesses) and *yutas* (shamans) retain the ancient form of traditional *mikos* (shrine maidens). Until a few dozen years ago, the islanders

zealously practiced ancestor worship and continued the practice of washing the bones of the deceased after letting the corpse decompose for a certain length of time.

More examples include their custom of carrying things on their heads or carrying things on their backs in baskets attached to their foreheads by tumplines, their thatched roofs and elevated floors in their architecture, their ceremonial or ritual events held all year round, and their bountiful traditional handicraft. The Amami Islands are truly a treasure house of folklore and cultural anthropology.

The Devil called "Amashin"

The third time the Amami Islands were colonized was the American Reign, which was the short eight-year period of occupation by Allied Forces' General Headquarters directly after the end of World War II. On January 29th, 1946, a memorandum from the Allied Forces' Supreme Headquarters placed the Amami Islands and Okinawa under the same division of administration. In 1951, The Amami Oshima Reversion Council was formed and as a result of the campaigning on the entire island, Amami Oshima reverted to Japan on December 25th, 1953.

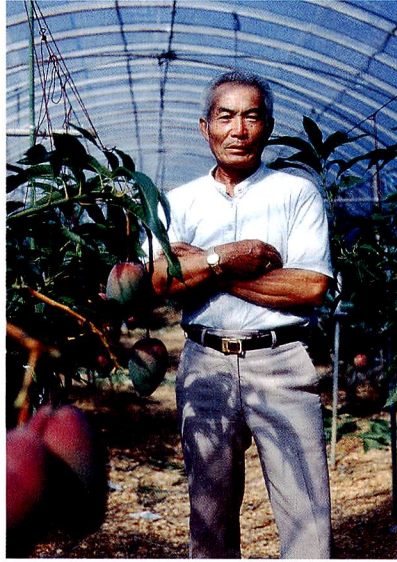
The economy of the Amami Islands was completely devastated at the time of the reversion so the Japanese government established the "Special Measures Law for Amami Islands Reconstruction" in 1954 and implemented the reconstruction. But the average income of the islanders remained less than half of the national average and showed no signs of improvement. So the "Special Measures Law for Amami Islands Development" and the "New Special Measures Law for Amami Islands Development" were established in the second and third terms respectively. The laws have eventually become known by their Japanese abbreviation "Amashin." In 1994, the Revised Amashin Law was established and a ten-year extension to 2003 was enacted.

In that way, the name of the "Special Measures Law for Amami Islands" established June of 1954 was revised from "Reconstruction" to "Development" and then to "New Development." This law has also been revised and has had its term extended every five years. But it retains consistent underlying objectives, which are to raise the average income level on the Amami Islands to the level of Okinawa and the mainland islands of Japan and to make the Amami Islands economically independent.

Almost 1.44 trillion yen for operating expenses have been poured into the islands for the task so far in the 45 years since the Amami Islands reverted to Japan. Projects entailing large-scale modifications of the natural landscape such as roads and harbors occupy almost eighty percent of the entire budget.

One-third of the Amami Islands' population emigrated during the last forty years. Most of the people who left were between fourteen and forty years old, which is the prime age range needed in the industries on the islands. As a result, the aging problem has become increasingly serious. The number of persons 65 years old or higher increased by 97.4%. In fact, persons 65 years old or higher occupied 22.9% of the total population of the Amami Islands in 1995. This is a significantly high percentage compared to the national average of 14.5% or the Okinawa Prefecture average of 19.7%.

An ever-increasing number of people



Mango farmer

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have started pointing out that Amashin is a devil in disguise. The people say that in this intense pursuit to actualize a higher average income and to reach the level of the mainland islands, the very identity of the Amami Islands will be lost. They say that it will be the end of the islanders' independent consciousness as Amamians.

For the Amamians, the half-century since the reversion to Japan has been a period of naively following the devil called Amashin. But more and more people in the Amami Islands are awakening to the true opulence of their islands. They are opening their eyes to their exuberant natural environment and culture. They are also trying a diversity of means to make this more widely known.