





# Chapter 8

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Island of Longevity and an  
Enthusiasm for Bullfights

# Tokunoshima

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Statue of Shigechiyo Izumi

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It wasn't until Shigechiyo Izumi became famous as the oldest person alive that the name of Tokunoshima Island became known throughout Japan. To tell the truth, being born and raised in Tokyo, I was hardly able to distinguish Tokunoshima from Amami Oshima until I moved to Kagoshima City about twenty years ago. And along with multitudes of other people, I became increasingly familiar with the island's name and location on the map as a result of Shigechiyo Izumi getting listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* in 1979.

At that time, in the unfolding of internationalization in Japan, Guinness Beer had just been widely released to the Japanese market, and on the same bandwagon, the existence of the Guinness Book of Records also became widely known. So for the first time, Japanese were able to appreciate the grandeur of a name listed in the book.

Shigechiyo Izumi also became a

## Culture

The next thing to Shigechiyo Izumi that is representative of Tokunoshima is the islanders' enthusiasm for bullfighting, which is said to have a tradition of several hundred years. Throughout Japan, there are a number of regions with bullfighting traditions, including some of Tokunoshima's neighboring islands. Tokunoshima may not

be the most flourishing place for bullfighting in Japan, but the Tokunoshima Islanders' enthusiasm for it is really something.

There are almost ten bullrings of various sizes on this moderately sized island. Bullfighting events are held during the New Year's holidays, during the consecutive holidays in May, in October, and sometimes in midsummer. It is not rare for well over a thousand spectators to cram in to see bullfights, even though the

popular figure in the other media. In fact, Prime Minister Suzuki stopped at Tokunoshima in 1981 on his way back from Okinawa and exchanged friendly words with him at the airport on the island.

Although there was no absolute proof that he was as old as he claimed, through the Guinness Book, Tokunoshima became known as an island of longevity to the world. Incidentally, the old man died in 1986.

As with the other islands in the Amami Islands, the society on Tokunoshima is an aged society. In fact, the "65 and up" age segment occupies 24.6% of its population and more than ten people are, at least, a hundred years of age. And as is common with elderly people, the females greatly outnumber the males. Incidentally, Kamato Hongo, who lives in Kagoshima City, became the oldest person alive in Japan in April 1999. She also is originally from Tokunoshima.

admission fee is not very cheap.

The basic bullfighting method is to put the heads of two bulls together and have the bulls push each other. The horns naturally become weapons. The match is over when one of the bulls loses his will to fight and runs away. It is also effective for one bull to ram the other against the fence. It is the job of people called *sekos* to pit the bulls against each other and provoke their fighting spirits.

When the match ends, the supporters of the winning side shout "*Waido! Waido!*" as an expression of joy. Incidentally, the islanders are also fond of sing-

ing *minyo* (traditional folk music) with the name of *Waido-bushi* (melody).

Tokunoshima bullfighting has become international. Since 1999, three Tokunoshima bulls have been sent to Korea during two consecutive years to fight Korean reddish bulls. The bullfights, which were billed as Korea-Japan Showdowns, are said to have been major events in Korea. Reportedly, tens of thousands of spectators crammed into the bullring of an area near Pusan that had been little known until these Korea-Japan events were held. We should take into account the historical basis for distinctive



Bullfight ring ©Studio Kagawa

feelings there towards Japan.

The result of the bullfights is that the bulls from Tokunoshima, which were of medium standing on Tokunoshima, broke even with Korean bulls of their grand champion class. However, one unfortunate part of this exchange between Japan and Korea is that the Tokunoshima bulls cannot return to Tokunoshima due to animal quarantine regulations. But as a result of the bullfighting showdowns, Tokunoshima is now attracting visits from Korean goodwill envoys and there are clear signs of deeper friendship to come between Japan and Korea. That will be a good thing if it attracts more tourists to the island.

It must not be forgotten that diving spots in coral reef regions of the Nansei Islands are an attraction to many tourists. On Tokunoshima, there are diving spots near the airport, at the northeast tip around Cape Kanami, and at the east shore. There are also seven businesses that cater to divers.

One of the appealing points of diving around Tokunoshima is that diving is possible both inside and outside the coral reefs. Another appealing point is the teeming profusion of life forms seen around Tokunoshima in the water, which is the merging point of elements of the north with elements of the south. The best time for diving is around July when the ocean is calm except for when a typhoon happens to rampage through the region.

If more divers start visiting the island, more diving spots can be newly opened for them, but as with the number of other visitors, the number of visiting divers is also stagnating. According to some people in the business of catering to divers, however, the way it is now is ideal for getting the fullest enjoyment out of diving and that a rapid increase of divers would not be favorable. The ocean around Tokunoshima now maintains a sound balance between development and natural conservation.

Tokunoshima recently had an opportunity to become particularly widely known. Naoko Takahashi, nicknamed "Q-Chan" in Japan, won the gold medal for the women's marathon at the Sydney Olympic Games. Q-Chan used Tokunoshima as her training base twice before the Olympics, and after she won the gold medal, her training on the island became a popular topic of conversation. In her honor, thirty-one kilometers of the circuit road that she always used for training was named "Naoko Road" in April 2000. The town of Amagi in the area erected a monument with that name.

A yearly triathlon is held on a Sunday between the last ten days of June and the first ten days of July at Amagi. Preparations for the 14th triathlon to be held this year (2001) are progressing smoothly. A limit of six hundred people is allowed to participate and the number is almost always reached. Including the participants and the people who accom-



Naoko Road monument ("Gold Medallist Naoko Takahashi" part added after she won the Sidney Olympic championship)

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pany them, over a thousand people visit the island for the event.

It is not only the Amagi townsfolk who manage the triathlon. A system is set up in which volunteers from all over the island pitch in and help. The event is considered to be a positive element in vitalizing the island. Now that Q-Chan has used the same road as part of her training course, the number of applicants is expected to skyrocket. But considering the characteristics of the competition and the safety aspects, the number of participants allowed to compete cannot be excessively increased.



Winner of 2000 Triathlon in Tokunoshima reaching finish line

©Amagi Town Office

## Nature

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Viewed from a distance, a few gently sloping mountains can be seen on Tokunoshima. The tallest mountain, called Mount Inokawa, is in the center of the island and rises 645 meters above sea level. It is the second tallest mountain in the Amami Islands. Another tall mountain is Mount Amagi, which rises 533 meters high in the northern part of the island.

The top part of Mount Inokawa has been designated as an Amami Gunto Semi-National Park. It is rather thickly covered with a forest of broad-leaf evergreen trees such as those of a genus (*Castanopsis*) akin to chinquapins and oaks, which are both representative of the natural vegetation of this region. There has been practically no commercial use of such mountaintop natural forests in recent years. Mount Inokawa receives enough rainfall every month so the woods are well preserved wherever the soil is deep.

## Industries

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According to official statistics, the total tillable area on Tokunoshima is 6,940 hectares, which is 28.1% of the total area of the island. The average cultivated area per farming household is 1.86 hectares. In the crop breakdown, the area under

As with Amami Oshima, innumerable *habus*, which are venomous snakes that attack humans, dwell in the forests of Tokunoshima. From what I hear, that is one reason many people do not rashly enter the forests. That might be a slight disadvantage for eco-tourism that features the atmosphere of a luxuriant forest.

The gently sloping surface of the island from sea level to a height of about two hundred meters contains many terraces and is covered with farmland. The island gently slopes from the southern area throughout the western coast. Parts of this region contain great amounts of coral remains. The surface layer is formed from weathered limestone and is yellowish brown. And below it is a wide expanse of reddish soil.

Granite forms the rock layer under the soil in the mountainous region that divides the northern area from the central area. The core of Mount Inokawa is made of rock formed in the Paleozoic Era.

sugarcane cultivation is by far the largest with 4,531 hectares, which is 78.4% of the total area of 5,779 hectares under cultivation. The total area of paddy fields is 4 hectares.

Sugarcane production specialists were first stationed in Tokunoshima in 1735 during the mid-Edo Period when the Satsuma Domain was promoting full-



scale sugarcane production on the island. In 1830 during the last part of the Edo Era, the islanders were forced into a compulsory sugarcane planting system that they considered extremely unreasonable.

In the same year, 1830, the Dutch colonial government on Java also began to enforce similar compulsory planting, the Cultivation System (*Kultuurstelsel* in Dutch), which was also criticized by the islanders on Java. That was happening even though the policy makers of the

Dutch and Satsuma governments had no apparent direct exchange. It is very interesting that both of these policies should have been respectively carried out contemporaneously.

The total volume of raw sugar (cured sugar which contains molasses) and unrefined brown sugar (non-centrifuged sugar) produced on Tokunoshima has been about 30,000 tons per year in recent years. That accounts for 39% of the gross production of Kagoshima



Sugarcane harvesting by a small-sized harvester

© Kazutaka Nakano

Prefecture and is a greater volume than that produced by any other island of the prefecture.

Incidentally, about 800,000 tons of raw sugar is produced in all of Japan per year, 24% of which comes from sugarcane. But Japan's yearly consumption, which is mostly of refined sugar, comes to about 2.5 million tons. From that, we can see the importance of sugarcane production in the agriculture on Tokunoshima.

From a global perspective, considering the sunshine duration factor, sugarcane is not being produced on Tokunoshima under optimal climatic conditions, even if the typhoon damage factor is overlooked. This is also true for some other islands of the Nansei Islands. Continuous clear weather is needed during the ripening period, which begins a few months before harvest time, in order to raise the sugar content inside the sugarcane. Climatic conditions on Tokunoshima usually do not provide the necessary sunshine duration.

Rainfall was unusually light and skies were generally clear throughout October and November of 1999 on Tokunoshima. The extraordinarily high sugar content in the sugarcane harvested in that season proves the necessity of sunshine duration.

This year's price of sugarcane actually available to farming households in all the Satsunan Islands is, on average, a little more than 20,700 yen per ton, which is far more than ten times as much

selling price as that set by the main sugarcane producing countries of Southeast Asia. But even still, the average gross income per farming household is only about 1.6 million yen per year.

Unlike rice, with sugar, there is absolutely no difference in the taste of the final refined product no matter where the raw sugar was produced. If the selling conditions of a sugarcane producing farm were under completely free competition without governmental subsidization, Tokunoshima would obviously be no match for the Southeast Asian countries, and sugarcane production would have to be discontinued. So the islanders are now examining a diversity of possibilities which might enable them to continue their farming economy somehow without depending on sugarcane.

As I mentioned earlier, the islanders have been zealous about bullfights since the olden days. They are very interested in cattle and their gross production of beef calves is second to sugarcane.

Calves are shipped from the island within one year after they are born. The number of calves shipped from Tokunoshima is by far the highest of the Amami Islands. Production of sugarcane and calves has always been closely knit because sugarcane leaves can be used as fodder. But in recent years, because of the severe aging of the workforce, more and more farmers have been adopting machinery called harvesters, which makes it much easier to harvest sugarcane. As a

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result, the situation is changing.

When a harvester is used to harvest the sugarcane stalks, the leaves can no longer be used as fodder. So more and more islanders are decreasing their area for cultivating sugarcane to make a larger area to produce fodder.

Production of calves occupies a high position in the island's agriculture. But now that the international trade with beef has become almost totally free, a significant increase in production cannot be expected. Furthermore, the aged farmers no longer have the physical strength to easily carry their calves to the auction market. The production of calves on the island cannot continue unless young people work hard at increasing the number of calves. Still worse, I often hear that the fee for renting a harvester is another heavy burden.

Recently, potatoes have become conspicuous in the farm fields and in shipments. Shipping of the potatoes from the island begins in late January, at which time the potatoes grown on the mainland islands are not ready to be harvested. According to the islanders, they select a variety that is compatible with the reddish soil zone, which I mentioned earlier, directly beneath the surface.

Tokunoshima potatoes are selling for an especially high price on the market because of their whitish flesh. Potatoes have come right next to calves on the latest statistics for gross produce. However, the yield per area on Tokunoshima

is somewhat lower than that of the main potato producing districts of the mainland islands, and it is not known whether the production volume will continue to increase.

I hear that potato production is also closely related to sugarcane cultivation. If potatoes are planted on a field from which sugarcane had been harvested and can no longer be ratooned, there is no need to apply agricultural chemicals to the soil. Another advantage with potatoes is that they can be planted after the typhoon season ends and be harvested one hundred days later.

In the past, all of the material to make Oshima pongees was brought to Tokunoshima and the pongee makers, who were mostly females, would earn a considerable income by piecework. But orders hardly ever come in now, only a scanty number of fish can be caught, and growth of tourism is minimal. So town administrations on the island have gone back to the drawing board to brainstorm new ways to somehow increase the blessings from the soil.

An increased production volume of potatoes in recent years is evident all throughout the Nansei Islands, not only Tokunoshima. For Tokunoshima, potatoes are the crop that is now making the best progress. The administrations are thinking of increasing the scale of crop production that best suits Tokunoshima's frost-free climate. The advantage of potato production on Tokunoshima is

that the harvest is earlier than that of the main competing districts. But the advantage of subtropical fruit production is that this is the only region in Japan that can produce it.

Tankan oranges, especially those from Yaku Island, have become well known in the big cities. They taste more like Valencia oranges than any other citrus fruit produced in Japan. *Tankan* oranges are of high quality and, although strength must be applied, can be peeled with the fingers, which makes them superior to Valencia oranges. It will be necessary to lower the price more to compete on a full scale with the imported Valencia oranges.

Winters are too cold on mainland Kyushu, so the most suitable region in Japan to cultivate tankan oranges to full flavor capacity is the Nansei Islands.

The number of farming households cultivating tankan orange trees is increasing, but tankan orange tree cultivation on Tokunoshima is still far from the scale of Amami Oshima Island. As a result of the mild winters on Tokunoshima, tankan oranges have an excellent taste, but on the other hand, some of them do not become completely orange in color.

For many kinds of fruit, from the

planting stage to the first harvest, it takes a waiting period of several years, which is an enormous burden on the farmers. For tankan oranges, the wait is three years.

Although tankan orange trees are usually cultivated outdoors on Tokunoshima, other kinds of trees originating in the tropics must be cultivated in a greenhouse. And other kinds can be cultivated outdoors but produce better fruit in



Mango producer's signboard

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a greenhouse. On Tokunoshima, mango trees are representative of the type that are cultivated in a greenhouse.

Mango production is not limited to Tokunoshima. Mangos are produced in the area from Okinawa Prefecture into mainland Kyushu and the area is gradually expanding. Mango trees are originally from the tropics south of the Tropic of Cancer. But the advantage of cultivating

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the trees in Japan is that the mangos can be shipped in their fully ripe condition. As with bananas and other tropical fruit, for many reasons, it is difficult to import mangos into Japan in their fully ripe condition.

Even though the domestically grown mangos are clearly higher priced than the imports, the domestically grown fully ripened mangos are more delicious and more enticing to the eye. Compared to most other people in the world, Japanese tend to attach much more importance to appearance than to other qualities of a fruit. Foreign fruit producers who export to Japan are finding out that their fruit cannot be sold at a good price unless it looks delicious.

It is best for mangos to be grown in greenhouses in Japan for obvious climatic reasons and also because they look more attractive when they are grown indoors. Unlike on mainland Kyushu, on Tokunoshima, there is no need to always go through the trouble of heating up the greenhouses. That advantage more than makes up for the transportation cost to the mainland islands.

Less than 100 farming households are involved in shipping mangos today and the sales turnover is less than one hundred million yen but there is potential for a higher volume of production. The key to success will be to entice potential consumers to pay the high price to try the mangos.

An intended potential sales target is

the gift market. Japanese have a custom of selecting rare foods with high prices to give as gifts mostly during mid-year and year-end. The only trouble is that mangos from Tokunoshima are shipped in autumn. It is said that most mangos are presently being shipped by mail in packages that do not pass through the Agricultural Cooperative Association.

A marine product of Tokunoshima that I would like to mention is green laver. When you drive along the seaside road anytime from January to the end of April during the ebb of the flood tide, you notice deep green seaweed covering the rocks. That is green laver, *Monostroma*. The islanders have been putting it in their soup and eating it since ancient times.

This edible seaweed is found around the islands of Okinawa Prefecture, around Kyushu, around Shikoku, and also around Honshu from the west through the Tokai district. On Tokunoshima, having started with prefectural aid, several companies have been culturing green laver for the past twenty years. More than half of the production volume is dried, pressed into sheets, and shipped mostly to the other islands of the Nansei Islands. Most of it is ingested in the traditional way, which is in soup. The exquisite aroma is out of this world.

The green laver cultured around mainland Kyushu is shipped all over Japan in packages as aonori, which is a dried and chopped condiment sprinkled

on rice and noodles. It is also marketed in jars as *tsukudani*, which is a boiled down thick paste. But the production volume from Tokunoshima is too little to be shipped throughout Japan. A representative of the island's top green laver company told me that a great increase in production volume is not realistic because an enormous investment would be required.



Green laver, natural (foreground) and cultured (background)

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